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# An Interview with Stephen Turner: Careers and Ideas in Practice

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## Abstract

Over the course of his long career, Stephen Turner has challenged a host of established positions in social theory. In this interview we discuss some of these interventions, starting with his critique of concepts that purport to explain social life but that are detached from it. Instead of treating practices as reified entities that 'exist' and about which we can have a theory, Stephen works from the ground up, asking about the place of habit and tacit knowledge and their significance for how practices are shared. In discussing Stephen's approach, and how it relates to – and departs from - the work of Thomas Kuhn, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Antony Giddens, and Bruno Latour, we range across topics to do with constructivism, realism, and materiality. We look back at the reception of his landmark book, *The Social Theory of Practices* (1994), and we look forwards: thinking about where his ideas are leading now.

## Keywords

habit; explanation; tacit knowledge; technology; skill

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## Introduction

As part of the inaugural issue of *The Journal of Practice Theory* on the theme 'Past, Present, Future', Manuel Baeriswyl and Elizabeth Shove interviewed three influential figures whose work has significantly shaped the development of practice theory. These conversations focus on pivotal moments and turning points in the interviewees' careers, and the evolution of the ideas they have championed. Together, these interviews form the 'Past' section of this issue and present some insight into how theories of practice have emerged within, and responded to, disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and generational contexts.

The interview schedule was shared with the participants in advance. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and edited. The interviewees reviewed the transcripts, provided corrections, and added references.

Stephen Turner is Distinguished University Professor at the Department of Philosophy of the University of South Florida. He is the author of a number of books in the history and philosophy of social science and statistics. He has also written extensively in science studies, especially on patronage and the politics and economics of science, and on the concept of practices, including three books, *The Social Theory of Practices* (1994), *Brains/Practices/Relativism* (2002), and a collection of essays, *Understanding the Tacit* (2014).

In this interview, Elizabeth Shove and Manuel Baeriswyl talk with Stephen Turner about his take on practices and practice theory and some of the ideas set out in his book, *The Social Theory of Practices* (1994).

**Elizabeth Shove:** Let's start at the deep end. Your critique of widely shared views of the social and the place of practice is striking and original and you've been making this argument for a very long time. So, I'm wondering, did you have, I don't mean an enemy, that's putting it too strongly, but was there an orthodox position that you thought needed to be addressed, tackled, or taken apart?

**Stephen Turner:** In the sixties the dominant positivist understanding of things was fraying both in philosophy and sociology. Then things like ethnomethodology came along in sociology, and they were very exciting novelties, but initially very poorly understood: was ethnomethodology a methodological critique, a form of social psychology, or a full-scale alternative to behavioural science as it then existed? In philosophy, there was a parallel and equally confused revolution associated with Wittgenstein and Quine - all of which had elements that go into the notion of practices. As a student you try to make sense of all this, you realise that it is not just Parsons and positivism, there's Durkheim, there's Spencer, there's Comte, Sumner and so on. Almost everyone has something relevant but different to say about the topic, but everyone is working with concepts like *Weltanschauung*[2] from different traditions whose relations are unclear. And you need to figure out a way to fit all that together, and not really neglect any of it either.

There was also, for me, an existential element: a matter of starting out with a general social

[2] The world view of an individual or group.

exposure to different cultures and ethnicities from childhood that sensitised me to differences. Then, as an undergraduate, I took a course on African political development that really opened those things up in a radical way. There were places where culture, practices, family connections, beliefs and so on were important to understand but were also radically different, yet not anthropological curiosities either. And so, then the problem became: “how do you think about these differences?”. The alternatives that were around were things like functionalism and that didn't do you much good. They were reductive and crude. So you needed something better.

So that's the way I was motivated. I used those starting points to talk critically about organizational sociology, which happened to be important to the setting that I was in while in graduate school. And then that turned very quickly into the fad of studying organizational culture, which is actually a great topic, but not very happily developed. These were practical motivators. But my nagging question was still just “how do you think about those things?”. And “what concepts are going to get you some traction?”.

**Elizabeth Shove:** So, there you were, thinking about these things and actually getting some traction. In your writing you talk quite a lot about solving problems. Looking back, do you think you did solve some of those conceptual problems?

