

Practice theory and conservative thought

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Abstract

The concept of practice is thematically central to modern conservative thought, as evident in Edmund Burke's writings on the aesthetic and his diatribe against the French Revolution. It is also the main organizing thread in the framework in the human sciences known as practice theory, which extends back at least to Karl Marx's 'Theses on Feuerbach'. This article historicizes 'practice' in conservative thought and practice theory, accounts for the family resemblance between the two, and takes apart that family resemblance to reveal differences. The ingredients of practice theory (historical inheritance, embodiment, cognitive limits, loose coupling between conscious thought and action) are in many cases also distinctive traits of conservative thought. But the similarity is deceptive. Practice theory and conservative thought constitute two distinct interpretations of practice, two disparate endeavours for connecting human science with political strategy, and two different formulas for opposing theory and practice. The present study will argue that this is primarily a *political* opposition for conservative thought, while it is a *human-scientific* opposition for practice theory. Conservative thought is *initially* political and then human-scientific; practice theory is initially human-scientific and *then* political. This article advocates for practice theory against conservative thought as differently amended versions of a politics that recognizes human finitude.

Keywords

conservative thought, finitude, Karl Marx, practice theory, theory of action

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Introduction

Practice theory consists very generally of critical efforts at understanding the ways in which practical activity organizes the world independently of representational-symbolic or rational processes. Practice theory tries to resolve the subjectivist/objectivist opposition in social theory by considering more closely their simultaneity (Ortner, 1984; Rouse, 2007; Stern, 2003). It moves away from holistic understandings of culture in favour of an emphasis on a shared background of practice that is presupposed by all particular forms of meaning (Reckwitz, 2002).

Conservative thought, meanwhile, is associated with a conceptual defence of forms of life and experience that are threatened with transformation and upheaval (Mannheim, 1993[1927]; Robin, 2017). Conservative thought is drawn toward ‘the available’, the concrete, and the traditional in contrast with abstractions, abstracted descriptions, or ‘the aspirational’ (Gray, 1995: 78). Conservative thought warns against reforms or efforts at social change in part by emphasizing limits to rationality, reason, and knowledge (Kirk, 2001[1953]: 8–9).

Between practice theory and conservative thought there are a number of family resemblances, many more than, say, between practice theory and liberal thought. In many ways, these resemblances cause confusion, conflation, and mistaken identity. As Bourdieu (2000: 123) noticed, a ‘conservative hostility’ to rationalism has proven remarkably generative for practice in a kind of alternate history. Many of the figures mobilized by this hostility (among them Michael Oakeshott and Friedrich von Hayek) occupy what Perry Anderson (1992: 11) refers to as the unusual position of ‘[appearing] marginal, even eccentric figures to their colleagues’ in the human sciences, but figures whose voices have been ‘heard in the chancelleries’, parliaments, senates, and bureaucracies around the world for the last half century. A conservative hostility to rationalism is not, however, the only formula for the genesis of ‘practice’ as a figure in social thought, nor is it the best known. Figures like Bourdieu and Foucault, American pragmatists like Dewey and Pierce, or the philosopher Judith Butler all demonstrate ‘practice theory’ of a different sort, heard far less often in the chancelleries and parliaments but far *more* often in the humanities and social science departments.

This article examines the deceptive similarity between practice theory and conservative thought, historicizes both discourses to a common conceptual lineage, but more importantly attempts to take apart their family resemblance to reveal subtle but significant differences. This effort seeks to ward off recent (Zamora and Behrent, 2015) and more distant but still relevant (Habermas, 1981) conflations between practice theory and conservative thought. The growing appeal of both practice theory and conservative thought arises from their common opposition to rationalism, and the way in which they favourably align with attempts to see *behind* ‘universal reason’ in relation to other types of knowledge or skill (Latour, 2004: 226–7). If Kant found a new *plane* by repurposing Enlightenment thinking to redefine freedom as action that is consistent with universal reason, then ‘practice’ departs from his efforts by attempting to situate action on a different plane alongside different things like historical formations, routine movements, and bodies in material space and irreversible time.¹

The difference between conservative thought and practice theory ultimately stems from the same opposition they establish between the rational and the practical. The present study will argue that this is primarily a *political* opposition for conservative thought, while it is a *human-scientific* opposition for practice theory. Differently stated, conservative thought is *initially* political and then human-scientific; practice theory is initially human-scientific and *then* political. This means that any reference to a non-mentalistic or a practice-like version of human agency (such as ‘tacit intentionality’, ‘passive intentionality’, ‘practical sense’, ‘embodied understanding’, and so on) carries a ‘dual reference’ to both politics and human science.

The first point of focus below is the topic of dual reference. The article then describes the conceptual lineage of both conservative thought and practice theory using Kant’s definition of agency on the grounds of reason alone, which draws their mutual opposition in a theory versus practice debate. This conveys something politically as much as it does for human science. This article makes the difference between conservative thought and practice theory clear by then comparing related concepts from across the family resemblance: *amor fati* and disidentification, catallaxy and counter-conduct, tradition and inquiry.

Dual reference

Dual references are meaningful within and defined by two different social and mental spaces that gives them a combined meaning that carries the imprint of both, creating family resemblances, strange bedfellows, and confused scholars. Dual references operate through terminologies and styles rather than intellectual content. They arise from different formulas that express different oppositions. Bourdieu, for example, describes Heidegger’s many dual references in terminologies like *das man*, *dasein*, *Sorge* that are simultaneously philosophical and political:

It is just as wrong to situate Heidegger in the purely political arena, relying on the affinity of his thought to that of essayists like Spengler or Junger, as it is to localize him in the ‘philosophical’ arena ‘properly speaking’, that is, in the relatively autonomous history of philosophy, for instance in the name of his opposition to the neo-Kantians. . . . Heidegger’s political ontology sets up . . . a political stance but gives it a purely philosophical expression. (Bourdieu, 1991: 5–6)²

For our purposes, conservative thought sets up practical agency as a political stance and gives it a human-scientific expression. Practice theory sets up practical agency as a human-scientific stance and gives it a political expression. Their terminologies and themes are closely related or even identical. Both conservative thinkers and practice theorists pay unique attention to embodiment, cognition, history, subtle routines, and everyday life. For conservative thought, these topics are significant primarily as *political* topics; while for practice theory, they are predominately of *human-scientific* concern.

The articulation of ‘practice’ becomes evident in a 1790s debate of theory versus practice, which at the time could not be removed from direct political significance (Yack, 1986). A Kantian grammar of action appeared from Kant’s solution to the

paradox that human freedom is still possible in a world of natural lawfulness and social dependence by arguing for action as a theoretical category *only* ('within the bounds of universal reason', for instance). Kant makes moral autonomy identical with the possibility of action as subjectively caused.

When Edmund Burke uses 'practice', this differs from when Karl Marx uses 'practice' (*praxis*), although both use the expression to oppose Kant's idealist solution (practice *versus* theory). For Burke, the opposition is political ('conservative hostility to rationalism'). For Marx, the opposition is human-scientific ('the truth of human thinking'). Once proposed, 'practice' migrates into different spheres and becomes muddled. The language employed by Burke can bear a striking resemblance to the language employed by Marx.³ Without recovering their different starting points, or generative formulas, it is difficult to see the difference in what is *getting said* through their statements.

Finitude, or the Kantian grammar of action

That practice theory is an argument against rationalism is widely acknowledged (see Reckwitz, 2002; Rouse, 2007; Turner, 2007). What is not widely acknowledged is how this opposition aligns practice theory with conservative thought in a shared counter-rationalism. To appreciate that connection, it is not enough to recognize how practice theories oppose a Kantian model of the mind (Turner, 2003). It is necessary to see how this becomes entangled with the problem of finitude, which is the source of the Kantian 'Copernican Turn' and Kant's effort to define conditions for 'freedom and knowledge' despite nature's lawfulness and determination (Han-Pile, 2003).

