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Articulating consumers through practices of vernacular creativity

By

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Abstract

The paper discusses the constitution of the consuming subject in lifestyle practices of belonging and difference, taste and choice in the material circumstances of everyday living. It considers how lived moments of mundane activity can be understood, not simply as sites of social reproduction and unknowing regulation, but as fields of invention, transformation and reflexive struggle. In particular we unpack the contribution to be gleaned from a thoughtful return to de Certeau (1988; et al 1998), a theorist of practice whose lucidly insightful works, we claim, remain largely silenced within contemporary debates over the turn to practice in consumer research (Schau et al, 2009). It is argued that current conceptions of practice within management and marketing find themselves corralled by the authoritative legacy of the works of Bourdieu (1990; 1984; 1977) which has the effect of marginalizing other traditions of practice theorising: here consumption practices are formatted into logics of rational calculation. We suggest that the work of de Certeau offers an alternative to reductive discursive accountings, revealing the emergent and material character of mundane sense and deed, where the ordinary is figured as the realm par excellence of improvised vernacular consumption practices. In seeking to repair mechanistic underpinnings by linking practices and structure in the everyday lifestyle work of consumers, we hope to turn our gaze towards the moral and political character of that which practice theory calls forth. Born of necessity such practice laughs in the face of Bourdieu's dismissal of the 'choice of necessity'.

Articulating consumers through practices of vernacular creativity

Introduction

“[h]uman reality does not exist first in order to act later; but for human reality to be is to act, and to cease to act is to cease to be” (Sartre, 2003: 498)

Sartre seems to be saying that practice articulates and invigorates our social worlds. Taking this at face value, we could say that lifestyle practices, those of belonging, difference, taste and choice articulate and energize consumer capitalism. We might then add that principles of agency and autonomy situate the consuming subject within circuits of practice which unfold in the struggles of everyday living. With such ideas the paper seeks to articulate the prominence of practice as the dynamic of meaningful action within lifestyle architectures constitutive of consumer culture. It does so in the context of a diverse multiplicity of grammars of consumer identity that, while materializing in the regularities of practice as consuming agents represent themselves to themselves, are seen to subvert binary relations and the effects of their regulative force. Substantive models of the consuming subject are shown to locate the productive and transformative possibilities of agency in the doing of practical action and practical sense. They enlist the work of various practice theorists to frame lived moments of identity work as expressed in the artful, often subversive, bricolage of the ordinary, the mundane and the everyday.

Seeking to negotiate space for the creative agency of consuming subjects within ‘practice theory’ (Schatzki, 2001: 3), the paper claims ontological priority for *culture as praxis* (Bauman, 1999), for cultural materials as they call themselves into being in lived moments of the everyday. This it sees as a pre-reflexive matrix of conditions of intelligibility which shapes social practice and is shaped by it. Indeed Gherardi (2000) observes that *“practice is both our production of the world and the result of this process”* (ibid: 215). In the sense that practices are culturally embedded entanglements they can be said to be *“carriers of understanding and intelligibility”* (Schatzki, 1996: 12).

Yet, in holding that the work of identity is constituted within practice, the paper sets out to reveal how the status of consumers as adaptive and inventive actors is bound to identity work performed within generative social practice (Schatzki, ibid: 11). Specifically it discusses the treatment of the construct ‘resistance’, tracing circulating subject positions implicated in the shaping of concept, context and collective. To say that such subject positions are recursively organized and always in process is to invoke ‘structuration’ (Giddens, 1984) in that the identity work of ‘resistance’ is understood as an ‘ordering effect’ (Law, 1994) of various cultural materials as they *“perform themselves through agents, through interaction between agents and through devices, texts and architectures”* (ibid: 24). And importantly, as Law goes on to argue, *“representations shape, influence and participate in ordering practices [...] ordering is not possible without representation”* (ibid: 25). The recursion at work in the context of consumer lifestyle practice reveals the operations of an economy of representation (interested containment and concealment) in which discursive arrangements forge identity concepts. And although the truth of some institutions is indeed that as they materialize the logic of collective practice, they also generate strategic representations that carry forward and perform strategically managed views of that practice, as Kjellberg and Helgesson (2007) confirm.