**Stephen Turner:** The thing that I eventually landed on, probably in the late seventies and early eighties, was tradition. I was preparing grant proposals on two concepts of tradition - rejected, by the way. But I got very interested in political traditions, which are one of these ineffable things. And I was getting some good first-person commentary on that from people who could say interesting things about it. It became obvious to me that there was a kind of more or less Durkheimian way of thinking about these things, which I later came to understand as neo-Kantian. And there was an embodied (which nobody said then), practice-oriented way of thinking about them. So, thinking about those things and what they required, what they assumed, and what they also assumed illegitimately, was one of my concerns. If you turn explanatory concepts into objects and then start ascribing a teleology to them, which is what Bourdieu did, that is ideologically very clever, but not necessarily accurate.

**Elizabeth Shove:** You put it very modestly, but you're actually having a go at the very foundations of a lot of social theory.

**Stephen Turner:** Absolutely. That was the target all along. And that's why I spent so much time doing straight historical stuff, mostly on explanation. My approach was always about explanation rather than ontology.

**Elizabeth Shove:** Yes, that's a big difference. In some ways you're quite against the concept of practice but in other ways it's completely compatible. I mean, it depends on how you interpret practice and whether you view that as an explanation or whether you see it in some other kind of way. So that's definitely interesting.

**Stephen Turner:** Exactly. So, for me ontologizing, both for practices and collective intentionality, is a premature stopping point that avoids the explanatory issues.

**Elizabeth Shove:** On a different track, I was curious to read about the influence of Kuhn: could you say a bit more about that?

**Stephen Turner:** The whole of the sixties in the philosophy of science was consumed by the revolution against logical positivism, and Kuhn was a big revolutionary.[3] But Kuhn's work contained a lot of problematic elements, such as the famous 21 definitions of paradigm (Masterman 1970). Larry Nichols and I have a new paper in *Critical Inquiry* (2024) on L. J. Henderson, who was sort of the godfather of Conant, who was the godfather of Kuhn, who actually talks about practice as a fundamental problematic, as the basis of conceptual schemes but also interacting with conceptual schemes in a way that binds them to practical activities. These things were all implicit but in a confused way in Kuhn, and partly lost. And the paradigm concept obscured all of this. Incommensurability and Feyerabend and the whole rebellion against positivism, which by that time was badly wounded and bleeding, took precedence. But it turned the discourse away from practice and towards concepts, and eventually semantics.

But Kuhnianism at the time was nevertheless part of one's education and part of the way in which almost everything was framed. He was a celebrity and paradigm talk was part of the culture. So, you had to address it. Practice is a good way of thinking about the unstated, the tacit stuff, that differentiates one intellectual context from another. But practices weren't something that you could pick out, like a paradigm understood just as a conceptual scheme. It was more. To study practices, you needed to treat them as a natural object. Likewise, you had to figure out what the paradigm included and what made it a paradigm. And you had to compare it to something as a natural object. So, I think Kuhn's work just raises all the big questions without answering them.

**Elizabeth Shove:** OK, but your take on practices has some resonance with some strands of science and also some really big points of difference and departure. For example, on social constructivism, you're quite critical about the logic of that.

**Stephen Turner:** I'm probably not all that different from David Bloor[4] in some ways. My criticisms involved the short cuts that they took in explanation. But the topics are the same: even Harry Collins is interested in tacit knowledge and so forth. For me, those people were very positive in the sense that they legitimated this stuff as the big deal area of study. And one of their mantras was, well, "we want to attack the hard problems". I think one of the problems with the Chicago school[5] was that they sort of ran away from the hard problems.

**Elizabeth Shove:** From the big problems?

**Stephen Turner:** Yeah, they sort of said, "Oh, you guys can take care of all the important stuff, like class and power, while we're going to talk about this really cute stuff that people do." And that conceded the big things - and not only politics. And the science studies people didn't do that. They said, "we're going to talk about hardball physics, and we're going to talk about it in these terms".

**Elizabeth Shove:** I'm going to go over to Manuel in a minute, but you know, you also

[3] Kuhn's 1962 book, the Structure of Scientific Revolutions, drew attention to the social organization and history of knowledge.
[4] Here Stephen refers to the 'strong' programme in science studies, and the idea that all forms of scientific knowledge are shaped by dominant paradigms. Key authors include David Bloor at Edinburgh and Harry Collins, at the University of Bath.
[5] Those associated with the Chicago school, for example, Howard Becker and Erving Goffman, also dealt with social organisation, but with a focus on everyday life.

refer to Bourdieu, not very favorably, really. (*Laughs)* So I'm puzzled now: we've got Kuhn, we've got Bloor, we've got science studies, and then Bourdieu. So, how in your head, do you frame that?