Kant's starting point was a series of observations about factual human limits: We only passively receive sense data from objects in the world; our action is plagued by contingency and unintended consequence; our intuition needs thought and objects; what it is more, it cannot be intentionally produced. This would imply that our presence in the world is defined by all the ways in which we *lack* control over it. In fact, according to Kant, the opposite is the case. Limitations of knowledge and action are shown to be transcendental conditions for having knowledge or for acting *at all*:

[In] the judgment of free actions, in regard to their causality, we can get only as far as the intelligible cause, but *we cannot get beyond it*; we can know that actions could be free, i.e. that they could be determined independently of sensibility, and in that way that they could be the sensibly unconditioned condition of appearances. But why the intelligible character gives us exactly these appearances and this empirical character under the circumstances before us, to answer *this surpasses every faculty of our reason*, indeed it surpasses the authority of our reason even to ask it; it is as if one were to ask why the transcendental object of our outer sensible intuition gives precisely only the intuition of space and not some other one. (Kant, 1998[1790]: 545; emphasis added)

For Kant, 'intelligible cause' signals here 'absolute spontaneity', that is, action with *nothing* antecedent to the determination of will. He makes as good a case as any for why human action is intelligible *only* within the bounds of reason alone:

The will is conceived as a power of determining oneself to action in accordance with the subjective representation of laws. . . . Will is a kind of causality belonging to living beings so far as they are rational. Freedom then would be the property this causality has of being able to work independently of determination by alien causes. (Kant, 1964[1785]: 29, 45, 65)

If this negotiates a condition of freedom that means *transcending* the limits of what we can control about the world, the argument finds an additional application that is strictly speaking outside the boundaries of ‘reason alone’ but still arises from it as the space of human sovereignty in the world. For Kant, reflective judgements cannot be disproven; they can only produce prudent ‘maxims’. These are still valuable in instances when we confront objects of observation that exceed our rational grasp and are led to consider whether the ‘very contingency of the thing’s form is a basis for regarding the product as if it had come about through a causality only reason can have’ (Kant, 1991a[1784]: 42). This unknown causality can be defined as ‘purpose’, and it is by finding purpose in the disparate events of history that *transcendental freedom* can be progressively reconciled with the empirical world and reshape it, allowing for conditions (the ‘kingdom of ends’) in which rational determination will overcome what is otherwise an ‘aimless random process . . . the dismal reign of chance’ (ibid.).

Kant’s approach to finitude departs considerably from earlier arguments found in European thought. The first was a kind of Promethean vision of ‘rebellion in which human finitude consumes itself in the attempt to reach beyond its own condition’. Stoicism, meanwhile, responds to finitude by likening human existence to a play we did not write or choose, but have to perform as a character assigned to us: ‘The best we can do is learn to know our part and to use this knowledge to impersonate it better’. Finally, there is the ‘humorous coming to terms with limits’. Here, a fleeting control over events does not lead to dejection, but instead giving up on ‘the very idea of . . . a fixed cosmic and moral order, and shifts from perspective to perspective, following . . . moods and the ever changing flux of events’ (Han-Pile, 2003: 152–4).

Kant’s approach was different, and revolutionary for that fact, because the restricted scope of human control and the *recognition* of it served for him as a pretext for defining a space in which ‘human reason was absolutely sovereign’ (Han-Pile, 2003: 154). For Foucault (1970: 263–4), Kant’s efforts signal the ‘threshold of our modernity’, because Kant makes the question of knowledge now revolve around the question of limits, something that leads to the continuous definition and refinement of a ‘subject’ (‘man’) that is never given *to* experience but that makes experience possible. The concentration on mind as mediator extends this framework to establish a transcendental relation to the field of action. Frames, values, beliefs, ideologies, and so on are given precedence in explanations of action not because they really exist, but because they are solutions to human finitude that make a clear ‘subject position’ possible (Turner, 2003).

The discussion that follows argues that a different approach to the problem of finitude stands at the origin of modern conservative thought, an approach that aligns it with contemporary practice theory. This approach to finitude concentrates on history, the body, and ‘the actual’ as establishing one in a certain perspective and position with certain capacities for action.⁴ ‘Practice’ refers to this finitude, I claim, and in modern conservative thought, it does so in political opposition to the French Revolution by

referring to the secret wisdom of governing institutions, forbidden to reason, that cannot be reformed by the omnipotence of principles (or ‘theory’). The key figure is Burke, and the best insight into his treatment of practice is in distinction from Kant’s own treatment and how, for Kant, theory prevails over practice.

The 1790s crucible

In Kant’s 1793 (1991b) essay, ‘On the Common Saying: “This May Be True in Theory, But It Does Not Apply in Practice”’, he makes several points that serve to diagram the connection between practice and critique. Notably, in addition to being a defence of the university (written in the context of Kant’s *Conflict of the Faculties*), this essay serves to countervail claims about the French Revolution found in Burke’s *Reflections on the French Revolution* (1951[1790]). As Kant opens, a ‘theory is a sum of rules if those rules are thought of as principles having a certain generality’. A practice is ‘not every doing, but only that . . . which is thought as the observance of certain principles of procedure represented in their generality’ (1991b[1793]: 279). For Kant, it is scholars in universities who engage in theory. He directs his critique at practitioners (physicians, lawyers, agriculturalists) who believe they can do without theory entirely because they need only rely on the lessons of experience.

The burden on Kant is to justify the academic to the ‘man of affairs, the statesman and the man of the world’. He must convince them that they cannot get ‘further than theory’ if they seek only to ‘[grope] about in experiments and experiences, without putting together certain principles (which really constitute what is called a theory) and without having thought out some whole relevant to [their] business’ (1991b[1793]: 279). This is more convincing when theory engages with objects that can only be represented by concepts (like mathematics for an engineer). It is much harder when theory involves ‘objects of intuition . . . that could perhaps be thought quite well and irreproachably . . . but perhaps they could not be given at all but might well be empty ideas’ (ibid.: 280). For Kant, however, this is quickly disproven when it comes to morality and the duties of virtue and right: ‘For here it is a matter of the canon of reason (in the practical), where the worth of practice rests entirely on its conformity with the theory underlying it, and all is lost if the empirical and hence contingent conditions of carrying out the law are made conditions of the law itself’ (ibid.: 281).

Kant therefore restricts knowledge to those claims in which experience is *authorized* by transcendental structures like rules or laws. From his position in the contentious 1790s, Kant does believe that theory *can* change practice, by defining conditions for right action most of all, and thus for ‘divesting oneself rationally from the limits of dogmatism’ (Habermas, 1973: 259). If one becomes reasonable through access to the transcendental, then one also becomes alienated from a world that consists of convention and natural constraint. The ‘human character’ is alienated by such circumstances, and this attends in a *total* way to society as dehumanizing. The Kantian position thus creates a ‘longing for total revolution’ (Yack, 1986).

Kant exemplifies a position in a theory/practice duality that *can* give revolutionary emphasis to the former, and in a way that contextualizes the appearance of practice in conservative thought. From this starting point, Kant’s theory of action is *simultaneous* to

a political stance, because action must be redeemed by reason (especially in the face of determination by Newtonian mechanics) and reason, in the 1790s, had revolutionary tendencies. Burke, however, makes practice stand out in its ‘plenitude and consistency’, needing no legitimation by reason. He is particularly venomous in his criticism of those (like Kant) who give theory unwarranted privilege:

It is vain to talk to them of the practice of their ancestors, the fundamental laws of their country, the fixed form of a constitution, whose merits are confirmed by the long test of solid experience. . . . They despise experience as the wisdom of unlettered men. They have the ‘rights of men’. Against these there can be no prescription; against these no argument is binding; these admit no temperament, and no compromise; anything withheld from their full demand is so much of fraud and injustice. (Burke, 1951[1790]: 59)

Burke chastises ‘professors of metaphysics’ for their distance and superiority from what is common and mundane. Practice here becomes partially synonymous with what is *practical*: ‘What is the use of discussing a man’s abstract right to food or medicine? The question is upon the method of procuring and administering them. In that deliberation, I shall always advise to call upon the farmer and the physician, rather than the professor of metaphysics’ (Burke, 1951[1790]: 58). Yet, as Burke continues, utility is only a symptom of the practical. Practice serves instead to *totally* cover the field of actual and potential events as a historical inheritance. It cannot be rationally designed or even summarized. Knowledge of it can be acquired only through long experience:

Constructing a commonwealth, or renovating it, or reforming it, is like every other experimental science, not to be taught a priori. Nor is it short experience that can instruct us in that practical science. . . . The science of government being therefore so practical in itself, and intended for such practical purposes, a matter which requires experience, and even more experience than any one person can gain in his whole life. . . . The pretended rights of these theorists are all extremes; and in proportion that they are metaphysically true, they are morally and politically false. (ibid.: 58–9)

What is so striking about Burke’s analysis is how much he anticipates in later arguments that make practice their centrepiece (e.g. a reticence to commit a ‘scholastic fallacy’). His earlier essay on *The Beautiful and the Sublime* provides a subtle phenomenology of the senses and the body, and Burke makes it a point to emphasize how the aesthetic reveals conclusively that we can ‘be wrong in theory, but right in practice. . . . Men often act right from their feelings, who afterwards reason ill on them from principle’ (Burke, 1887[1757]: 128). To celebrate intimate habits of the body, as Burke does, when dry theoretical discourse is revolutionary: this is to *be* counterrevolutionary.

