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## **Power and Theories of Social Practice: Bringing Capacity into Question with a Focus on Plastic Packaging Recycling**

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### **Abstract**

In this essay, we conceptualise ‘capacity’ as a means of attending to power and addressing corollary issues of disparity and social change in a manner commensurate with the ontological commitments of second-wave theories of practice. While second-wave theories of practice justifiably see power as immanent to the enactment and ordering of practices, the challenge remains to develop convincing analytical tools capable of empirically parsing the relations that give rise to social disparities. Our conceptualisation of capacity, which comprises three interwoven dimensions (potential, limit, and position), responds to this challenge and, in doing so, illuminates how practices are imbued with and produce social disparities in capacities to act. To illustrate the novel empirical tractability that our conceptualisation of capacity contributes to the debate on power and second-wave theories of practice, we focus on and critique the assumed ‘power’ of packaging design practitioners to tackle waste by enhancing the recyclability of plastic packaging. As this case demonstrates, the conceptualisation of capacity articulated in this paper contributes a powerful means for practice-theoretical research to unpick and address the details and dynamics of disparities in capacities to act, sharpening insight into the constraints and possibilities for social change.

### **Keywords**

*capacity; plastic recycling; power; social change; sustainability*

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## Introduction: Bringing Capacity into Question

Across different commentators, the question of whether practice theories can account for power and relatedly politics, political economy and conflict remains live (Blue, 2025; Evans, 2020; Geels et al., 2015; Holmes, 2025; Sayer, 2013; Soron, 2019; Southerton et al., 2026). The question typically arises as part of critiques levelled against ‘second-wave’ (Hanchard 2024) theories of practice and their flat ontological foundations. Prominent contributors to first-wave practice theories, including Pierre Bourdieu ([1979] 2010) and Anthony Giddens (1986), maintained hierarchical social ontologies that embed different types and scales of social phenomena. In contrast, works that can be clustered under the bracket of second-wave practice theories share a common approach to the social as composed of social practices throughout (see, for instance: Nicolini 2012; Schatzki 1996; Shove et al. 2012). These practices are understood to be interconnected and to unfold across a single, flat ontological plane (Schatzki 2016). Second-wave theories of practice have been challenged (for example, by Fine 2005; Savage 2020, and Sayer 2005) over their abilities to account for power, with their flatness taken to inhibit conceptualisation and explication of social disparities and related issues of inequality and inequity.

One way to respond to this line of critique is to assert that arguments that second-wave theories of practice do not engage with the concept of power are based on particular social ontologies and accompanying understandings of power that are themselves inimical to the flat ontological underpinnings of second-wave practice theories. Power is not missing from second-wave theories of practice; conceptualisations and accounts of power unfold on alternative theoretical grounds. This response fits with work that has increasingly specified how practice theories are suffused with understandings of power (Nicolini 2012; Watson 2017; Holmes 2022; Blue 2025). Works of this kind generally spring from the contention that theories of practice are and always have been theories of power. Nicolini captures this sentiment in the strongest terms, arguing that “... all practice-based approaches foreground the centrality of interest in all human matters and therefore put emphasis on the importance of power, conflict, and politics as constitutive elements of the social reality we experience...” (2012, p. 6)

This equation of theories of practice with theories of power can be linked with a basic understanding that to “... engage in a practice is to exercise a power.” (Barnes, 2001, p. 28) Echoes of a Foucauldian view of power are loud here, with power broadly conceptualised in relational terms across second-wave theories of practice. That is, as part and parcel of the flow of performances of practices and the relationships and orderings those performances enact. In this regard, the flat ontological approaches that imbue second-wave theories of practice do not disavow social disparities and the materialisation of various inequalities and inequities; they simply frame them as produced and reproduced as the aggregate effect of performances of practices over time.