The value of the turn to practice is not to be found in a rediscovery of functionalism and institutions as strategically interested idioms or progenitors of discourse. This insight is common parlance and always already in the mix of the lived everyday. Strategic discursive practices not only call forth identity concepts, they distribute them and set relational frames in play among a local production cohort where *“everyone is in some sense aware of the reflexive constitution of modern social activity and the implications it has for her or his life”* (Giddens, 1991: 14). Importantly, those preconditions of intelligibility and related discursive operations are made visible when, as Gherardi (2000) trenchantly observes, *“the breaching of rules [of invisibility of concealment] exposes the*

rule-based operations that produce a 'normal' situation" (ibid: 215). Those breaches and subversions are revealed in the activities whereby consumers produce and manage natural settings of order producing organization. As a result, we suggest that discourse-driven accountings overlook the invention of actors in settings of complex intermediated networks of practice, where practices are in process and constantly assembling new meanings; and are far removed from being determined by extant institutions and their strategically interested representations. Indeed it occurs to the authors that the task of 'marketing as practice' approaches is not to take the activity, say of authoring marketing strategy, as the 'primary strip' (Goffman, 1986: 21), but to construct points of perspective at least once removed from such baseline representation. In problematizing practices of strategically attending to the production of a sequence of methods witnessable as, say, share-of-voice targets, the focal phenomenon becomes not simply process or management calculation, or first order representation, but the local methods of 'cultural calculation' (Barry and Slater, 2002), of producing "*some organizational event as the situated, local accomplishment of its production cohort in producing that event as just the event it accountably is*" (Livingston, 1987: 8). Consequently, if, as Johnson Melin & Whittington (2003) trenchantly observe, "*we are to aid management and the managing of organizations we need to achieve a higher degree of reflexivity amongst [those] actors about what they are doing*" (ibid: 5).

Research as pedagogy

Recent years have seen a turn towards 'practice' as an analytic object in organization studies. Informed by the wider turn towards practice in contemporary social theory (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 1996; Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina & von Savigny, 2001) sympathies have also grown towards research designs that offer richer and more penetrative treatments of process as context. There has been growing scholarly investment in practice-related research programmes, especially in strategy (Chia & Holt, 2006; Chia and MacKay, 2007; Gherardi, 2000; Jarzabkowski, 2004, 2008; Jarzabkowski, Balogun & Seidl, 2007; Whittington, 2004, 2006, 2007) where there has been a move from process as the voice of implementation towards activity-based views of "*the detailed processes and practices which constitute the day-to-day activities of organisational life*" (Johnson, Melin and Whittington, 2003: 3). Similar investment has been made in accounting (Ahrens & Chapman, 2007), management studies (Fox, 2000; Handley, Sturdy, Fincham & Clark, 2006; Roberts, 2006; Wenger, 1998) and marketing management (Araujo, 2007; Brownlie, 1991; Brownlie and Saren, 1997; Brownlie, Ferguson and Hewer, 2007; Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2007; Kjellberg, 2008). This flurry of publications has occurred at a time when representations of the interests of the audience for management research play strongly to the hardy perennial of 'relevance' and what is to be done for it to become less removed from the needs of managerial actors through focusing on the micro activities of managers who otherwise are left "*bereft of insights, let alone guidelines for action*" (Johnson, Melin & Whittington, 2003: 5).