From Burke to Bourdieu (through Marx)

While it seems something of a non sequitur to call Burke a practice theorist, there is far less that distinguishes him from someone like Bourdieu (about the aesthetic, for example) than there is distinguishing Bourdieu from Kant (see Bourdieu, 1984: 491ff).⁵ Burke is distinctive in that what is ‘practical’ for him inspires an awe (interlaced with fear) that

resembles a response to all that captures the aesthetic sublime. In comprehending the practical, we confront something that strongly confirms the extent of our control or finitude (Burke, 1887[1757]: 214–15). Burke associates practice with opacity, immeasurable and strange, which proves the limits to programmatic formulas, logical deductions, and social change deliberately planned: ‘It is with infinite caution that any man ought to venture upon pulling down an edifice which has answered in any tolerable degree of ages the common purposes of society’ (Burke, 1951[1790]: 60).

Burke’s approach is intended to make visible the traditions and norms within which everyday reality is inscribed, and where a transcendent construct like ‘ethical action’ is stunningly out of place. The body, the senses, experience, and historical inheritance are all made relevant points of focus against this rational construct. Burke appeals to practice with an interest in counter-revolution. Practice is therefore meaningful in a distinctly political vein. But what do these parallels with someone like Bourdieu mean? If both Burke and Bourdieu oppose Kant, how do they oppose each other?

If there is someone who shares the same difference with Burke as Bourdieu, it would be Marx. Bourdieu (1984: 493) critiques Kant, neo-Kantians, and the entire philosophical field as based on ‘dispositions associated with a particular social and economic condition’. Marx and Engels (1998[1844–5]: 197) famously argued that ‘Kant was satisfied with “good will” alone’ in his theory of action in reflection of ‘the impotence, wretchedness and depression of the German burghers’. Although Bourdieu resisted such ‘reflection’ arguments, Marx’s asking of ‘the practical question’ demonstrates a practice theory from a human-scientific point of view shared with Bourdieu. This distinguishes Marx from Burke and Bourdieu from conservative thought.

For Marx (1978b[1844–5]: 144), whether ‘objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is a practical question’. This, I claim, constitutes a different generative formula for ‘practice’ than conservative hostility to rationalism. Marx himself demonstrates practice as the ‘truth of human thinking’ by finding a contradiction between theory and practice when what is of ‘general concern’ applies only to affairs of state (Marx, 1978a[1843]: 45). This is mistaken because while a ‘specific activity and situation in life’ might seem to have only ‘individual significance’, once comprehended as practice it is anything but individual or accidental. In their critique of Ludwig Feuerbach, whom they praise for his luminous discussion of material things in defiance of old Hegelian verbosity, Marx and Engels (1998[1844–5]: 44–5) reveal how every object that obtains an unremarkable ‘sensuous certainty’ for Feuerbach – a cherry-tree, ‘man’, overworked consumptive starvelings, even Feuerbach himself, a philosopher who, in relative comfort, looks out of a window and *contemplates* nature – is in fact the product of ‘living sensuous activity’ that has sedimented as history and social relations.

Marx often uses the German word *Geheimnisse* to refer to both sensuous certainty and the accidental as holding ‘secrets . . . removed from public scrutiny’ (Roberts, 2017: 52). What seems *subjectively necessary* carries a very public significance in its truth, as *practice*, the ‘unceasing sensuous labor and creation’ on the basis of which everything that appears spontaneously as given, certain, unquestionable, or without reason depends and would cease with its cessation. For Marx, the bourgeois political revolution made things like ‘birth, social rank, education, occupation [into] non-political distinctions’ because they seemed necessary as individualized, removed from history and social

significance (Marx, 1978a[1843]: 33). In *The German Ideology* with Engels (1998[1844–5]: 87), he argues that ‘individuals seem freer under dominance by the bourgeoisie because their conditions of life seem accidental’. Conditions that seem private are *Geheimnisse*: accidental and non-political because they do not seem available to public scrutiny. Marx’s point, by contrast, is that they *are* available to public scrutiny because they always raise the practical question: What living sensuous activity has made them possible?

Bourdieu’s practice theory shares with Marx the same opposition to Burke on practice and to Kant on *theory*. Reflexivity is, arguably, as resonant with conservative thought as it is with practice theory because of the emphasis it places on practice as a limit to the ‘imperialism of the universal’ (Bourdieu, 2000: 78). As Bourdieu presents it, reflexivity shares this with a reactive nationalism and the ‘irrationalist pathos which so often accompanies it’. The difference is that reflexivity does not have the effect of dismissing the universal out of hand, but rather of breaking the ‘monopoly [on] the universal’ of those with capital (ibid.: 124).

The consequence of this, on the one hand, is a radical levelling effect that makes even the most highly esteemed or apparently necessary activities (art, science, capitalism) into *practice*, and therefore limited by history and the body just like anything else. Reflexivity here decreases the sense of necessity as it dethrones what appears to be of transcendent significance, or ‘accidental’ in Marx’s terms, with activities undertaken in the absence of any historical awareness of their contingency or social meaning. On the other hand, there is nothing that stops this from leading to a *confirmation* of these practices as now freed from the monopolistic construal of their possibilities, or as traditions that lack an absolute foundation but are nonetheless maintained, often with more fervour (see Macintyre, 1981: 221).

The ambiguities of reflexivity are evident in Bourdieu’s opening lecture at the Collège de France, ‘A Lecture on the Lecture’ (1990b[1982]). He starts by drawing the lecture as a practice out of its tacit state:

As a rite of incorporation and investiture, the inaugural lecture, *inceptio*, is a symbolic enactment of the process of delegation whereby the new master is finally authorized to speak with authority, and which establishes his words as a legitimate discourse, delivered by somebody with the right to speak. The literally magical effectiveness of the ritual rests on the silent and invisible exchange between the new entrant, who makes a public offering of his words, and the gathered scholars who attest by their presence in a body that these words, by being thus accepted by the most eminent masters, become universally acceptable, that is, in the full sense of the word, magisterial. (ibid.: 177)

While the language here is less celebratory than cynical, such an account could easily lend itself to a tradition and invoke the tendency for preservation, elevated even to spiritual significance. But Bourdieu finds a different purpose in socially and historically marking a practice (‘the inaugural lecture’): ‘It shakes you out of that state of innocence which enables you to fulfill the expectations of the institution with a state of satisfaction’ (ibid.).

Practice theory enables a kind of break with this ‘primary adherence’ to practically enact an institution, in this case, with a sense of satisfaction. As Bourdieu explains in his inaugural lecture, the effect of such a ‘reflexive self-examination’ has as a consequence a certain confrontation. Such a ‘lucid perception of the truth of vocations and acclamations’ does not lend itself to giving up or giving in. Rather, one can ‘always join the game without illusions, by making a conscious and deliberate resolution’ (Bourdieu, 1990b[1982]: 197–8). We can resolve ourselves to a social reality characterized by certain social facts, or to participation in certain institutions, but that resolution is contingent on the recognition that these are *not* the only possibilities. In order for that participation to have meaning, it must be understood that this is *not* the only way that things could possibly be.