**Stephen Turner:** *(Laughs)*. I've been thinking about this. And what I think is really going on is that there are people like Reckwitz and Bourdieu, and in philosophy Rouse, but also the people in management studies, who have an idea of what a practice is. And usually, it's this sort of kind of thing that has a goal, explicitly or not explicitly. So, it's an identifiable unitary thing that they can have a theory about.

That's not the way I think about it.

I think about practice in terms of the way I started my dissertation those many years ago, in terms of the occasion for explaining something. You discover, to your surprise, that something's a practice, and not natural. I think, for me, that's the big distinction. But you get there through empirical experience with these distinctions. You don't realise that you're dealing with somebody that's operating with a different practice until something goes wrong, and/or, somebody explains to you why it's going wrong.

I can give you this example that sticks with me. I had a Chinese department chair, and we would have conversations, and he would go silent. And I would think, well, I haven't explained myself clearly enough. Let me put it more forcefully and more clearly. And he would get even more silent. And then it was explained to me in some travel guide that no, that's the Chinese reaction when they don't like what you're saying (*laughs)*.

But how do you discover that? And how do you theorise that? Well, I think that a practice in this sense is a comparison-based object, a discoverable that depends on your starting point, rather than a kind of thing out there that you can grab.

**Elizabeth Shove:** We could go on for a good while on this and on whether you aren't overdoing it a bit in terms of the stiffness of practice theory, but it's Manuel's turn now.

**Manuel Baeriswyl:** We wanted to talk about the specific texts we picked to read in preparation for talking with you. The first is *The Social Theory of Practices: Tradition, Tacit Knowledge and Presuppositions* (1994). You said that most readers ignore the last chapter of a book *(laughs)*. So perhaps you could say more about what you had in mind in the last chapter specifically?

**Stephen Turner:** What is buried in the last chapter (really the last couple of chapters) is actually very similar to what I wrote more recently, on habits (2020a, 330-335), and it's been a continuing concern of mine: what is it that sustains practices, and how do people acquire them if they are not shared through some kind of magical mental transmission? What happens?

The examples I was thinking of in those last chapters, performances such as playing baseball that form habits, were about transmission, but there was nothing magical about the process. There are also the rituals that people perform together, and their objects. That's what I've been emphasizing more recently. There are actual objects in the world that people orient themselves to, and that makes things hang together in a way that doesn't require a kind of common mental state.

Demystification was the goal. So, the last chapters were really an attempt to just hint at what was an alternative explanation of what's a genuine phenomenon.

**Elizabeth Shove:** There's something intriguing about this reference to a genuine phenomenon. I need to think about this a bit more, but it sounds as if you go along with the view that there is a world out there that simply needs understanding?

**Stephen Turner:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Elizabeth Shove:** And that's where you begin?

**Stephen Turner:** Yes - you start where you are, with your own tacit expectations and feelings. And with things like alien political traditions, it becomes obvious that you have stumbled onto a way of doing things that is very long term, very deeply rooted, and very difficult to describe. But it's definitely there.

**Elizabeth Shove:** Yes, yes. But the thereness of the 'it' is interesting. And it brings us back to how you think about practices. You say practices are "defined as those non-linguistic conditions for an activity that are learned" (Turner 2001, 129), which is fine as far as it goes. But it was something like 25 years ago that you wrote that. The first question is: are you sticking to that now, 25 years on?

**Stephen Turner:** Yeah, but now I think I would emphasise more of the sort of dialectic between the public and the private, or purely tacit parts. But also, the public objects themselves that we do share.

**Elizabeth Shove:** That's fine, but what brings change about then, Stephen?

**Stephen Turner:** This is less of a problem if you don't have a unitary theory of a practice as a kind of object or as a set of presuppositions. If you are looking at how ideological change occurs, and how ideas get turned into practices and become tacit, you have a different focus: ongoing and individual experience which varies.

One of the things that Foucault did was to trace back, through his genealogies, somebody explicitly saying what everybody now assumes. There has got to be a way of talking about the "assuming" part as a kind of causal story and also retain the individuality of people's experience of those things: discipline, for example. It's not like people have cookie cutter brains that have downloaded the same programme: they're interacting with something that is public, that enables them to communicate and produces a kind of conformity, but nevertheless, is distinctly theirs and personal. The trick is to problematise those processes and not assume how it happens.