Another way to respond to the question of whether second wave-theories of practice adequately account for power is to consider, in line with Watson’s (2017) approach to the topic, that more refined conceptual and analytical work may be needed to convince critics and to enhance second-wave practice theories’ capacities to engage power and corollaries of social disparity, inequality, and inequity. This is to recognise that the suggestion that theories of practice are, and always have been, theories of power can be a frustrating shut-down of further discussion and elaboration. Recognising this, and in the spirit of participating in conceptual development and refinement, scope remains, as Watson (2017) suggests, to hone analytics commensurate with the ontological commitments of second-wave practice theories that convincingly attend to the details and dynamics of power.

A third form of response to the question of whether practice theories can account for power, one that is closer to the second than the first retort, focuses on the basis for developing an empirically tractable practice-based analysis of power. This is the mode of response developed in this essay. Against the sketched backdrop, we purposefully ask: how can second-wave theories of practice convincingly help to conceptually and empirically engage with social disparities, without relapsing into a conceptual tautology of practice or discussion of abstract social hierarchies and levels? The focus on social disparities signals an intentional move on our part toward grounding and refining discussion of power – a persistent, yet notoriously slippery topic of social, political, and economic theory, which, in very basic terms, can be taken to reflect a shared interest in differences in abilities to act and effect change.

Our task is to address reservations about how well second-wave practice theory can tackle power by focusing on disparities to act in a way that current articulations of how power is endemic to and emergent from the flow of practices do not explicitly resolve. The aim is to help realise the potential of second-wave practice theories to engage with critical questions and articulate theoretically informed critiques of power and disparities of practice. Specifically, we contend that thorough conceptualisation and detailed empirical consideration of ‘capacity’ provide a necessary and substantial step towards addressing the stated question. We show, in turn, how conceptual and analytical work on capacity can help to fill out theoretical accounts of practice and power and offer new pathways for empirical analysis that matter for developing understandings of the contours of social change regarding different topical domains.

We start by specifying capacity, positioning it as a key differentiator across a broad range of ways in which power is conceptualised in social theory. That is, between understandings of power as a ‘property’ (of a subject, social actor, or object) and as an ‘effect’ (only transpiring via the enactment of socio-material relationships). We subsequently discuss three dimensions of what comprises and characterises capacity – potential, limit, and position. We then play those three interwoven dimensions through a brief empirical account of plastic waste, focusing on the potential, limits, and positions of packaging design practice and attempts to enhance and upscale plastics recycling and redress socio-environmental harms. We conclude with a short note on the value of the empirical tractability that our conceptual account of capacity offers for practice-theoretically inspired research on power, and, relatedly, social disparities and social change.

## Capacity and the Differentiation of Conceptualisations of Power

Capacity can be mobilised as a key differentiator in the wide range of social theoretical engagements with power. To characterise the range of different ways of conceptualising power, we specifically contend that capacity can be posited in reference to two poles defining the complex territory of debate. At one end, there are approaches that align with what may be taken as ‘common sense’, seeing power as an *object*, or a *property*, that can belong to an individual, institution, or other social actor. At the other end, there are approaches which understand power in more relational terms and as an *effect*, that is as that which transpires with moments of interaction between social phenomena.

In terms of conceptualising power as a property of an object, in its most fundamental form, power can be seen as the capacity to act with effect in the world – essentially making it synonymous with conventional ideas of agency. A bit more specific is to understand power as having the capacity to enact change in what other actors do or are able to do – i.e., different forms of domination. Max Weber ([1920] 1968) characterised power as the probability of effective domination of others, and the mechanism of power as authority. Steven Lukes (1974) also gives a sophisticated characterisation

of power as the capacity to effect outcomes, identifying mechanisms including the shaping of agendas and the influence on what is considered possible or thinkable. For both Weber and Lukes, power is largely framed as a property of social actors, including organisations, consisting in that actor's capacity to effect change in the world.