It is that non-necessity that Bourdieu shares with Marx as the ‘truth of human thinking’ keyed to practice. Practical limits themselves consist of a type of necessity, as Bourdieu (1993: 25) argues, but knowledge of it ‘is a progress of possible freedom’. It is the ‘*sense of necessity*’ that is important here, which is implied by all forms of practice, in contrast to the theoretical definition. An embodied understanding ‘enables one to act as one “should” without positing or executing a Kantian “should” or rules of conduct. The dispositions that . . . result from a durable modification of the body . . . remain unnoticed until they appear in action, and even then, because of the self-evidence of their necessity and their immediate adaptation to the situation’ (Bourdieu, 2000: 139). For Bourdieu, however, the strength of this sense is *inversely* related to ‘knowledge of the social world’. As that knowledge increases, ‘subjective necessity’ decreases, though this does not change the ‘objective necessity’ that actually exists (1993: 25). Social regularities, persistent orders, and patterns assume the character of a *choice* as they become both less accidental and less necessary. Their continuation now reflects a practical circumstance of non-intervention and social domination.

This is the political source of practice formed by a human-scientific standpoint, rather than as a political position-taking. If Burke opposes Kant with an emphasis on practice as having some immunity from theoretical formulation, then Marx and Bourdieu oppose Kant with the inaccuracy of a theoretically defined point of view on human agency. The ‘truth of human thinking’ does not have the same effect as conservative hostility to rationalism as a *political* stance. When what is objectively necessary from a human-scientific point of view is revealed, the effect is to change the seemingly accidental nature of social life and reduce the sense of subjective necessity by showing how the subjective meaningfulness of action unfolds within specific historical limits that are in some sense physical, material, and routine. In both cases, this makes the ‘truth of human thinking’ political once that thinking attempts to comprehend human agency as practice, rather than as a theoretical construct like ethical action.⁶

Conservative thought versus practice theory

What does this mean for the differences between conservative thought and practice theory? In what follows, I do not attempt a comprehensive summary of conservative thought or practice theory, nor have I attempted one thus far. The discussion is necessarily selective.⁷ But the goal is nevertheless ambitious: to disentangle the family

resemblances between practice theory and conservative thought in a similar way. *Both* practice theory and conservative thought emphasize ‘the impurity of practical reason . . . its embeddedness in contingent, historically specific norms and practices’ (Allen, 2011: 51). The discussion that follows will therefore focus on ideal-types of allied concepts in conservative thought and practice theory in order to draw attention to a general difference between them, despite the fact that they both commit to practice instead of universal reason as the relation to the world in which agency appears.

Conservative thought recommends *non*-critical forms of this engagement (*amor fati*, catallaxy, tradition) that seek to confirm practical limits as part of some greater necessity. Practice theory recommends critical forms of this engagement instead (disidentification, counter-conduct, inquiry) that make practical limits a demonstration of greater contingency and possibility.⁸

***Amor fati* versus disidentification**

The first comparison involves what I treat as different approaches to identity from conservative and practice standpoints. The practical limits of history and the body shape identity as a type of finitude that defines its conditions of possibility. The difference is whether identity consists of an identification with these limits, or whether the treatment of them as ‘necessary’ serves as a pretext for freedom found in *dis*identification instead.

Nietzsche’s concept of *amor fati* demonstrates and advocates for the love of inherited limits (as fate), and so it serves as an ideal-type for a conservative position. The ‘necessary’ here does not mean conditions of self-clarity, but instead refers to inscrutable limits that are deeply tied to a historical inheritance that does not allow for a transcendent perspective. To identify with this inheritance means that ‘one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backwards, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it – all idealism is mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary – but *love it*’ (Nietzsche, 2000a[1888]: 745). Thus, the source of identity consists of the eternal repetition of its formative conditions. The meaning of ‘love’ (*agape*) means that this identification is not mediated by a rational process. In these terms, *amor fati* remains impervious to justification and its potential critique (Han-Pile, 2011).

Nietzsche’s argument undermines the transcendent position required to develop principles, laws, or duties with context-transcending status.⁹ Laws or rules are not implied by practices and revealed by reason; they are simply an exercise of the ‘quantum of force’ (Nietzsche, 2000b[1887]: 481). Practice here occurs with such inner consistency and automaticity that subjectivity, will, or intention are mere grammatical fallacies that give the *illusion* of events that happen to us as ‘voluntary achievements, willed, chosen’. If there is no ‘doer outside of the deed . . . the deed is all’, as Nietzsche puts it, then this invalidates our (‘the ordinary will’) role as creator of deeds and creators of the future. So we love our fate because we can only consist of its eternal repetition, exercised by the weight of history and carried in the body so that it cannot be removed.

The most controversial application of *amor fati* is to identities that appear truly as fates because their formative moment is one of past exclusion or suffering. Here, the ‘[reiteration] of an identity whose present past is one of insistently unredeemable injury’

(Brown, 1993: 405) maintains the identity in a steady state, and demands recognition only so far as it is the recognition of this injury, again and again. This confirms history as the *only* source of identity, and one that cannot, at least in principle, allow for the formative moment to be surpassed.

Amor fati can be used to demonstrate history as finitude and eternal recurrence as identification with inherited conditions of possibility. Judith Butler uses Nietzsche to develop a different standpoint, emblematic of practice theory by its emphasis on *dis-identification* made possible through the same practical limits, but for the purposes of gaining autonomy. For Butler, practices that signify and fix gender in certain bodies have a dispersive effect over time and are only maintained iteratively, through a 'regulated process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its results . . . through the production of substantializing effects' (Butler, 1990: 198). The repetition gives the appearance of substance because it is through these regulative practices that an object of *belief* is also fixed. But there is nothing outside of the practices, as Butler maintains, following Nietzsche; rather, the impression of fixity requires a 'continual and incessant materializing of possibilities' in the body (Butler, 1988: 521).

However, instead of *amor fati*, Butler uses recurrence to emphasize disidentification as implied by *all* reiterative practices. As she argues, this potential relation to practical limits is 'crucial to the rearticulation of democratic contestation. Indeed, it may be precisely through practices which underscore disidentification with those regulatory norms by which sexual difference is materialized that both feminist and queer politics are mobilized' (Butler, 1993: 4). An example of such a disidentification is gender parody that provokes the reinforcement of regulatory norms by unjustifiable force. This kind of subversion '[facilitates] a reconceptualization of which bodies matter, and which bodies are yet to emerge as critical matters of concern' (ibid.). The larger point is that parody is a way of transforming practices while remaining situated in them.

This distinguishes Butler's position from *amor fati* as a different potential relation to history, the body, and the concrete as conditions of possibility for identity. Importantly, the conservative stance here does not necessarily mean a position on the political right, though *amor fati* argues for the impossibility of getting past inherited practical limits as a recipe for politicized identity. Butler's practice theory offers disidentification as an alternative that can potentially 'reopen . . . the point at which this sovereign subjectivity is established' and change its relation to time: from 'eternal recurrence of pain' to the future as an open horizon. Identities become something less like deeply embodied and irremediable events. They become something more like traits of historical and embodied significance that can be made *into* political positions (such as 'queer politics') that provide alternative practical models and can serve to 'forge an alternative future' (Brown, 1993: 407).

It is possible to read Nietzsche as appealing to the ancient Greeks, especially in the wake of the 1871 Paris Commune and its (in Nietzsche's words) 'threat to our culture!', as a counter to 'the laborer, the paper chase of the bourgeoisie and the baveling threat of socialism' (Robin, 2017: 140).¹⁰ But his opposition to 'Socratic culture' in *The Birth of Tragedy* contains an altered version of what might otherwise seem like a more straightforward 'conservative hostility to rationalism'. Consider the following passage: 'Who could mistake the *optimistic* element in the nature of dialectic, which celebrates a

triumph with every conclusion and can breathe only in cool clarity and consciousness—the optimistic element which, having once penetrated tragedy must gradually overgrow its Dionysian regions and impel it necessarily to self-destruction—to the death-leap into bourgeois drama’ (Nietzsche, 2000c[1872]: 91). For Nietzsche, Socrates embodies ‘the unshakeable faith that thought . . . can penetrate into the deepest recesses of being, and that thought is capable not only of knowing being but even *correcting* it’ (ibid.: 95).

