Bordering and Insurgency: Towards a Decolonial Practice-Based Approach

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Abstract

This essay advances a decolonial agenda for practice-based research through the concepts of bordering and insurgency, introduced as generative tools for rethinking how practices are theorised and studied. While practice theories have contributed significantly to overcoming dualisms and foregrounding relationality, many empirical applications continue to overlook colonial histories, power asymmetries, and intersectional dynamics that shape social practices. Drawing on decolonial ideas, I propose an affirmative orientation that expands the analytical and ethical scope of practice theories. Bordering invites attention to the epistemic boundaries that legitimise certain practices while marginalising others, while insurgency foregrounds the knowledges and actions that emerge from sites of resistance. Together, these concepts support a more plural, situated, and reflexive engagement with practice - one that is attuned to historical legacies, ongoing exclusions, and the political stakes of knowing and doing. The essay concludes by encouraging future research that embraces epistemic diversity and cultivates methodologies capable of engaging with contested and emergent forms of practice.

Keywords

colonisation, decolonisation, intersectionality, social theory

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Introduction

The turn to practice (see Schatzki et al. 2001) in the social sciences has contributed significantly to rethinking agency, materiality, and knowing. However, despite the epistemological and methodological richness that practice-based approaches have enabled, many empirical studies - particularly in management and organization studies - continue to overlook questions of difference, historical situatedness, and the unequal distribution of power across contexts. As Quijano (2000) and Ballestrin (2013) argue, modern social science is entangled with coloniality, not merely as a historical residue but as an ongoing set of interwoven practices that shape knowledge production, circulation, and validation.

In this essay, I propose a decolonial reorientation of practice-based research that foregrounds two interrelated concepts: *bordering* and *insurgency*. These concepts invite a shift from viewing practices as coherent and stable configurations toward understanding them as situated, contested, and marked by histories of struggle and exclusion. Rather than offering a general critique of practice theories or their ontological assumptions, the essay outlines a forward-looking research agenda that articulates how decolonial commitments can broaden and deepen practice-based enquiry.

While recent efforts have begun to address power and politics in practice theories (e.g., Watson 2017; Jonas and Littig 2017; Koddenbrock 2017), this essay adopts a different entry point. Rather than focusing on institutional configurations, rule negotiations, or the reconstruction of broader orders from within observed practices, it proposes a decolonial lens that foregrounds the geopolitics of epistemic legitimacy. Power, in this framing, is not simply an effect of relational positioning or normative disruption but is enacted through ongoing social practices that define which ways of knowing, doing, and being are rendered possible, peripheral, or unintelligible. This focus sets the stage for the concepts of bordering and insurgency.

By *bordering*, I refer to the ways in which boundaries are continuously drawn and negotiated between epistemic traditions, geographic spaces, and social identities. This notion echoes the argument advanced by Scobie, Lee, and Smyth (2021), who suggest that the decolonial struggle is also a negotiation between aspirations and institutional constraints. Bordering is not only a condition of exclusion; it is also a space of encounter, translation, and friction. It challenges us to ask which practices are legitimised, whose knowings are foregrounded, and which forms of life are rendered peripheral or unintelligible.

Insurgency, in turn, refers to a mode of epistemic resistance that affirms subaltern forms of knowing and being. It resonates with Lugones' (2014) notion of decolonial feminism, where the task is not only to critique dominant narratives but to create spaces for enacting and embodying other ways of knowing. Insurgent practices reclaim silenced histories, inhabit alternative temporalities, and affirm ontological multiplicity. They are not merely oppositional but generative, cultivating openings for new theoretical and political possibilities.

Together, bordering and insurgency offer conceptual tools to imagine a decolonial practice theory - one that does not merely transpose existing frameworks onto new contexts, but reconfigures the epistemological foundations from which practices are defined and studied. This essay sketches such an agenda, drawing on decolonial scholars who foreground the need for critical reflexivity (Bonatti &

Battestin 2023), situated engagement (Girei 2017), and collective re-existence (Lugones 2014). In doing so, I invite researchers to engage with the implications of their own positionalities and to consider how their work might contribute to more plural, grounded, and just forms of practice-based research.