**Elizabeth Shove:** We'll come back to the material world and the role of things a bit later. But first, another person who's writing a lot at the time (the mid-1980s) is Giddens. *The Constitution of Society* (1984) was a bit of a landmark for some people. And Giddens has no qualms at all about constructing an edifice around the concept of practices and society.

**Stephen Turner:** And the structure of the whole thing of a society.

**Elizabeth Shove:** Absolutely. So, there you were in America. In your autobiography (2022a), Giddens is quite a hero, but he's saying completely different things, compared to the sorts of positions that you're taking.

**Stephen Turner:** Yeah.

**Elizabeth Shove:** I mean, you probably never argued this through with Giddens, but if Giddens was here…

**Stephen Turner:** (Laughs)

**Elizabeth Shove:** What would you have to say to him?

**Stephen Turner:** I think that was a boat that I got off in a paper called *Social Theory Without Wholes* ( 1984). After a summer seminar with Richard Rorty,[6] I really rethought the question of whether it even made interesting sense to talk about there being a correct social theory or a true social theory. And that shows up in the practices book as well. So, I took a much more almost pragmatic or utilitarian view of social theories. They are images that help you around a little bit. But then there are lots of these images, and there's nothing absolute about any of them. But that also pushes you to the question of, okay, well, what is absolute?

I thought, there are many flowers growing out in this garden of social theory. But what's the source, what's the ground? And that question pushed me more in the direction of cognitive science: in a way, I was already there.

**Elizabeth Shove:** So, you never did have an argument with Giddens then?

**Stephen Turner:** No, no. And actually, he was puzzled, and others were also puzzled by that book [*The Social Theory of Practices, Tradition, Tacit Knowledge and Presuppositions* (1994)]. It made no sense to them at all.

**Elizabeth Shove:** Okay, so we've got some questions about the reception of that book. I'm not saying it sunk without trace, because the traces are all around us in a way, but from your point of view, what happened?

**Stephen Turner:** It gets ritually cited by people who only read the title *(Laughs)*. I think that's the fate of a lot of books.

One of the reasons for writing it was to reach a more sociological audience, but it actually got a philosophical audience. And it made clear to me that this was really a philosophical argument about a sociological topic. Since people didn't have commitments in both fields it was hard for them to make sense of it. But then it did pick up with people who were really engaged with it, like Joe Rouse, for example, or Jim Bohman who did a nice review of it in *History and Theory* (1997) which was even translated into French. So, it had definitely had an impact on that bunch of people. But outside of that, I think what was in demand, especially in American sociology, and what Bourdieu supplied, was a kind of orthodox vocabulary that you could use to describe things. For people who were looking for that, this book wasn't the news that they wanted to hear.

**Elizabeth Shove:** We've read some of the reviews of that book and we'd like to go back over what some people said then.

**Manuel Baeriswyl:** First, a review from Michael Hård (1996) in which he quotes you saying that "we cannot do anything to get behind the notion of practice, either in a causal or justificatory way, because practices are not objects, but are rather explanatory constructions that solve specific problems of

[6] Richard Rorty was an American Philosopher known for his work on representation and language.

comparison and unmet expectations” (Hård 1996, 123). So, the question would be, what do you make of that now?

**Stephen Turner:** One of the key texts for me was Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* (1969). And that's very much the spirit of that text. In fact, the original title of the practice book was *The Opacity of Practice*.

**Elizabeth Shove:** *(Laughs)*

**Stephen Turner:** That ended up as the title of the last chapter, I think. But that was the idea that you can't get behind practices, you can't turn them into something else, and you can't reduce them to a functional instrument and so on and so forth.

**Elizabeth Shove:** That's great. I never knew that. I've always found the title really puzzling, because it's absolutely the reverse of what the book is about.

**Stephen Turner:** (*Laughs*) That's what the editor said: “You don't mean “*the*”... you're saying you have *the* social theory of practices?” I said, no, no, that wasn't what it was about.

**Elizabeth Shove:** It stuck anyway.

**Stephen Turner:** Well, I think, actually, it turned out to be a good title, because it was the kind of thing that if somebody needed a citation on practices and didn't want to read the book, then you just could cite it.