Amor fati is a critique of rationalism because *amor fati* is not optimistic. It is not optimistic because it does not find in thought the capacity to penetrate the recesses of being and correct it. This makes it tragic, which ‘bourgeois drama’ is not. This tragic versus optimistic opposition is closely analogous with conservative thought’s hostility to rationalism as a formula for practice, though for Nietzsche it is ultimately more ‘magisterial’ (demonstrating the mode of classic German philology that Nietzsche adapted in *The Birth of Tragedy* [Whitman, 1986]). Thus, *amor fati* will carry a varied political significance depending on how it aligns with political efforts modelled along the lines of ‘thought’ attempting to ‘correct being’.

Catallaxy versus counter-conduct

To situate Hayek and Foucault in similar positions but with opposing politics seems to make sense given that both, arguably and controversially, have some alignment with neoliberalism. In Hayek’s case, that alignment is more overt because his argument is so clearly situated against planning and the ‘abuse of reason’ from the very start.¹¹ Foucault’s conception of practice has a different orientation that resembles reflexivity and disidentification. Counter-conduct makes modes of being available to politics in a similar way by introducing a separation between who we are and who we could *possibly* be.

This means that being obliged to act in any particular way does not need to be determined by anything ‘subjective’ in the conventional sense (like a desire). But the wager of practice theory is therefore a large one. If action is not attributable to a belief or desire, and therefore not subjectively located, then what can be it attributed to? And what does that attribution mean for the way evaluations are formed in legal, moral, and educational contexts? As Foucault argued (1979: 30), the ‘soul is the prison of the body’. The false attribution of evaluation to actions attributable to the body are forms of entrapment and control, because they falsely limit and label the range of action of which the body is capable by making it the effect of a subject. This is all practice-relative. It is made clear only as the effect of an *evaluation*, and here it performs a ‘*ruse* of reason’.

Hayek very purposefully rejects Kant in his neglected work of psychology *The Sensory Order* (1952). Importantly, this follows on from what was arguably the most generative experience of Hayek’s thought as extending his mentor Ludwig von Mises’ opposition to economic planning and involvement in the ‘socialist calculation debate’ (Bockman, 2011). This preoccupied Hayek in the years leading up to the 1944 publication of *The Road to Serfdom*. While in some respect Hayek’s subsequent concern with cognition runs parallel to von Mises’ own monumental work *Human Action* (1949), Hayek’s efforts do much more to establish how history and a kind of embodiment claim imperil even the most rational economic design.

For Hayek, economic institutions are created in history and cannot be fully comprehended or theoretically summarized (*pace* the German historical school), yet they remain an essential inheritance. They are irreplaceable for the coordination they provide as an unintended and unplanned result. Consider Hayek's discussion of the 'price system' as a demonstration of conservative thought that emphasizes the limits of rational understanding by highlighting the strength of practice:

The price system is just one of those formations which man has learned to use (though he is still very far from having learned to make the best use of it) after he had *stumbled upon it without understanding it*. Through it not only a division of labor but also a co-ordinated utilization of resources based on an equally divided knowledge has become possible. . . . [Man] has been able to develop that division of labor on which our civilization is based because he happened to stumble upon a method which made it possible. Had he not done so, he might still have developed some other, although different, civilization, something like the 'state' of the termite ants, or some other altogether unimaginable type. All that we can say is that nobody has yet succeeded in designing an alternative system in which certain features of the existing one can be preserved which are dear even to those who most violently assail it—such as particularly the extent to which the individual can choose his pursuits and consequently freely use his own knowledge and skill. (Hayek, 1948: 88–9; emphasis mine)

Hayek published *The Sensory Order* in 1952 with the stated purpose to 'know the kind of process by which a given physical situation is transformed into a certain phenomenal picture' (Hayek, 1952: 7). He sought to understand a kind of perceptual intelligence that was different from how we might describe the world in the language of science or any form of rationalism. We can find a parallel argument, accompanied in the same manner by a move toward the cognitive, in the philosopher and chemist Michael Polanyi's famous 'tacit dimension' of knowledge, which he developed, in part, to oppose 'a socialist theory which derived its tremendous persuasive power from its claim to scientific certainty' (Polanyi, 1966: 3).

Intelligence and rationality do not appear from an organizing mental act that applies rules to sensory input. Rather, they appear *endogenous* to the neural accumulation of sensory information, a point that Hayek makes by referencing Hebbian learning models (the predecessor of present-day neural networks). Fundamentally, then, we cannot know our own 'minds' because we cannot represent the mind from a position outside of the sensory order. Hayek here deals a decisive blow to Kantianism: 'Any apparatus of classification must possess a structure of a higher degree of complexity than is possessed by the objects which it classifies'. If the apparatus of classification is of the same degree of complexity as what it classifies, then 'there exists . . . an absolute *limit* to what the human brain can ever accomplish by way of explanation' (Hayek, 1952: 185).

For Hayek, this becomes most evident in his defence of the price system and the phenomenon of 'spontaneous order' (or *catallaxy*) that occurs in the absence of planning, and which assures a mutual adjustment between economic agents that is collectively rational but does not reflect individual rationality or transcendental reason of any kind. As Hayek puts it (1948: 88), 'the problem is precisely how to extend the span of our

utilization of resources beyond the span of the control of any one mind; and, therefore, how to dispense with the need for conscious control'. The limits of 'conscious control' are mirrored in his argument that 'mind' has no more complexity than the accumulated experience of the sensory order. Thus, 'we make constant use of formulas, symbols, and rules whose meaning we do not understand. . . . We have developed these practices and institutions' by stumbling upon them as effective, but their full complexity will always exceed our feeble grasp (ibid.).

Rather than try to regulate or control the outcome of markets to more closely follow some pre-defined purpose, our finitude demands that we accept the fate that catallaxy (e.g. market order) gives us, good or bad:

It ought to be freely admitted that the market order does not bring about any close correspondence between subjective merit and individual needs and rewards. . . . Everybody, rich or poor, owes his income to the outcome of a mixed game of skill and chance, the aggregate result and the shares in which are as high as they are only because we have agreed to play that game. . . . And once we have agreed to play the game and profited from its results it is a moral obligation on us to abide by the results even if they turn against us. (Hayek, 1966: 612, 614)

The flirtation of Foucault with neoliberalism is rooted in the indirect compatibility he found between Hayek's catallaxy as economic liberalism and Foucault's own resistance to humanism. Passing all thought and action through the construct of 'man' draws Foucault's critical attention, but he does not share Hayek's recommendation that the limits of knowledge confirm a market order as a moral obligation on conduct.

In Foucault's late lectures on neoliberalism, his ambiguous stance is framed by the writings most often associated with his practice theory: Foucault's analysis of disciplinary technologies in *Discipline and Punish* (1979). Examinations become a primary point of emphasis as a critical instrument through which 'power . . . produces reality. . . . The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production' (ibid.: 194). The carceral society consists of an 'observing hierarchy and normalizing judgment' that is all pervasive and claims omniscience (ibid.: 304). In his seminar at the time of writing *DP*, Foucault stressed a shift from class struggle to governmentality as the central dynamic of contemporary political struggles, not least because of a '[recolonization of] political identity as political interest' in the years after May 1968 and the French state's 'government of the social' (Behrent, 2010).

Foucault presents the version of neoliberalism most influenced by Hayek as a kind of counterweight to this carceral archipelago:

What appears in [American neoliberalism] is not at all the ideal or the project of an exhaustively disciplinary society in which the legal network hemming in individuals is taken over and extended internally by . . . normative mechanisms. Nor is it a society in which the mechanism of a general normalization and the exclusion of those who cannot be normalized is needed. . . . [We] see instead the image, idea or theme-program of a society in which there is an optimization of the system of differences, in which the field would be open to fluctuating processes, in which minority individuals and practices are tolerated, and

in which action is brought to bear on the rules of the game rather than on the players, and finally in which there is an environmental type of intervention instead of the internal subjugation of individuals. (Foucault, 2008[1978–9]: 259–60)

Foucault and Hayek both align themselves with a market order as a practical form that has a certain appeal. But unlike Hayek, Foucault's argument draws from a critical stance and not a confirmation. The market order that Hayek, Becker, and Friedman all sketch invites, in Foucault's terms, 'counter-conduct'.