Critique of Empirical Practice-Theoretical Research

Despite the conceptual openness of practice theories, many empirical studies - particularly those conducted within dominant institutional and epistemic centres[2] - tend to reproduce analytical closures that obscure key dimensions of power, history, and difference. While foundational practice theorists such as Bourdieu, Giddens, or Schatzki offer resources to explore contestation and hierarchy, applied research often privileges stability, routine, and normativity over disruption, struggle, and transformation.

One frequent limitation lies in the assumption of homogeneity across practices, contexts, and actors. Practices are often treated as internally consistent units of analysis, without sufficient attention to how they are shaped by race, gender, caste, class, and other intersecting markers (see Collins 2019; Akotirene 2023). As Liu (2022) shows, even seemingly inclusive knowledge regimes can operate through racialised assumptions and affective disciplining, reinforcing whiteness as the normative horizon of behaviour and professional recognition. Similarly, Dixit (2023) demonstrates how caste privilege continues to shape epistemic legitimacy in academic fields, even when such hierarchies remain unacknowledged in empirical descriptions of practice.

A second issue concerns the abstraction of practices from their sociohistorical conditions. In many empirical studies (e.g, Bjerregaard and Klitmøller 2016; Lüthy 2024), practices are examined in the present tense, as if they emerge spontaneously from local configurations of activity and materiality. This temporal flattening occludes the colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal legacies that continue to structure which practices are possible, desirable, or intelligible in a given field. As Bonatti and Battestin (2023) argue, these silences are not accidental but part of a broader epistemic regime that marginalises knowledges rooted in embodied experience, affective memory, and collective resistance.

Moreover, practice-based research often reflects what Sliwa et al. (2025) describe as 'ontological arrogance' - a tendency to universalise theoretical assumptions developed in the Global North, while neglecting alternative modes of knowing and organising. Girei (2017), for instance, offers a reflexive account of her positionality as a researcher and practitioner working in post-conflict Uganda. Her efforts to promote participatory development through civil society engagement were repeatedly challenged by donor-driven practices that imposed technical and managerial logics. Through this experience, Girei came to recognise the coloniality embedded in institutional routines and the need to ground research in relational, situated, and politically aware ways of knowing.

Taken together, these issues are not symptomatic of a failure of practice theories themselves, but rather of a selective engagement of ideas in empirical application. What is often missing is a deliberate attentiveness to power, history, and positionality - not as external conditions, but as constitutive of what

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[2] By dominant institutional and epistemic centres, I refer to universities, journals, languages, and research traditions located mainly in the Global North that set the standards of legitimate knowledge, often marginalising other socio-historical contexts and epistemologies (see Liu 2022; Girei 2017; Dixit 2023).

practices are, how they are reproduced, and how they might be transformed. A decolonial agenda thus invites researchers to expand the analytical scope of practice-based research beyond technical competence or localised activity, toward a more situated, critical, and ethically attuned engagement to 'the political[3]' within practices.

Some scholars have sought to reintroduce power and politics into practice theories through complementary strategies to the one that I propose. Watson (2017), for example, maps how power circulates across constellations of interrelated practices, producing differentiated capacities for action and recognition. Jonas and Littig (2017) advance a praxeological political analysis that attends to how practices participate in norm-setting and public contestation. Koddenbrock (2017), in turn, warns against the fragmentation of social analysis into disconnected practices and advocates for a 'logic of reconstruction' that links local practices to 'broader' political-economic formations. While these approaches expand the analytical range of practice theories, they operate (to varying degrees) with the same epistemic grammar - privileging internal dynamics or analytical reconstructions rooted in Western critical traditions. In contrast, the perspective developed here begins from the colonial difference. It frames colonisation not as a historical backdrop, but as an ongoing social practice that shapes which practices are legitimised, whose knowledge is made credible, and whose lived realities remain invisible. This shift opens a different horizon for engaging with issues of power and politics in practice theories - one that is not merely additive or corrective but grounded in the epistemic and ontological reconfigurations demanded by decolonial arguments.