**Elizabeth Shove:** That's a bit annoying as well.

**Stephen Turner:** Well, you take what you can get.

**Elizabeth Shove:** Manuel, we're going back to Trevor Pinch's review, is that right?

**Manuel Baeriswyl:** Yes. Trevor Pinch writes in his review (1997) that one problem with your work is that you focus on very broad practices. But what if we take other well-known examples of empirical research using practice theory, such as Lave's (1991) work, on situated practices and on learning midwifery. What do you make of this?

**Stephen Turner:** Yeah, well, I think the interesting thing about her work is that it's almost a paradigm case of the stuff I was criticising (*laughs*). It's not so much the narrowness of the practice that you're looking at it’s the conceptualisation of the practice. And I think it goes back to this idea of what a practice is, and then how you're going to have a theory about it. So, you know, Pinch thinks “this is a practice. So, this is the way we need to think about practices.” I'm completely on the other side. I'm saying, “oh, we never know what's a practice or not in advance.”

**Elizabeth Shove:** But the idea of practices is a useful device for academics and for non-academics as well. It's real in its effects, even if it's not, as it were, *real* real. For example, you don't have to buy the whole architecture of structure and agency and all the rest of it to go along with Giddens’ claim that practices are shared across space and time. I’m not trying to change your mind, but it is intriguing, given how much there is written about practices, strategy as practice, entrepreneurship as practice, everything is “a practice” and there you are in Florida in a hurricane still saying completely the opposite!

**Stephen Turner:** I was at a management meeting some years ago in the UK and they were using this very kind of practical notion of practices that made perfect sense in the context of conflicting organizational cultures or

of questions about why some company works well and not another, which definitely wasn't the way I was thinking of practices.

But nevertheless, when you start looking at even those problems you get entangled in the question of OK, really, what does that practice consist of? It's going to consist of these things that you have to discover and dig out. You can't say in advance what the content of that is. You see some general picture, but the details you don't really know. And you can certainly be surprised.

I think interpersonal practices of deference and so on, for example, are really deeply rooted and interesting. I have a Chinese colleague who's a liberal and he was talking about why it's so difficult to have liberal democracy in China. It's the Confucian tradition. It's not that people are consciously Confucians, but that there's a whole style of human interaction that doesn't fit very well with the sort of the autonomous individual necessary for a certain kind of practice of liberal democracy. But this is another case where you've got many different traditions that practice it in different ways. And that's fascinating to me. That to me is what the problem is.

**Elizabeth Shove:** OK, to move on. You write about tacit and explicit knowledge, common experiences, sharing between people, collective intelligibility, and so on. And this is where we come to the material world. As you know, there's a whole field of science studies and Actor-Network Theory and so on, and Latour saying 'Where Are the Missing Masses?' (1992) in social theory, but you don't pay much attention, in fact, probably no attention to the material world. You also say some quite interesting things about Latour. And, I agree, he was a fantastic magician.

**Stephen Turner:** *(Laughs)*

**Elizabeth Shove:** But where do you stand now?

**Stephen Turner:** Originally, when I worked on rituals, obviously this included ritual objects and their powers. These were pretty material, but it wasn't a material sort of determination. I certainly was aware of that kind of argument. And more recently I looked at digitalisation in the same way, and about what do we mean by familiarity, given the objects that we have around us, and so forth (2022b).

But I also think that the changes in the physical world from, say, 1920 to 1999, or something like that, weren't all that great. True, television substituted for radio. But now we've got some much more pervasive kinds of changes where everybody has to have a phone to go to the grocery store. That strikes me as really interesting. And also, AI externalises a lot of what were previously matters of tacit knowledge.

Today, if you want to fix a car or something like that, or if you've got a plumbing problem, you go on YouTube, and you can see, OK, this is how it's done. You don't have to know anything special, but you do have to know some things. It seems like the world of skills gets invaded and tacit knowledge, skills, and practices get replaced. But on the other hand, a lot of it has to do with standardised objects. There's a lot to be thought about.

**Elizabeth Shove:** Absolutely. Screw, and fittings, and all the rest. But I'm wondering, where does that fit in? If we have a Stephen Turner view of practices, where does the standard screw thread fit in the sharing process?

**Stephen Turner:** This is an interesting historical problem - British screws weren't standard at first, but American ones were. Standardisation creates new relations. It makes sharing less directly interpersonal. Think about Polanyi (1964) talking about discovery: he's talking about science as an apostolic succession, where you learn to think and to do stuff in the lab, and where your mental patterns match up to somebody else's patterns, but not perfectly. And that's how progress comes about. That's very different from, you know, getting it off YouTube. But science is now becoming less personal (Turner 2020b).