The way in which our subjectivity occurs *through* practice is here entangled with that which runs counter to how practice 'conducts' us. Foucault distinguishes counter-conduct from comparable actions like dissidence, insubordination, or revolt exactly because counter-conduct '[allows] reference to the active sense of the word "conduct"' (2007[1977–8]: 201). Conduct is the 'activity of conducting (*conduire*), of conduction (*la conduction*) if you like, but it is equally the way in which one conducts oneself (*se conduit*), lets oneself be conducted (*se laisse conduire*), is conducted (*est conduit*), and finally, in which one behaves (*se comporter*) as an effect of a form of conduct (*une conduite*) as the action of conducting or conduction' (ibid.: 193).

Foucault argues that counter-conduct is simultaneously a conduction *and* a deviation in this sense, which means that counter-conduct stays with a practice as a conducting power in order to undermine it. It involves a 'double refusal and promotion [as] a sphere of revolt that incites a process of productivity' (Davison, 2011: 37). This is not simply revolt, but the genesis of different conduct in the guise of the old. Counter-conduct does not confirm these practical limits ipso facto (which Hayek does), even despite the fact that, as Foucault describes in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, neoliberalism attempts to submit *every* conduct to the market's regime of proof (productivity, efficiency, market value) and imposes a universal economic conceptualization. Like disidentification and reflexivity, it starts from conduct, generated by history, held in and on the body, and operating within the concrete.

This is especially puzzling given the apparent support that Foucault lends to neoliberalism, which seems to be gesture toward conservative thought (Zamora and Behrent, 2015). This is deeply misleading, however. The antithesis between Hayek and Foucault becomes evident in Hayek's statement that we accept the judgements of the market as not just or merited but *necessary*, and Foucault's statement that markets remain rooted in practices that are more contingent and contestable than they appear. For Hayek, market failure is an obligation that we must 'abide by', just as we must market success, because there can never be a *reason* for it. For Foucault, market failure is the counter-conduct of market success, because it makes a different subjectivity possible that reverses the polarities of the neoliberal prerogative that *makes* the market into this sort of practical limit, and makes market failure equivalent to death or madness as a horrifying finitude that can only be exorcised through constant conformity to its opposite (health and reason). Failure is counter-conduct in the same way that 'mysticism' or 'reading Scripture' is counter-conduct in the configuration of pastoral power. In all cases, practice still conducts us; here that conduction runs counter to its dominant thrust, becoming an *ethics*.

Foucault's approach does not address domination or injustice in its totality, but nor is it meant to. It is a practice theory that reveals the historical situatedness of certain forms of identity and agency characteristic of European modernity, particularly those that involve typological classifications formed through the discourse of 'man'. Foucault (1984: 50) connects his practice theory to Kant's critical philosophy, but pivots away from ethical freedom: 'An archaeological and genealogical study of practices', as he puts it, has for its ultimate appeal 'the critique of what we are . . . and at the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them'.

A politics of experiment, going beyond what seems necessary, is available to Foucault but not to Hayek. This is despite their common opposition to Kant and his elaboration of how reason *can* 'conduct' us. For Hayek, practice is a theory of action *because* it prevents the 'abuse of reason' and opposes planning. For Foucault, practice means a human-scientific statement on history ('genealogy') and the practice-relativity of subject categories ('subjectivation'). For him, maintaining practical limits *then* becomes a political choice.

Tradition versus inquiry

Michael Oakeshott and pragmatism are remarkably similar with respect to their critique of rationalism and their shared emphasis on the significance of historical development. They differ on the decisive grounds of how acquired 'conduct' or 'habit' should either be categorized as part of traditions that should be preserved, or instead be open to creative reconstruction through inquiry.

Oakeshott's model of habit acquisition emphasizes the significance of repeated exposures and experiences that build habits endogenously, without having to be categorized as such. The difference between thought and experience resembles not a difference in kind, but in degree of familiarity gained through repeated exposure. It is in 'virtue of distinguishing and remembering likenesses and unlikenesses in what is going on [that] we come to inhabit a world of recognizables' (Oakeshott, 1975: 3). All of this unfolds automatically, through a 'continuous and unconditional engagement of learning to understand which is well on its way in even the most exiguous acts of attention' (ibid.: 2). Importantly, intelligence does *not* require a 'reflective consciousness [to] supervene . . . upon the confusion of all that may be going on'. Indeed, reflective consciousness (or Kantian rationality) is itself simply another 'going-on' that becomes more familiar through repeated experience (ibid.).

As Oakeshott continues, 'understanding here becomes identification', which he discusses independently of 'causal or marginal resemblances and differences in recognizable characteristics' that would require a conceptual architecture. Identification is instead a matter of 'ideal characters specified as compositions of characteristics. . . . If we are asked to account for our conclusions we can only point to the marks which specify an ideal character' (Oakeshott, 1975: 5). Everything, in other words, is endogenous to this process of learning, which means that a practical limit applies even to rational thought. Thus, to understand human conduct

in which an agent discloses and enacts himself is to put it into a story in which it is recognized to be an occurrence contingently related to other occurrences. . . . This story has no overall meaning; it is occurrences understood in terms of the meanings they acquire from their evidential contingent relationships. And the teller of the story has no message for those who listen. (ibid.: 105)

Oakeshott uses this argument less to celebrate practices arrived at without design than to establish how traditions ('the story') will always remain elusive for explicitly formulated or formulatable ideals:

[A] tradition of behaviour is a tricky thing to get to know. Indeed, it may even appear to be essentially unintelligible. It is neither fixed nor finished; it has no changeless centre to which understanding can anchor itself; there is no sovereign purpose to be perceived or invariable direction to be detected; there is no model to be copied, no ideal to be realized, or rule to be followed. (Oakeshott, 1962: 128–9)

His emphasis is on just how much about a tradition eludes our understanding even though we enact it. The only thing we can claim to know is 'its detail. . . . What has to be learned is but a coherent concrete manner of living in all its concreteness' (ibid.). The lesson here is less one of celebration than of humility: Practice creates order and stability, though it carries an aura of mystery that recommends against any sort of tampering, especially for a condition-bound (not transcendent) intelligence like ours. The goal of 'moral education' should not be the capacity to subjectively represent rules or laws, but rather an '*amour-propre* . . . when the spring of [our] conduct is not an attachment to an ideal or a felt duty to obey, but [our] self-esteem, and when to act wrongly is felt as a diminution to [our] self-esteem' (ibid.: 63).

Pragmatism, signals a practice theory that shares many characteristics with Oakeshott. Instead of using practical limits to confirm the inevitability of tradition, however, the purpose is to further democratic critique, or *inquiry*. While habits are also acquired by actors through action in the world, pragmatists like Dewey and Peirce allow for experiences to arise outside of the familiar or what is recursively produced through recognizing 'likenesses' (in Oakeshott's terms). Inquiry can modify acquired habits and modes of conduct that have (now) occurred to us as something that *can be* questioned. The high esteem given to critical capacities by Peirce (1905) draws him toward inquiry (synonymous with 'critical common-sensism') as a 'modification of Kantianism'. Even epistemic limits are habits for Peirce, which means that they enable action, but can also be progressively reformed and something else 'fixated' in their place.

Inquiry is a tool for creatively reforming these practical limits while remaining within them. In this version of practice theory, inquiry is defined very simply as the 'progressive determination of a problem and its solution' (Dewey, 1938). This procedure of trial via scepticism is grounded in a 'living awareness' of the extent to which our inquiries unfold on the basis of habit as 'a way or manner of action' (ibid.: 13). Those habits are 'valid . . . such as generally produce conclusions that are sustained and developed in further inquiry' (ibid.). Indeed, the very nature of objects is only what 'has been produced and ordered in settled form through the process of inquiry. . . . [Things] exist as

objects for us only as they have been previously determined as outcomes of inquiries. . . . In [new situations] they are means of attaining knowledge of something else' (ibid.: 119).