In the context of the appeals to knowledge it seeks to promote, this special issue spins 'practice theory' as a short-hand for a style of investigative reportage that generates intimate close-ups of action as it unfolds in the lived reality of management. Drawing on vocabulary under rehearsal in organization studies' treatments of 'practice theory', the call for papers is indicative of lines of inquiry which set up a ready-made framing in terms of how marketing practices are constructed, interpreted and performed etc. And looking to the extant literature we find suggestions of suitable empirical topics located around analysis of the functioning of such social facts as 'strategy away days', 'flip charts', post-it notes, planning papers, power-point presentations, key tasks, dashboards, strategic vision, mission statements, committee papers and other paraphernalia assumed to be self evident truths of the mundane everyday in organizational life. With the exception of work such as that by Pullen and Rhodes (2009), a material culture of organizations has yet to assemble itself positions of perspective and these ideas may hold some promise here. But such efforts will, of

necessity, call for skilled reflexive research practice (Schön, 1983, 1987) which avoids theorising organisations, strategy, marketing and purposeful practical action into existence without examining the material basis of the ordering arrangements that serve the purpose of naturalising such framing concepts.

In the context of consumption, the crux of the matter is that consumer cultures are auto-productive: that is to say, they produce themselves and not only reproduce themselves through everyday actions embedded in practices of consuming agents. And so the paper argues that practice theory necessarily re-inscribes social facts of concept, context and collective, so that mundane acts of consumer resistance are rendered intelligible beyond anti-consumption rhetoric, providing ways of thinking ‘resistance’ as a site of inventive sociality. To mark this turn to practice the paper pays particular tribute to the writings of de Certeau (1988) who gestures toward tactics and strategies as ‘silent productions’, bundles of everyday activities embedded in the lived-work of consumption practices and their material assemblages. The paper considers ways to theorize the ‘everyday’ and to shape analytic relations to practice phenomena while avoiding reductive determinations to discourse. And although it claims that a (re)turn to practice is overdue, the paper considers the institutional difficulties of theorizing the social through banal ‘moments’ of worldly activities; for tussles with the stubborn language of governance and instrumentality invoked by the ‘inspectorly’ gaze of management studies risks the nuance, vitality and ambivalence sufficient to the crafting of practice insights. Indeed, we have to wonder what narrative devices, what new genres of narrativity and representation might be adequate to the task of calling forth marketing practices in all their reflexivity. Perhaps, as Parker (2006) suggests, marketing stands to gain from bringing an interpretive or a cultural studies turn to the problem of producing adequate representations as accounts of empirical engagement and in constructing a reflexive pedagogy sufficient to the task.

Identifying identity in practice

“Women use [hair] colour to say goodbye to old selves and they use it to audition new ones. [...] there is no longer a single notion of womanhood towards which all girls are headed.”
(McCracken, 1997:140)

The paper brings to the special issue the work of ‘practice approaches’ (Schatzki, 2001) to framing the study of social life within consumer culture. In doing so we refer to studies in which consuming subjects are constituted within practices instantiated in fields of cultural praxis (Bauman, 1999) where the generative orderings of vernacular ‘doings’ such as taste, belonging, appetite, division and struggle become intelligible through expressive and transformative performance. The opening extract suggests, after Butler (1999), that the gendered subject is invested with an agency that ‘does’ gender as a transformative practice without ever being fully determined by naturalizing discourses of gender identity. Indeed as McCracken (1997) observes, women use hair coloring to change the way they think about themselves, to ‘do’ different selves and to play with identity; for there are available *“literally dozens of version of femaleness [and] no ritual could possibly deliver young girls to all of these gender stations”* (ibid: 141). Such literature holds that consumption activities are embedded in – and spring from - the mundane character of everyday living where the work of situated lifestyle practitioners renders selfhood the collective accomplishment of practices of identity, difference, acceptance, autonomy and association. The underpinning logic here draws on Bauman’s (1999) view that *“human praxis, with all its functionally inevitable generative rules, seems to be a prerequisite of human activity, rather than its symbolically motivated artifact”* (ibid: 112).