Decolonial Arguments for Practice-Based Research

Decolonial arguments offer vital resources for reimagining how we study and theorise practices. Rather than treating knowledge as abstract, disembodied, or universal, decolonial approaches foreground the entanglements of epistemology with colonial histories, geopolitical hierarchies, and material asymmetries. As Quijano (2000) reminds us, coloniality persists as a network of power-laden practices that organises not only labour and bodies, but also subjectivities and systems of knowledge. This means that the ways in which practices are defined, valorised, or dismissed are usually implicated in broader struggles over meaning, memory, and legitimacy.

Within this context, the notion of *bordering* emerges as a key analytical tool. Bordering refers to the discursive, institutional, and material processes through which boundaries are drawn between what counts as legitimate knowledge and what is rendered peripheral, residual, or invisible. These borders are not static lines; they are produced and contested through everyday practices of categorisation, translation, inclusion, and exclusion. As Ballestrin (2013) suggests, the 'colonial difference' continues to structure the global division of epistemic labour, often demarcating the Global South as a site of empirical illustration rather than of theoretical innovation.

The conceptual roots of *bordering* in a decolonial register draw heavily from *border thinking* or *border gnosis*, as articulated by Mignolo (2009), who describes it as a mode of knowing from the underside of

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[3] Here, 'the political' refers not to institutional politics or policy-making, but to the ever-present dimension of antagonism, contestation, and power relations that shape social practices (see Mouffe, 2005).

the colonial perspective of modernity. It builds on Anzaldúa's ([1987]1999) work on *borderlands*, where ontological multiplicity is not merely tolerated but inhabited as a generative space. In this framing, *border ontology* does not seek to overcome or erase borders, but to dwell in their tensions, reclaiming them as epistemic and political resources. As such, bordering becomes both a condition of exclusion and a space of encounter, translation, and friction. It challenges us to ask which practices are legitimised, whose knowings are foregrounded, and which forms of life are rendered unintelligible.

The concept of *insurgency* complements this view by naming the active contestation of dominant knowledge regimes. Insurgency refers to epistemic and ontological practices that interrupt, subvert, or exceed the norms of what is thinkable or speakable within hegemonic frameworks. Lugones (2014) describes these as acts of *resistant existence* - practices that emerge from the cracks of the colonial/modern 'system' and affirm other ways of being, relating, and knowing. In the field of political epistemology, Escobar (2018) conceptualises *insurgent knowledges* as grounded, embodied, and collective processes that challenge abstract, universalising epistemologies from the standpoint of the oppressed and dispossessed. These are not merely oppositional acts; they are constructive, crafting worlds in which plural ontologies can coexist without being absorbed or erased by dominant paradigms.

Insurgency also resonates with what Mignolo (2009) calls *epistemic disobedience* - a deliberate refusal to obey the rules of colonial reason and a commitment to enact other logics, other memories, and other futures. Rather than asking to be included in dominant forms of order and knowing, insurgent knowers seek to displace taken-for-granted terms and recompose the ground from which theory and practice emerge. Girei's (2017) account exemplifies this point. Her attempt to work collaboratively with Ugandan civil society organisations was met with donor-driven expectations of technical neutrality and depoliticised practice. Instead of conforming to these demands, she reframed her research as a relational and political engagement, rooted in the lived realities of those marginalised by institutional power. Her praxis was insurgent not only in its content but in its refusal to separate knowledge from positionality, ethics, and struggle.

These concepts do not stand apart from existing practice theory approaches; instead, they provide an opportunity to revisit and expand them. For instance, Schatzki (2002; 2012) defines practices as organised nexuses of doings and sayings, governed by teleoaffective structures (the ends and emotions that make actions meaningful), rules, and shared understandings. He argues that what makes sense to do in a given situation - *practical intelligibility* - is embedded in and shaped by these social arrangements. A decolonial approach invites us to ask: whose ends are included in a given teleoaffective structure? Whose intelligibility is taken for granted? And how are such orientations historically conditioned by coloniality, epistemic domination, or resistance?