Focusing on the other pole, understanding power as effect rather than object, we can turn to Foucault. Foucault (1982) expressly disavows the analysis of power, or elaboration of the foundations for the analysis of power, as goals of his work. This is because he is at pains to challenge the very idea of power as a thing in and of itself and a property that is amenable to substantive analysis. As he stresses, "... power is relations; power is not a thing." (Foucault et al. [1989] 1996, 410) These relations are not simple, linear chains of command but are asymmetrically distributed, multiple, and mobile throughout the social body. Power, therefore, is not a property or possession held by a dominant individual; rather, it concerns the strategies, techniques, and tactics that constitute social interactions themselves and what they produce. This means that power only materialises as an effect of social interactions, perpetually exercised rather than simply acquired, held, or owned. Power, in this instance, is never latent, but immanent. As Schatzki (2019, 168) explains, "... power so conceived is also the root notion of power that Bourdieu used, above all in his later work". However, in the case of Bourdieu, power relations do not obtain between social actors, as with Foucault, "... but between positions that actors occupy..." in social fields. (Schatzki, 2019, 168) By emphasising the constitutive positions that actors take up in social fields, instead of interaction, Bourdieu ([1979] 2010) articulates a famously structured and structuring account of power as an effect of social relations, irreducible to the properties of actors and objects. Still, Bourdieu's analysis of power is closer to Foucault's than it is to Weber and Lukes.

From this high-level characterisation of a selected set of positions that conceptualise power as a property and as an effect, the relation between capacity and power appears to be a key differentiator. For understandings of power as a possession, power is synonymous with capacity, as articulated most clearly by Lukes (2005). In this sense, power is a substantive possession (what can be identified, in Spinozan terms, as *potentia*), a resource or ability held by a social actor that is ready to be deployed, whether deliberately or through the structural determination of agendas. For understandings of power as effect, meanwhile, capacity is an unevenly manifest potential (*potestas*), the effect of resources and dispositions, which emerge from socio-material relations.

Building on this view, power-imbued socio-material relations and the resulting asymmetrical and differentially advantaged positions of actors within those relations are clearly shaped by uneven distributions of capacity to act. However, those very uneven distributions of capacity are themselves outcomes, often aggregated and consolidated over time, of previous enactments. These enactments are not only an expression of existing capacities but also productive, reinforcing, and legitimising of new distributions of capacity to act, converting contingent relational effects into durable, often institutionalised, resources. Therefore, while power and capacity are tightly associated and mutually constitutive, it is meaningful to recognise them as distinct, and this can provide a means to gaining stronger analytical traction on the challenging conceptual and empirical terrain of explaining the materialisation of social disparities and the details and dynamics of social change.

So far, social practices have been absent from our discussion of power and capacity. In what follows, we bring practices into view as part of laying out an explicit practice-theoretical conceptualisation of capacity that draws inspiration from existing writing on power and theories of social practice.

## Framing Capacity as an Analytical Resource for Practice Theoretical Investigation of Power

Capacity can be seen as a key feature and differentiator of social theoretical accounts of power. There has, however, so far been little engaged conceptual and analytical work on capacity in second-wave theories of practice. Watson (2017) does signal something of a move in this direction, as part of a discussion of the difficulties theories of practice face when moving beyond acknowledgement of the ubiquity of relations of power to investigate disparities in capacities to act with effect. Addressing these difficulties and building on the work of others, including Schatzki (2002) and Nicolini (2012), Watson writes:

“The challenge is to develop concepts and methods that can help grasp how arrangements and associations of practices and the heterogeneous flows they are bound with are produced through, and reproduce, systematic inequities in capacities to act, including to act in ways which shape others’ capacities to act.” (Watson 2017, 179)

To address this challenge and make the broad idea of capacity itself amenable to analytical framing, we delineate three interwoven conceptual understandings. We do so to show how a focus on capacity can make empirically tangible key aspects of the ways in which practices render social disparities. The framings include: potential, limit, and position.

### 1. Potential

The potential capacity for effective action is a recurring feature of writing on power as *object* and as *effect*. From a practice-based perspective, this capacity needs to be viewed in reference to practice and as that which is realised only in the performance of practices. This draws attention to the potential for the performance of practices that instantiate relations constituting agency. As such, potential capacity to act is not reducible to abstract accounts of practice entities. Rather, capacity as potential to act is realised through performance. This understanding of capacity is underpinned by well-established accounts in practice theory – through, for example, recognition of geographical variation in the prevalence of a particular practice, as reflecting uneven availability of the specific requisites, most obviously of materials, but also of competencies and meanings (Shove et al., 2012).