The possibilities for change and transformation and the identity work that accomplishes them are busy empirical sites for consumer culture research. Miller (1998) captures the logic of practice in

this domain when he observes of an informant that “*her shopping is primarily an act of love, that in its daily conscientiousness becomes one of the primary means by which relationships of love and care are constituted by practice. That is to say, shopping does not merely reflect love, but it is a major form in which this love is manifested and reproduced.*” (ibid: 18). In this and other detailed studies of consumption practice, the links between practice and identity work as mutually constituting social spaces are made explicit in ways that Simpson (2009) argues have escaped research framed by ‘practice approaches’ within a ‘post-processual’ (Whittington, 2007: 1576) organization studies. She writes that “*theories of organizational practice such as strategizing can only be enhanced by the restoration of this vital link to identity*” (ibid: 1342). Embedded within the logic of practice and identity work is the sense that the generative rules of culture as praxis conceive of the subject as having some ‘viable existence prior to the cultural field that it negotiates’ (Butler, 1999: 182). To be culturally embedded is not to foreclose the possibility of agency or identity relations of coherence and continuity, but to have recourse to a prediscursive subject that is never fully of nor determined by the cultural world that it negotiates. Praxis is then forged in spaces that separate the subject from its cultural predicates as they manifest themselves through practice.

In steering or shaping the context of consumption activity, practices are not merely reproductive of social order; for meaning systems are negotiated in improvised and unexpected ways which can be understood as “*component parts of the multiplicity of practices that constitute the repertoires of social life*” (Cheng, Olsen, Southerton & Warde, 2007: 43). The paper discusses how fields of everyday consumer activity can then be understood, not simply as sites of constraint, preservation and social reproduction, but as modes of production, invention and transformation in which consumers are conceptualised, not as mere ‘users’ of goods and services, but as ‘active and creative practitioners’ (Shove & Pantzar, 2005). This brings to the discussion the challenge of positioning the research gaze in a space that is tolerant of an ambivalence that comes from understanding consumers, or marketers, as both puppets and puppeteers, whose culturally constituted identity work is expressed through a matrix of coherent oppositional practices. In an exploration of practices of formation and division, Butler (1999) discusses the cultural matrix through which transgressive identity work becomes intelligible, observing that in contesting the limits of gender identity norms, inventive identity practices open up “*subversive matrices of gender disorder*”(ibid: 24). In this way resistance, opposition, subversion, transgression, deviance, contestation and additional practices of ‘othering’ destabilise the cultural matrix of intelligibility that shapes the meaning of identifying categories such as gender and sexuality.

Inspired by Butler (1999) we then take ‘resistance’ to be an open field of consumer practice where invention and making-do seed the disorder of ‘subversive matrices’ which destabilize the ordering work of identity norms which otherwise sustain relations of coherence. In this sense the orderliness of social practices is not only a matter of preservation and constraint, but of bricolage and transcendence. The paper focuses on struggles for preservation and transformation, for difference and identity, through materially mediated lifestyle practices which are collectively constructed within ‘nexuses of activity’ (Schatzki, 2000: 11). It discusses the treatment of the construct ‘resistance’, tracing a line of argument that travels from resistance as an expression of ‘existential struggle’ and ‘reflexive defiance’, to resistance as circulating subject positions recursively organized and performed through circuits of practice. In doing so it reveals how acts of consumer resistance are rendered intelligible, providing ways of rethinking resistive actions as embedded in a generative field of “*embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding*” (Schatzki, ibid: 2). Paraphrasing Schatzki we suggest that identity categories such as gender and sexuality may then be said to “*depend, both causally and ontologically, on participation in social practices*” (ibid: 11). But having said so, the important point, we believe, for practice approaches to contextual studies of consumers and managers is that practices do not simply follow from identity categories functioning as prior structures. As Butler

(1999) claims, practices of desire do not *follow* from (the discursive categories of) either sex or gender, “*where follow is a political relation of entailment instituted by the cultural laws that establish and regulate the shape and meaning of sexuality*” (ibid: 24). The challenge for practice research in markets and marketing is to find way of accomplishing a reflexive vantage point from which to distance witnessed interventions from ideologically inscribed norms of governance and regulation; for both are involved in the order-productive work that makes up the practical accountability of research into practical action.