A similar move is possible when engaging with posthumanist approaches to practice. Gherardi (2022) defines practices as sociomaterial configurations where knowing is enacted relationally through entanglements of human and more-than-human elements. Her notion of *knowing-in-practice* challenges the Cartesian division between subject and object and invites us to trace how knowledge is embodied, situated, and co-constituted with artefacts, spaces, discourses, and affect. From a decolonial standpoint, this opens a path to recognise how non-Western cosmologies, spiritual materialities, and ancestral

presences can also participate in the constitution of practices, even though such knowledges are often excluded from what is deemed intelligible or relevant in empirical research. In this sense, bordering and insurgency allow us to expand the reach of sociomaterial thinking not only to include nonhuman agency, but to render visible epistemologies that do not separate knowing from land, ritual, silence, or community.

From this angle, *bordering* and *insurgency* do not reject practice theories; they radicalise its potential. They are concepts with which once can reorient epistemic commitments and foreground plural genealogies of knowing and doing. They call for practice theories capable of working across borders, listening across differences, and engaging with the insurgent possibilities that emerge from the periphery.

While posthumanist and practice-based epistemologies already challenge the Cartesian separation between subject and object, they do not always and necessarily attend to the geopolitical and historical conditions that shape which knowledges are seen, heard, or rendered credible. As Ibarra-Colado (2006) argues, knowledge production - even when conceived as situated and embodied - remains shaped by power relations that determine whose knowings are legitimised and whose are marginalised. Gherardi's (2022) notion of knowing-in-practice foregrounds knowledge as performative and relational, co-constituted through sociomaterial entanglements. Ibarra-Colado's critique develops this position by highlighting how such entanglements are also conditioned by epistemic hierarchies rooted in colonial histories and institutional arrangements. Together, these insights support an approach that attends to politics within a practice: one that understands knowing as always situated, but also contested, regulated, and bordered by broader struggles over recognition and legitimacy.

Towards Bordering and Insurgent Practices

What would it mean to take bordering and insurgency seriously in practice-based research? This question points toward a future agenda in which practice theories do not merely describe what is, but help to imagine what could be. It invites researchers to attend more carefully to how practices are made visible, who is authorised to participate in them, and what forms of life are silently excluded from accounts of action, meaning, and competence.

To begin with, a bordering-sensitive approach calls for heightened reflexivity regarding research positionality and the epistemic boundaries that shape inquiry. Rather than assuming that practices are stable, self-evident phenomena, researchers are challenged to ask how categories such as 'organising', 'learning', or 'managing' are historically and culturally constructed, and whose practices remain unnamed or unintelligible within dominant frames. This requires attention not only to what is said and done, but also to what is silenced, erased, or misrecognised. As Bonatti and Battestin (2023) remind us, knowledge is often shaped through denial- an active process of forgetting the colonial conditions that underpin modern institutions and their practices.

The idea of *insurgency* reorients research towards marginal and emergent practices that defy codification. It foregrounds modes of knowing that may not fit neatly into analytic categories, but which hold political and ontological weight. This includes spiritual, affective, collective, and territorial forms of knowledge that are often dismissed as anecdotal, informal, or pre-theoretical. Empirical engagement

with such practices requires methodological openness: dialogical designs, narrative and performative methods, and participatory approaches that decentre the researcher as the exclusive knower. It also calls for humility - a willingness to unlearn inherited epistemic habits and to let research be disrupted by those whose worlds do not conform to dominant expectations. As Hui (2023) argues, decolonial strategies in research should not be imposed normatively from above but emerge through methodological reflexivity and attentiveness to how enquiry itself unfolds as situated practice.