This view of potential gestures toward a practice-based conceptualisation of capacity that is just as sensitive to the limits of action as it is to the potential to act. Put otherwise, a sensitivity not only for what can be done, but also for what cannot be done. The promise is a more nuanced view of the interplay of practices and the distribution of elements in shaping uneven configurations of limited capacities to act with effect, however provisionally organised.

### 2. Limit

There is no social theory of power that argues individual actors, groups, or organisations can do just as they please. This appreciation of the limits of potential action is rooted in the etymology and Latin origins of capacity (*capacitatem*), meaning ‘breadth’ and ‘capability of holding much’.<sup>2</sup> As such, capacity involves a volumetric view of the limits of what is possible to do.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.etymonline.com/word/capacity>

From a practice-based perspective, the limits of action reside with the socio-material ordering and performance of practices. This carries with it an understanding that there are social and material finitudes to the performance of practice, whether of one practitioner, or of an institution and the sum of performances that reproduce it and through which it has effects. Drawing broadly on theories of practice, it is accepted, for example, that materials and arrangements thereof have morphological qualities of form and structure that help to establish limits of enactment (Schatzki, 2019). It is also accepted that knowledge, normative values, and expectations of practice help to establish the limits of intelligibility concerning what is seen as right and proper conduct (Nicolini, 2012). Moreover, it is understood that practices can affect other practices; that practices have capacity (albeit limited) to affect the limits of other practices and performances thereof (Shove et al., 2012). This is to say that access to materials and resources, including forms of knowledge, opportunities, and means to extend the limits of possible action, are also the effects of the ordering and performance of practices. A knock-on effect of this view is that systematic disparities in capacities to act and the limits these reflect, are outcomes of the live details and dynamics of enactment.

This practice-theoretical framing of capacity in terms of potential and limit hints at a further, basic dimension. Namely, a framing of capacity as position, both in terms of that held (however provisionally) by a practitioner in reference to a practice and the wider relationality of one practice to another.

### 3. Position

Conceptions of power as an effect of social relations suggest position, however provisional these positions may be. Foucault writes of the relationship between power and position as follows: "... power is exercised through networks, and individuals do not simply circulate in those networks; they are in a position to both submit to and exercise this power." (Foucault [1997] 2004, 29) Bourdieu ([1979]2010) goes a step further, emphasising the positioning that underpins the position that actors take up in reference to the structuring forces of social fields. From a broad second-wave, practice-based perspective, the discussion of individuals and social fields needs to be superseded by an account of practice. This is consistent with an argument, shared across second-wave practice theories, that neither individuals, nor social fields, exist outside of practice and therefore outside of what people are doing and embroiled with. Echoing this view, Reckwitz writes, for example, of practitioners as 'crossing points', with the capacity for potential action constituted by the positions that practitioners find themselves in amid a "... constellation of 'crossing'." (2002, 257) Schatzki somewhat echoes this view, writing that "... positions always depend on the events and activities that encompass, or are carried out by, the components of arrangements." (2002, 19) Put otherwise in Schatzki's terms, arrangements are social orders in which entities, including practitioners, are positioned and amid which meaning and identity befall them.

What these practice-based views of position mean in terms of capacity is that there is a locus to performance. This locus can be taken to refer to the more or less formal role a practitioner enacts in reference to a practice. In very basic terms, how, for example, a practitioner acts in the position of a police officer, teacher, researcher, engineer, motorist, parent, or something else. Such positionings and related capacities to act can be internally differentiated according to "... past experience, technical knowledge, learning, opportunities, available resources, [and] previous encouragement by others...", as Warde (2005, 138) writes about motoring. The extent to which internal positions of practice are instituted also affects capacities to act, as in the institutionalised rank-and-file order of policing and teaching in specific contexts. As such, capacities to act are constituted *in situ*, through

enactment, amid the wider instituted relations through which enactments are positioned and therefore conditioned. This account involves taking a decisive step away from the individual practitioner, instead focusing on how the position occupied is constituted by the flow of practices, their performances, and the consequences of those performances.