Edgework where the Practice is

This paper situates the idea of resistance as social practice within the territory of consumer culture research. In doing so it explores ways in which available forms of cultural analysis can enervate the pulpit orthodoxy and ‘fatality’ (Baudrillard, 1990) of practice as it represents itself among extant marketing literature. The analytical gaze sustaining notions of consumption and resistance is supported by a complex web of ideological, economic and social resources which empties this crude binary opposition of any piercing diagnostic power - as Baudrillard (1990) observes “things have found a way of avoiding a dialectics of meaning that was beginning to bore them” (ibid: 7). For although, as the collected work edited by Lee, Fenandez and Hyman (2009) indicates, resistance may be theorised as an integral component of power relations sustaining discourses of consumption and anti-consumption, or resistance, communities of restive activists are raised daily in opposition to what is declared to be global capitalism’s corrosive impact on social life. Resistance is more than obedience to ideological imperative and rhetorical ploys, it can also be understood as a *creative consumption practice* (Cherrier, 2009; Hewer & Brownlie 2010) or as *spaces of vernacular creativity* (Edensor et al, 2009). Denzin (2001) argues that the complexity of the creative interplay between consumption and resistance is no more apparent than in the subtle interpenetration of ways in which “*consumers use the resources of popular culture for personal and group empowerment*” (ibid: 328). A close reading of Douglas (1996) reveals, modern consumption was itself born of revolt and resistance. Furthermore, the cultural logic of consumption continues to be bound up with the urge to break-out of the constraints of local givens, such as hearth and community, towards the formation, with new allies, of collectives and forms of ‘floating sociality’ (Maffesoli, 1996) based around choice, inclination and interest. In agreeing with Cherrier (2009) that resistance and domination are co-constitutive, we also concur with Sharp et al (2000) that “*processes of domination and resistance...are always implicated in, and mutually constitutive of one another*” (ibid: 1). And so it is then that inventing a new collective, be they star trek fans (Kozinets, 1999), or burning man participants (Kozinets, 2002), is then as much the prerogative of those motivated to share enthusiasms as in taking an active political stance in opposition to some collectively perceived grievance, taking it upon themselves to, as Scott (2007) suggested in relation to critical marketing, “try and rethink (and rework) markets into a more humane shape.” (ibid: 4).

Bourdieu & Theories of Practice

The work of Allen (2002), Holt (1995, 1998), Moisio & Beruchashvili, (2010), Schau, Muniz and Arnould (2009), Thompson (2004) and Warde (2005) provides an early foundation for the discussion of discursive practices in consumer research. And the recent turns to transformative consumer research (Mick, 2006) and to consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) have added further impetus to efforts to rethink consumer resistance, expressed in the work of Penaloza and Price (1993), Dobscha (1998) and Ritson and Dobscha, (1999). However, it is within the work of Schau et al (2009) that we find the practice turn most pronounced. In this paper they explore the value of the work of Warde (2005) and Reckwitz for repositioning work on consumption practices. For as Warde defines this concept, “*...practice as a temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings. Examples are cooking practices voting practices, industrial practices, recreational practices and correctional practices.*” (Warde, 2005:

133-134). Or when he quotes the work of Reckwitz: “*A practice is thus a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood. To say that practices are ‘social practices’ is indeed a tautology: A practice is social, as it is a ‘type’ of behaving and understanding that appears at different locales and at different points of time and is carried out by different body/minds.*” (quoted by Warde: 135). For Echeverri & Skålén (2011), practice theory is largely constituted in the same manner, that is, through the terms of Bourdieu and Foucault:

“Practice theory hold that action is only possible and understandable in relation to common and shared practices and that social order is constituted by practices (Bourdieu, 1977; Foucault, 1977; Giddens, 1984). Practice theories thus conceive of organizations as constituted by the shared practices which actors draw on to act and interpret other actors’ actions.” (Orlikowski; Schatzki, 2006).” (Echeverri & Skålén, 2011: 9).