**Elizabeth Shove:** Okay, but it's also different from the lesson, if that's the word, that's inscribed in a screw thread, that it will only fit a certain kind of plumbing. And you can't get away from that. I mean, that's what Latour was on about with the notion of scripting as well.

**Stephen Turner:** Yeah, so I did have a paper that actually talks about this, the way in which knowledge is built into objects. And so, a lot of knowledge that our ancestors had, we don't have, because it's built into the objects that we use routinely (Turner 2007: 45). So, when you talk about consensus, or what sharing is and so forth, a lot of it's going to be through those objects. But the objects are themselves outcomes of past practices with histories and genealogies of practices. You don't encounter the makers or anything like that: just the objects.

**Elizabeth Shove:** OK so that's where your take on practice comes closer and closer to the idea of common experience, common encounters, which some people then call practices – and treat them in a different way – that is as explanations. For example, Reckwitz talks about people as the carriers of practices, but objects have this role as well, just like the screw threads we've talked about. So, do you think it's just a matter of faith, at least on Reckwitz's part, and on my part as well, that we just believe that practices are carried in this way?

**Stephen Turner:** I think this is really an empirical question. But it's also, I think of it more as a cognitive sciencey question. All these notions like extended mind, appeal to me a lot. Because now that I'm old, I have to write everything down to remember it. So, it's very present to me that the material world is part of the mind.

**Elizabeth Shove:** It is part of you.

**Stephen Turner:** Yeah. And it's also, in a way, a sharable part of the mind. I just did a paper on Karl Popper (2024), which shows how his World 3[7] is really a version of the older idea of the objective mind. The interesting thing about it is that objective minds are common things, too, they're object-like things in the world. That's what makes it "objective." And so, minds in this sense can be articulated and used as common points of reference, just like a tool can be.

**Elizabeth Shove:** OK, we're on to another theme now. When I was reading some of your books and papers, I was wondering about whether your work would have happened in a European environment. That's not really a question, because you live in America, you are an American, but it goes back to the question about who you're having a debate with, and

[7] In Popper's 'three-worlds', world three consists of 'cultural' objects of thought that interact with a mental world two and a material world one.

about the movement of ideas between America and other parts of the world. Everybody is part of a tradition but how have the debates around you shaped who you are, and the flow of your ideas.

**Stephen Turner:** Well, my friends think of me as a European intellectual, and not as an American.

**Elizabeth Shove:** That is interesting!

**Stephen Turner:** This is an old American problem. There was a historic tension produced by disciplinarisation. If you're not someone who goes after particular journals or who lives and dies by them, you are an outsider. And disciplinarisation was the fate of American academia. William James wrote a famous paper on the PhD octopus (1903), and then, 25 years later, the president of Harvard, Lowell, along with Henderson, Whitehead, and Curtis wrote this incredible screed against specialisation, and about how the PhD system ruins people's minds. And that became the basis for the creation of the Harvard Society of Fellows (Homans and Bailey 1948). Their model was Trinity College at Cambridge. I was always pretty interdisciplinary. But it was sheer luck that I was allowed to be. If I had been in a conventional philosophy or sociology department it wouldn't have happened.

**Elizabeth Shove:** So, we have a couple of questions about your career as a whole, which is quite broad, to put it mildly. We asked about what you would pick out, and in the notes that you sent us, you mentioned the problem of relativism. We have to remember that somebody might read this, so could you explain a bit more what you meant?

**Stephen Turner:** *(Laughs).* The argument, found in people like Gananath Obeyesekere[8] is that there are some things that really aren't relativistic, that what people do in their practical life and so forth, is pragmatic. It's governed by their relation to the world, but it's not a theoretical alternative. So, on the one hand, you have this incredible diversity of ideas, practices, ontologies, morals, and so forth. On the other hand, you have this stuff that is not really all that diverse, and that everybody has to do. That is a common bond. Figuring out what is the common stuff of humanity and what is not - I think that's an empirical question.

**Elizabeth Shove:** OK.

**Stephen Turner:** Can you have a practice that actually is radically different from what everybody has ever done historically? I think those are the big existential questions.

There's a lot of sort of relativism denial, and I want to avoid that, but also avoid the kind of absolutist relativism that denies change. If you insist that cultures determine everything, that we are all cultural dopes, in Garfinkel's terms, and you're also saying: "no, cultures can't change, they can't improve even on their own terms." I think those are real problems that we have to navigate.