#### **4. An Interwoven View of Capacity - ‘Potential-Limit-Position’**

We have laid out a practice-oriented analysis of capacity, differentiating three dimensions that are interwoven with one another. Potential to enact practice always comes with limits, related to the (always provisional) positioning of performance. Recognising the relatively abstract theoretical nature of our writing up to this point and accepting that “... theory without some kind of exemplification is no theory at all...” (Barnes 1995, 61), the next section provides a short illustrative note. This is based on reflections from ongoing empirical research on the state of UK plastic packaging recycling, with special attention, in this essay, paid to the assumed power and capacity of packaging design practice to improve recyclability and tackle plastic waste.

### **Plastic Waste and the Assumed ‘Power’ of Packaging Design Practices**

Plastic waste is an important issue. The widespread production and use of plastics, which are essentially petrochemicals, impacts climate change, biodiversity, environmental pollution, and human health (Liboiron 2016; Mah 2022). The production, consumption, and disposal of plastics are unevenly spread and have disproportionate social and geographical effects (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022; Mah 2022). It is well documented, for example, that the bulk of plastic waste is generated in the global north (Cotta 2020), but that:

“... the majority of the plastic pollution problem falls disproportionately on the global south, especially in south and southeast Asia (Jambeck et al., 2015; Lebreton et al. 2017), creating an issue of slow violence (Homer-Dixon 2000) and environmental injustice.” (Owens and Conlon 2021, 1)

Increased and improved plastics recycling is considered by many researchers, industry actors, and policymakers as an answer to plastic waste and its effects (Holmes and Holmes 2024). Yet recycling rates remain stubbornly low – only 9% of global plastic waste is estimated to be recycled annually.<sup>3</sup>

#### **1. Potential**

Packaging design professionals’ working days comprise many practices, most of which are common to other professionals. But the practices that most distinguish them as packaging design professionals are those through which specific forms of packaging a product emerge, evident in the details of practice in project specification meetings and at design workstations. Packaging design practices could, in principle, be reshaped to produce more socially and ecologically sustainable packaging. It is, then, unsurprising that the details of packaging design are commonly framed in research and policy as key sources of trouble regarding plastic waste and low recycling rates. As Zhu et al. write: “... packaging design is generally considered as a decisive element in the packaging value chain as it determines the materials to be used [... and] the end-of-life options.” (2022, 818) Fitting with this framing: “... the design stage is considered to have the greatest influence on packaging sustainability, determining around 80% of environmental impacts.” (Zhu et al. 2022, p. 818) Attention is paid, in turn, to the “... implementation of good practices and standards in packaging design...”, with it taken

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/environment/plastics/plastics-lifecycle-is-far-from-circular>

as given that such changes would “... reinforce recycling as an economically attractive alternative to landfill, incineration and energy recovery.” (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2017, 18)

A suite of design guidelines for recyclability follows from these assumptions. These are produced by a range of industry actors, signalling a broader set of internationally shared ideas (e.g. the 2025 European Union Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulations (PPWR)<sup>4</sup> stipulates that all packaging waste must be recyclable by 2030, and various standardisation organisations have been involved in designing specific criteria for design for recyclability). As evidenced in an exemplar case offered by Recoup (2024, 4), a UK-registered charity and prominent voice on plastic recycling, the guidelines are targeted at “... those involved in the development and design of plastic packaging...”, with the organisation’s own guide specifically providing a “... practical document [that] seeks to answer in a pragmatic way many of the immediate questions for designers and specifiers of plastic packaging...” concerning how to improve recyclability (Recoup 2024, 4). Design for recyclability guidelines thus echo a broader understanding that “... to accelerate recycling, focus needs to first be on the design phase of plastic products because it creates the condition for product recyclability from a technical and economic perspective.” (United Nations Environment Programme, 2023, 28). This understanding is itself synonymous with the idea that packaging design practitioners have the power to help ‘turn off the tap’ of plastic waste and to establish new conditions of enhanced circularity and sustainability.