Contrary to Oakeshott's traditions, then, inquiry changes the very kinds of finitude or limits that make it possible in the first place. Against Kant's emphasis on 'clear and distinct ideas' as necessary for action, the pragmatic maxim that Peirce derives makes ideas clear against a background of 'prejudice' in which the intelligibility of ideas 'lies exclusively in its conceivable bearing on the *conduct* of life' (Peirce, 1958a[1905]: 183). 'Conceivable' here does not mean a limit that applies to the solitary consciousness of the individual. It means the state of 'indubitability' reached by a community of inquirers. For Peirce, there are no indubitable, uncriticizable habits of a general or recurrent kind. While certain habits seem to be 'natural', like instincts, they are in fact modified 'under varying circumstances and in distant ages'.

Habits are the pragmatic phenomenon altered through inquiry, but this does not arise through conscious intent. Since 'we cannot begin with complete doubt . . . we must begin with all the prejudices which we actually have. . . . These prejudices are not to be dispelled by a maxim, for they are things which it does not occur to us *can* be questioned' (Peirce, 1958b[1862]: 97). What it *does* occur to us to question are the acquired habits that lead us into a situation but do not allow for an unproblematic state of belief once we are there. When inquiry is taking place, attributes commonly ascribed to subjectivity appear as part of inquiry and in a mode of constant development: 'That consciousness of the action of a new feeling in destroying the old feeling is what I call an *experience*. Experience generally is what the course of life has *compelled* me to think' (Peirce, 1958c[1904]: 385). As Dewey puts it (1920: 93), 'experience means the new, that which calls us away from adherence to the past, that reveals novel facts and truths'.

Tradition in Oakeshott's terms does not imply the same forward process, but finds a preference instead for *not* calling things into question, in many cases because they are acquired in such a way that they *cannot* be called into question. But if, as pragmatists argue, all that we 'acquire' (in Oakeshott's terms) are habits that enable action, then action itself provides the testing ground on which any acquisition can be changed. As Oakeshott admits, the distinction is not absolute, and some relationships (like employment) are more easily reconstructed than others (family or friendship). The pragmatist argues that this is not a choice. If a progressive reconstruction, even subtle and prolonged, is *not* happening, then this signals a power relationship and the prevention of inquiry (see Joas, 1996[1992]: 128–9).

In his earliest work, *Experience and Its Modes*, Oakeshott (1933: 264) gives a brief criticism of pragmatism as subscribing to the truth or falsehood of an idea as stemming from the 'consequences which follow from it'. He distinguishes his own 'practical mode of experience' as being less akin to 'utilitarianism' than pragmatism. This simplified reading of pragmatism is not uncommon, but Oakeshott's argument is also indicative. For him, practice is a mode of experience *sub specie voluntatis*, and this distinguishes it from science and history as other possible modes that are far more lucid: 'Scientific and historical experience involve processes of abandoning truths which were never true in search of a coherent world of fact; practice involves a process in which the achievement of a coherent world of facts is merely preliminary to its transformation' (ibid.: 267).

This discussion comes well before Oakeshott's mature arguments about traditions of behaviour and conduct, but even here 'practice' refers to that which precedes and remains invulnerable to any arrangement that could *change* it.¹² Practical truth is not available to a 'world of fact'. I interpret this as 'conservative hostility to rationalism'. By contrast, pragmatism demonstrates a 'truth in human thinking' drawn toward practice because inquiry is distinct from universal reason. Habit is a practical truth, which seems necessary, but inquiry makes all such truths preliminaries, even instinctual ones, that will be altered in time. The political expression for this is 'creative democracy'.

Conclusion

Because 'practice' is the product of dual reference, it is rife with ambiguities and confusions. This has gone largely unrecognized, because a practice theory has been located almost wholly within the human sciences and is less frequently recognized as integral to many separate versions of conservative thought. Figures like Hayek and Oakeshott, and Nietzsche in a different sense, all exemplify a generative approach to 'practice' that, if eccentrically placed in the human sciences, has enjoyed a certain political appeal.

The examples of conservative thought discussed above lend themselves, overall, to the *confirmation* of practical limits and forms of non-critical engagement like *amor fati*, catallaxy and tradition that accept or enjoy historical inheritance and the limits of the body and of knowledge. As Oakeshott puts it (1962: 196), 'coming to be at home in this commonplace world qualifies us (as no knowledge of "political science" can ever qualify us) . . . to engage in what the man of conservative disposition understands to be political activity'. It is only within horizons that can never be formulated and cannot themselves be made political that a politics can take place. The examples of practice theory instead bring *critique* to bear by using practical limits as a starting point from which to derive a politics that makes our rootedness in practice apparent, but which also makes that rootedness contestable and contingent. Disidentification, counter-conduct, and inquiry are all forms of critical engagement. They disclose latent possibilities for change and transformation in current practice as the field on which a politics can take place.

The significance of theories of action for political strategies is demonstrated here through the manner in which 'practice' deviates from action as understood on a Kantian plane. Agency is a relation to the world that consists not of universal reason, but of practical modes: historically inherited, embodied, material, enacted, simultaneously meaningful and cognitively limiting. The proliferation of practice-related forms of agency ('passive intentionality', 'tacit intentionality', 'practice sense', 'tacit knowledge', 'embodied understanding') to explain a growing range of social phenomena suggests that the practice turn has enjoyed success. But we must be vigilant about the generative source of 'practice' in such increasingly prolific claims-making.

As this article has tried to show, a 'conservative hostility to rationalism' and 'truth in human thinking' are *both* generative formulas for practice, situated in sets of oppositions from which practice emerges as a token of either conservative thought or practice theory. This does not attempt an exhaustive range of the sources available for practice-based arguments. It does, however, appeal to reflexivity in the human sciences, specifically to

the difference between a political stance given a human-scientific expression and a human-scientific stance given a political expression.

By presenting capsule summaries and comparisons of allied concepts between conservative thought and practice theory, the effort has been to establish their family resemblance, but also to take it apart and attempt to clarify the nature and source of their subtle differences, easily mistakeable as analogues. More generally, practice theory serves as an alternative *politics of finitude* to the version presented by conservative thought and ‘heard in the chancelleries’ (Anderson, 1992). A politics of finitude is contemporary. It does not commit to universal or absolute principles or standpoints to arrive at a philosophical explication of human finitude, nor to overcome it by similar means. It is immanently focused instead of other-worldly. It does not seek to substitute a new centre in place of an old one. Both practice theory and conservative thought share the same opposition to transcendental subjectivity as a moral and epistemological solution to finitude that can never be absolutely present. For both accounts, practice grounds, locates, ‘impurifies’, and ‘detranscendentalizes’ reason, as it should (Allen, 2011). Yet this twinned effort lends itself to a different politics, depending on whether the position that anchors it is inside or outside of the human sciences.

The present study attempts to support the general autonomy of human science (Bourdieu, 1996), despite the fact that much work in the human sciences remains surreptitiously indebted to Kant (see Martin, 1998; Reckwitz, 2002; Turner, 2003).¹³ Practice theory is more open-ended, change-oriented, and immanently critical as a position-taking in (post-Kantian) human science. Conservative thought is more obstinate, order-oriented, and immanently preservative as a position-taking in (post-revolutionary) politics. The discussion here gestures toward new comparisons and syntheses that examine the ramifications of the practice turn, older here than most would place it and by the same token more consequential, for political trends on both the left and the right.

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Notes

1. ‘Plane’ is an allusion to Deleuze (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 33, 36): ‘Concepts belong to philosophy . . . philosophy creates them and never stops creating them. . . [The] task of philosophy when it creates concepts, entities, is always to extract an event from things and beings, to set up the new event from things and beings. . . . If philosophy begins with the creation of concepts, then the plane of immanence must be regarded as prephilosophical. It is presupposed not in the way that one concept may refer to others but in the way that concepts refer to a

nonconceptual understanding'. As Martin (1998) notes, the 'implicit philosophy of sociological theory' (evidenced by Weber and Durkheim) remains within a Kantian plane. The question of 'freedom within society' is conceptualized through a dichotomy of ethical action and social constraint playing the same role as universal reason.