**Elizabeth Shove:** The other thing you mentioned, and which we've already touched on is a resistance to the reification of concepts and general explanations. And that's where I think you *are* an American.

**Stephen Turner:** *(Laughs)*

[8] Gananath Obeyesekere is Emeritus professor of Anthropology, Princeton University.

**Elizabeth Shove:** I mean, never mind what your friends might say, but if you were to look for strong traditions of reification, you'd look to American Sociology. I don't see quite the same in other areas of social theory. So, what are the big theories that are still out there, Stephen?

**Stephen Turner:** Well, I think cultural sociology would be one example.

**Elizabeth Shove:** OK.

**Stephen Turner:** It's one of those areas where people are indoctrinated into a whole way of thinking - it's a paradigm. And then the question is, can you get outside of that and criticise it? But I think for a lot of those people, that's not important. They're trying to describe something, and they're looking around for tools that they can use, that also they can communicate with other people on. So, they latch onto these vocabularies.

**Elizabeth Shove:** And that's the way those concepts acquire a life of their own.

**Stephen Turner:** Exactly right.

**Elizabeth Shove:** Manuel, sorry, I've been hogging the agenda, but the practice turn is the next topic.

**Manuel Baeriswyl:** Yeah. To go on to another theme, *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory* (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, & von Savigny 2001) was published in 2001, and you and others have written a lot since then. Looking back, do you think there really was a practice turn at that time?

**Stephen Turner:** Yeah, I think so. I think it shows when you look at what happened beforehand, with systems theory and functionalism and, as you know, Giddens, various forms of Marxism, and all these other big scale ideas. People have used the notion of practice to go beyond that and to undermine that whole style. The same kind of turn happened earlier, oddly enough, with rational choice theory. And the two are sort of sides of the same coin: practice theory provides the non-rational parameters within which rational choice accounts make sense. But they were both substitutes for this older structural functionalist tradition, which was entombed in the book called *Approach to the Study of Social Structure* (1975) that was edited by Peter Blau. And that was that generation's last word. *(Laughs)*

And I think the timing was important, too, because the late eighties was a time in which American sociology went through a complete, fairly radical disintegration and then reconstruction. So, practice ideas were there to be used. And Bourdieu was waiting in the wings. Bourdieu had actually a pretty interesting relationship with Merton that shows up in his letters. Some people, like Jon Elster[9], just view Bourdieu as another functionalist. So, there's a hidden continuity there: the notion of practice rode in on the horse that Bourdieu was riding.

**Elizabeth Shove:** But I mean, not only Bourdieu, and also what's happened to practice theories since then. We're heading towards the end, but some of our questions are about what's happened to those agendas since. Where are the horses riding now?

**Stephen Turner:** Well, I think your point about how practice theories show up in so many

[9] Jon Elster is a philosopher and political theorist, Emeritus professor at Columbia University.

different areas is the important one, because there really are different conceptions of practice in these different places. There are some common threads, but there's not a unified practice theory. But I think actually the challenge of making sense of it in different contexts is pretty important because that diversity illuminates what you're saying, or what's wrong with what you're saying in a particular setting.

I credit Sherry Ortner with a lot of this, because I think before that essay (1984), people really didn't think of practice theory as a thing of its own, even if we used the term “practices”, as I did. That essay pulled it all together. All of these concepts were floating around out there and Ortner said “okay, this is a topic, and these are the different views that relate to it.” And to me, at least, that was a revelation.

**Elizabeth Shove:** But what now? Have you got any thoughts on the direction these debates are going in, and how they relate to different traditions in philosophy and sociology?

**Stephen Turner:** One of my concerns all along has been the relationship between social science descriptions and explanations and more fundamental neuroscience kinds of things. I think that's always got to be in the back of your mind - what is the cash value of the notions that you're theorising about?

But I think that goes both ways. If you get a really good description of something like practice, that's something that cognitive scientists have to take into account and say, “okay, well, how do we understand that in our terms?”. And there has to be that kind of dialogue. I've been more and more focused on how do you take some social theoretical notion, like “recognition” and translate it into cognitive science terms (2022d). Those are the kinds of questions that are really difficult but really interesting.

**Elizabeth Shove:** Thanks Stephen, we've packed a lot into a short interview and there is much to think about.

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