Design for recyclability guidelines highlight several specific ways packaging design practices could be reshaped to improve the recyclability of plastic packaging. In the case of Recoup’s (2024) guidelines, these include, for example: using mono-materials or mixed materials of the same polymer grouping and density; avoiding the use of pigments; designing packaging that means food residues are limited; shunning or only using thin barrier layers; using caps, lids or sleeves that are as recyclable as the main body of packaging; limiting the use of water-soluble adhesives; including clear material identification logos for consumers; and integrating environmental and legal standards into the design of specific formats. Without venturing too much into the detail of plastics recycling, improved recyclability is allied with the design of relatively plain and simple packaging formats. There appears to be, moreover, based on the noted opportunities for improvement, plenty of potential for packaging design practitioners to produce more recyclable plastic packaging. Why then, given the apparent potential of packaging design practices to produce more recyclable plastic packaging, in line with readily available guidelines, do recycling rates remain stubbornly low?

## 2. Limits

Design for recyclability guidelines are admittedly less explicit on the limits of design than they are on avenues for potential change concerning improved recycling. Nonetheless, they signal toward the limits of packaging design practice concerning attempts to put recyclability guidelines into practice. It is intimated in Recoup’s (2024) guide, for example, that the principles of packaging design to protect, preserve, and promote perishable goods can act to limit the implementation of design for recyclability guidelines. These limitations can be seen in different tensions and trade-offs.

An example concerns the continuing use of pigments in plastic packaging. As made clear in the Recoup guidelines:

“Colour interferes with the mechanical recycling process in two main ways: Firstly, strongly coloured plastic material has a much lower economic value than nonpigmented plastic. Secondly, heavily coloured (and hence strongly light absorbing) plastic may interfere with

<sup>4</sup> [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=OJ:L\\_202500040](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=OJ:L_202500040)

automated sorting machinery that uses Near-Infrared (NIR) spectroscopy to identify the nature of the plastic.” (Recoup 2024, 12)

It is advised that ‘the amount of colour to be used should be minimised as much as possible within the constraints set by technical considerations, branding and consumer acceptance’ (Recoup 2024, 12). Research highlights though the prevalent use of pigments in plastic packaging (Lisiecki et al. 2024). And, as recently documented regarding flexible plastic packaging, which is typically heavily branded, based on the use of coloured dyes:

“While inks serve a valuable purpose during the use phase of the plastic product, after recycling, the components of inks are not only blended into the plastic but may also undergo degradation. These components are a crucial factor for the low quality recyclates and higher volatile organic compound loads, posing significant toxicity and safety concerns.” (Lisiecki et al. 2024, 13)

Despite such concerns, which are unevenly distributed in real terms due to the uneven socio-economic and geographical spread of plastic production, consumption, and pollution, as noted, which means poorer communities disproportionately bear the brunt of these problems, the use of pigments continues. This continued use can be taken as evidence of the tension and trade-off between the importance of branding-based promotion in packaging design practices and the enhancement of recyclability. And, relatedly, shifts toward improved recyclability are limited, as this example shows, by the overwhelming dominance of packaging design practices driven by commitments to branding, promotion, and sales.

Another example of a limiting tension and trade-off between the principles of packaging design and the implementation of design for recyclability guidelines is signalled in a quote from the former Vice President for Sustainability at Klöckner Pentaplast, a global plastic packaging manufacturer:

“It would be remiss of us to focus purely on recyclability [...] To address a range of environmental challenges, we must continue to introduce innovation that enhances the primary functions of packaging: to protect, preserve and present the food inside.” (Yui Kamikawa, cited in: Recoup 2023, 11)

This quote demonstrates the tensions and trade-offs between implementing design for recyclability in practice and addressing diverse environmental challenges.