2. Heidegger and Wittgenstein are often credited with being the 'philosophical precursors' to practice theory in the human sciences (Reckwitz, 2002). It seems indicative, however, that *both* Heidegger and Wittgenstein have been historically associated with vaguely similar, early 20th century, middle-European 'conservative sympathies', as evidenced by a shared enthusiasm for Spengler's *Decline of the West*. J. C. Nyri (1982), for instance, argues that the late Wittgenstein's 'practice turn' consists *largely* of these conservative sympathies applied for philosophical purposes, which brings Wittgenstein into remarkable parallel with Oakeshott. To date, no one has attempted a political ontology (or analytic) of Wittgenstein, which would presumably be different from Bourdieu's treatment of Heidegger, given the different 'philosophical history' in which Wittgenstein worked (from Carnap and Russell forward in the analytic tradition, rather than Husserl forward in the continental). While it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss, Marx's practice theory arguably holds a similar (generative formula) distinction from Heidegger and Wittgenstein as Marx holds with Burke. A deceptive similarity, however, is indicated by book titles like *Marx and Wittgenstein* (Rubinstein, 1981) or *Marx and Heidegger* (Hemming, 2013), to name just two. A young Herbert Marcuse, who wrote a habilitation under Heidegger's supervision, attempted an integration of Marx and Heidegger in the early 1930s, inspired by the publication of Heidegger's *Being and Time* in 1927, Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* in 1932, and Marcuse's involvement in left-wing Weimar politics. Marcuse found in the young Marx's analysis of 'labor . . . a concept that grasps the being of human Dasein itself and as such' (Marcuse, 2005[1932]: 124).
3. Take, for instance, Burke's vivid statement: 'Wickedness is a little more inventive. Whilst you are discussing fashion, the fashion is gone by. The very same vice assumes a new body. . . . It walks abroad; it continues its ravages; whilst you are gibbeting the carcass, or demolishing the tomb. You are terrifying yourself with ghosts and apparitions, whilst your house is the haunt of robbers. It is thus with all those, who, attending only to the shell and husk of history, think they are waging war with intolerance, pride and cruelty, whilst, under color of abhorring the ill principles of antiquated parties, they are authorizing and feeding the same odious vices in different factions, and perhaps in worse' (Burke, 1951[1790]: 210). Compare this with the language that Marx uses to warn against a politics that refuses to recognize that 'all forms and products of consciousness cannot be dissolved by mental criticism, by resolution into "self-consciousness", or transformation into "apparitions", "specters", "whimsies" but only by the practical overthrow of actual social relations' (Marx and Engels, 1998[1844-5]: 61).
4. Finitude of this sort is commonly associated with practice, if not so explicitly stated. Finitude can be the 'limits set by the historically and socially situated conditions that [produce] habitus' (Bourdieu, 1990a[1980]: 55). It can be the presence of institutions 'which are indispensable conditions for the successful pursuit of conscious aims [but] have been neither invented nor are observed with any such purpose in view' (Hayek, 1973: 10-11). It can be that which specifies 'useful procedures or [denotes] obligations or duties which relate to human actions and utterances' (Oakeshott, 1975: 55). Finitude can be the fact that 'there is no possibility of agency or reality outside of the discursive practices that give [subjectivity] the intelligibility

[it has]’ (Butler, 1990: 202). Or it could be the ‘practical bearings we conceive the object of our comprehension to have’, and how this constitutes the ‘whole of our concept’ of it (Peirce, 1958d[1878]: 124). All of these are very different statements, given from different points of view, but they all share a similar referent.

5. As Mehta (1990: 164) writes, in comparison with nearly all continental and English liberals, ‘Burke expresses a tolerance that is grounded on an acceptance of his own limitations and his own possible obtuseness to other practices, and it is therefore a deeper tolerance than that of his liberal compatriots, even when they made toleration the focus of their theoretical attention. In contrast to the darkness that James Mill and others ascribed to India, Burke sees and accepts that darkness as perhaps stemming from the limits of his own circumscribed vision’.
6. Take Chakrabarty’s (2002: 62–3) argument as an example: Should the wearing of the *khadi* fabric by Indian male politicians be theorized as a ‘conscious statement of intent [this] can only lead us to see it as ritualistic and hypocritical’. Should it be comprehended as a practice instead, *khadi* exemplifies the ‘Ghandian modern’, with a historical source, given public significance, the contrast with which can even reduce how subjectively necessary (or accidental) capitalist practice can seem.
7. The following comparisons are not entirely defensible, aside from their selection of related concepts that qualify as part of either conservative thought or practice theory and have a family resemblance from across the divide that remains, to some degree at least, inexplicable and easily mistakable without a detailed dissection. Missing from this discussion are a lengthy list of possible others, including Michel de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre, Guy Debord, Roland Barthes, Harold Garfinkel, or Erving Goffman. Significant among all of these writers is the theme of ‘everyday life’, a formulation that clearly aligns with an attentiveness to practice. While it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss, the appearance of everyday life is worthy of further examination as constituting a scholarly stance that seems to display a similar simultaneity of the human-scientific and the political. As Bourdieu (1991) mentions, the Weimar-era ‘conservative revolutionaries’ among whom Heidegger trafficked also showed a distinct preoccupation with ‘everyday life’. I thank the reviewer for drawing my attention to this.
8. Conservative thought recognizes those horizons as well, but ‘enjoys them’ instead (in various ways) and is ‘cool and critical of change and innovation’ (Oakeshott, 1962: 172). For someone like Foucault, by contrast, the goal must be to establish ‘freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem’ (Foucault, 1997: 67).
9. This fits into a broader scepticism of ‘ideas’ that is a persistent theme in Nietzsche’s thought, extending to the ascetic (‘life-denying’) nature of scientific and artistic practice: ‘To become what one is, one must not have the faintest idea what one is. . . . The whole surface of consciousness – consciousness is a surface – must be kept clear of all great imperatives. . . . Meanwhile the organizing “idea” that is destined to rule keeps growing deep down – it begins to command; slowly it leads us back from side roads and wrong roads; it prepares single qualities and fitnesses that will one day prove to be indispensable as means toward a whole – one by one, it trains all subservient capacities before giving any hint of the dominant task, “goal”, “aim”, or “meaning”’ (Nietzsche 2000a[1888]: 752).
10. Robin (2017) maintains that Nietzsche possesses very persistent neo-aristocratic dispositions, which are on prominent display in the unpublished chapter from *The Birth of Tragedy* (‘The

Greek State'). In his own context, however, Nietzsche seemed positioned more against the drift of his own time, and less *for* anything threatened by it.

11. Hayek (2011[1960]), of course, wrote a famous essay in which he declared 'why [he is] not a conservative'. He cites the tendency of conservatism to cling to the past, and therefore to be led along by progressives and liberals whose politics are keyed to the future. Hayek finds that some conservatives have '[shown] an understanding of the meaning of spontaneously grown institutions such as language, law, morals, and conventions that anticipated modern scientific approaches and from which the liberals might have profited. But the admiration of the conservatives for free growth generally applies only to the past. They typically lack the courage to welcome the same undesigned change from which new tools of human endeavors will emerge' (ibid.: 527), which is where he positions himself. He mentions (ibid.: 529) Burke as one of the 'three greatest liberals' whom he admires, suggesting a puzzling affinity, but one that can seemingly be reconciled should we recognize how falling on the side of practice versus theory, in a configuration born of the French Revolution, at least partially joins them.
12. Oakeshott later (1975: 290–1) warns against the state becoming an 'enterprise association' involved in 'deploying [its citizens'] productive energies and talents according to a "scientifically deliberated" plan'.
13. The inspiration here is Bourdieu's claim that 'far from there existing . . . an antinomy between the search for autonomy . . . and the search for political efficacy, it is by increasing their autonomy . . . that intellectuals can increase the effectiveness of political action whose ends and means have their origin in the specific logic of the fields of cultural production' (Bourdieu, 1996: 340). To historicize is to overcome the 'genesis amnesia . . . which is at the basis of all forms of the transcendental illusion'. This defines the 'human sciences' broadly, without recognition of disciplinary boundaries, institutional divisions, or national fields. Any such broad categorization is therefore problematic. Yet the effort is still valid to the degree that it is two generative formulas that I seek to define, in the task of making legible a relevant but very subtle distinction, one that can be retraced genealogically (or using 'genetic history', in Bourdieu's preferred terminology).

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