From a conceptual standpoint, this agenda invites a rethinking of key notions in practice theories. For instance, what counts as *practical intelligibility* may vary radically across ontological horizons; what 'makes sense' to do cannot be assumed as a shared rationality but must be interpreted through historical, situated, and contested grounds. Similarly, *competence* is not a neutral category - it is often racialised, gendered, and classed, shaped by unequal access to recognition. A decolonial approach urges researchers to critically interrogate how such hierarchies are reproduced or resisted within practices, and what forms of learning or participation are rendered possible or impossible.

This reframing also opens a critical dialogue with posthumanist theories of practice. While Gherardi (2022), conceptualises knowing as a relational, sociomaterial process performed through entanglements of humans and nonhumans, her *knowing-in-practice* decouples knowledge from the isolated, intentional subject and emphasises emergent agency across heterogeneous networks. However, this kind of approach has the potential to bracket social markers of difference such as race, gender, class, and colonial history. A decolonial orientation complements this by emphasising those dimensions as part of the relational and sociomaterial web, showing how power circulates not only through human–nonhuman relations, but also through embodied inequalities, symbolic violence, and historical exclusions. In this way, bordering and insurgency extend posthumanist sensibilities, making them more attuned to difference, conflict, and resistance within practice.

Finally, a decolonial approach to practice theories may also contribute to deepening our understanding of large-scale, complex, global issues – sometimes framed as *grand challenges* (Jamali et al. 2021). While much existing literature addresses such challenges through institutional strategies and global frameworks, a decolonial approach invites us to examine how such crises are lived, contested, and transformed through situated, everyday practices. As Danner-Schröder et al. (2025) argue, practice theories offer valuable tools to explore the dynamic, relational, and processual nature of how organisations engage with complex societal issues. Building on this, a decolonial position foregrounds how such engagements are also shaped by historical inequalities, epistemic exclusions, and colonial legacies that are often rendered invisible in mainstream responses to climate change, global health crises, or systemic racism.

A decolonial approach to practice-based research would illuminate the frictions, resistances, and insurgent strategies that emerge from the margins, not as peripheral exceptions, but as central to understanding how change becomes possible. By tracing the interplay of power, memory, and knowledge in the enactment of practice, a decolonial approach reveals how seemingly universal responses are always situated, contested, and selective. In this way, bordering and insurgent practices offer a

grounded, plural, and relational way of engaging with grand challenges - not from above, but from within the tensions and possibilities of lived experience.

Final Thoughts

This essay has proposed a decolonial reorientation of practice theories grounded in the concepts of *bordering* and *insurgency*. It has sought to open a space for dialogue, inviting researchers to engage more deeply with the political, historical, and epistemic dimensions of practices. By foregrounding the ongoing effects of coloniality, the argument is that practice-based research must go beyond descriptions of situated activity to confront the conditions under which activity becomes visible, legitimate, or intelligible.

Bordering and *insurgency* offer conceptual ideas through which to recognise the asymmetries that shape both everyday practices and research practices. They ask us to remain attentive to how epistemic boundaries are drawn, differences erased or domesticated, and how resistance and creativity emerge from the margins. Crucially, these concepts do not stand in opposition to established practice theories and related ideas. Instead, they invite us to consider not only *what* is practiced, but *who* practices, *where*, *how*, and *against what conditions*.

A decolonial approach to practice theories offers valuable contributions for understanding both ordinary and large-scale phenomena, from routine forms of exclusion to the lived realities of grand challenges. It does so not by proposing a new method or paradigm, but by cultivating a sensibility - one that embraces epistemic humility, listens across difference, and holds space for plural ways of knowing and acting.

In this spirit, the future of practice theories may lie not in their consolidation but in their fragmentation: in allowing them to be unsettled, translated, and remade from diverse geopolitical and epistemic locations. Engaging with bordering and insurgency is not only an analytical gesture; it is a political and ethical commitment to make room for other worlds within the study of practices. It is, above all, an invitation to unlearn, to re-exist, and to practice otherwise.

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