A tangible example of this concerns the continued use of chemicals, multi-materials, adhesives, and other packaging design tricks, which are antithetical to improved recyclability but extend the lifespans of perishables, limit discard, and therefore emissions attributed to food waste. Food waste emissions are well-documented as higher than those attributed to plastic packaging, a point often cited in defence of the use of plastics (Voulvoulis et al. 2020). In practice, this means barrier copolymers continue to be used in plastic packaging to protect against oxygen and bacteria, helping to preserve presentable perishables, even though many are well known to negatively impact recyclability and therefore should be avoided or at least limited in use if recycling is to thrive (Recoup 2024). In this instance, the capacities of packaging design to embrace greater standards of recyclability are not only limited by protecting, preserving and promoting goods for purposes of sale but also by commitments to other sustainability-oriented goals, specifically overall emissions reduction.

### **3. Position**

The positioning of packaging designers in relation to the “internal differentiation” (Warde 2005, 138) of packaging design practices can further be taken to influence the use of techniques and materials

that inhibit recyclability. Novices may not know the impact of using certain pigments and chemicals on recyclability. Those positioned in companies with greater resources than others to test the recyclability of packaging formats will be better placed to make measured judgements. Those practising in companies with steadfast commitments to producing packaging that is recyclable by design may find there is limited capacity to use problematic pigments and chemicals, for example.

The constitutive positioning of packaging design practice relative to other practices can also be understood to impact capacities to enhance recyclability. In this regard, the discussed use of pigments and chemicals, which complicate recyclability but protect, preserve, and promote perishable goods, is significant for the positioning of design practice in geographically and temporally stretched supply chains and 'complexes of practice' (Shove et al. 2015). Packaging design practices are in co-constitutive relationships with haulage, purchasing, branding, and retailing practices, which not only demand mobile, fast-moving, marketable goods but also goods with extended shelf lives.

Packaging design practices are thus part of complexes of practice that demand enactments antithetical to what enhancing the recyclability of plastic packaging is taken to entail. If we were, then, to envisage a socially and ecologically sustainable regime of packaging provision, the practices of packaging design, and the sites where they are performed, would be centrally implicated in processes of change. Crucially, this constitutive view of the positioning of a practice also signals the ways in which practices of packaging design are bound within limits by systemic commitments to standards and material properties that have co-evolved with wider webs of practices, related systems of provision, and dominant models of capital accumulation.

Based on this brief illustrative account, the capacity of packaging design practitioners to integrate recyclability guidelines is more complicated than the assumed framing of packaging design practices' power in policy and research suggests. Rather than simply possessing the power to implement better, more sustainable design practices, practitioners are somewhat beholden to design principles situated within, and feeding into, wider complexes of practices that shape capacities to effect changes that could enhance the recyclability of plastic packaging.

Critically, this account reframes the discussion of the disparities of plastic waste in relation to the ordered and ordering enactment of packaging design as a constituted and constitutive component of unsustainable practice complexes and supply chains that demand, and help hold in place, the use of hard-to-recycle plastics. As a result of their position in a wider complex of relations, the potential of packaging design practices to reduce plastic waste is limited, and plastics continue to be landfilled, burnt, exported and littered at a high rate, typically becoming pollutants that disproportionately impact poorer, economically disadvantaged communities.

## **Concluding Note on Empirical Tractability**

In this essay, we have contributed a novel conceptualisation of capacity that is commensurate with second-wave theories of practice and aids the empirical analysis of social disparities, particularly those concerning capacities to act with effect. The empirical tractability of our conceptualisation of capacity lies in asking basic questions about the potentials, limits, and positions that come with and are held between social practices. Potential is about paying attention to the possibilities of practice; limit, to what is done, and position to the constituted and constitutive situatedness of practice, both in terms of the position that practitioners hold in a practice and the position of a practice in wider complexes of practices. The value of the empirical tractability of the articulated conceptualisation of capacity lies in revealing the detail and dynamics that underwrite the socio-material disparities of practice and related capacities to act. By shedding light on such details and dynamics, insight into

the possibilities and constraints of social change also comes sharply into view. While ‘power’ as an object cannot be empirically grasped, much of what constitutes capacity – as both manifestation of power-laden socio-material relations and as foundations of uneven locations in those relations – is empirically palpable and deserving of greater attention in practice-based research on the capacities and social disparities of practice and the related contours of social change.

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