The problem from the outset is that such an account of these theories of practice largely places emphasis in the last instance upon order over disorder, certainty over uncertainty, consistency over inconsistency. McRobbie (2005) for example may suggest that Bourdieu provides one of the most persuasive accounts of social practice; but in the same breath she suggests that “*The great disappointment underpinning Bourdieu’s writing is that there is so little possibility of radical social change, that everything is always already inclined towards conformity to the social order.*” (2005: 141). In this rendition of practices the work of theorists for whom the more improvised character of practices is emphasised remains silenced, here we are thinking in particular of the work of de Certeau (1988) and Lyotard (1984). Schau et al (2009) offer an account of theories of practice which instead adopts a medico-metaphor¹, and as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) revealed metaphors are not innocent rather they structure how we perceive and make sense of the world. Practices, for Schau et al (2009) are thus said to have a particular ‘anatomy’ and ‘physiology’, so that the only way of rendering practices as explicit becomes through the logics of science:

“Practices Create Value. By now it should be clear that consumers create value through their participation in brand communities and specifically in the enactment of practices. Through these twelve practices, consumers affect the entire marketing mix. Each practice serves to enable brand use and encourage deeper community engagement. Practices need to be known in order to be repeated and must be repeated to become part of the value creation repertoire. By providing opportunities to demonstrate competencies, practices allow members to accrue cultural capital through adroit performance which creates value for the consumer.” (2009: 27).

Here consumption practices are shepherded into the logic of business and calculation. More so, there appears to be a form of functionalism at work so that practices rather than operating towards their own ends can instead be matter-of-factly co-opted into the calculative practices of business and marketing to ‘create value’. Within such emerging work, we argue that something lies missing, that is the strategic use of observations from the field so that we see these practices and performances in the making – as at present what we get is the academic performing the job of the academic – that is in the act of making and constructing markets in their own image through their explicit knowledge claims – rather we need to be party to these decisions, negotiations, rules of

¹ Here we are told that: “*Each practice exhibits a common anatomy which can be described as: 1) understandings (knowledge and tacit cultural templates), 2) procedures (explicit performance rules), and 3) engagements (emotional projects and purposes). Each practice similarly demonstrates a physiology or manner in which these anatomical parts function together. Practices vary in their anatomy, but in their physiology they vary across communities. Above we identified the anatomy of practices.*” (Schau et. al., 2009).

thumb, renderings in their use and deployment – in action and practice rather than the only action being that of the academic doing what they do best that is discussing tables and forms of classification. The question then becomes how to capture practice in their modes of operation. For us, such an account of practices can be found in the work of de Certeau (1988). Warde (2005), himself is more explicit on this disjuncture between practices and market logics when he suggested:

“Because practices have their own distinct, institutionalized and collectively regulated conventions, they partly insulate people, qua consumers, from the blandishments of producers and promotional agencies. Customers cannot usually be dictated to by producers of goods and services; most innovations fail, more new functions and designs are rejected than adopted. Yet, nor are producers by-standers in the process. Producers attempt to mould practices in line with their commercial interests.” (2005: 141).

Such a notion brings to mind Shove and Pantzer’s (2005) discussion of the emergent market for Nordic walking as where they suggest: “What is missing, but what is required, is a more encompassing account of the co-production of practice.” (2005: 62). Alerting us to the importance of sphere of consumption, as where the action (or practice) gets settled:

“to explore new ways of thinking about the development of practices and the diffusion of products and technologies associated with them. In the process, we have shown something of how conventions of participation develop and how practices are shaped by actual, potential and previous practitioners as well as by producers. Consistent with our interpretation of practice as a process of integration, we suggest that configurations of image, stuff and skill continue to co-evolve. On both counts, we argue for a more dynamic theory of material and consumer culture and for one that takes due account of the fact that things are used in, for and as part of practice.” (2005: 62)

To unpack a counter theory of consumption practices, and build upon such insights, we explore the work of a theorist whose ideas seem fruitful, especially given the fact that they are largely overlooked in current ways of theorizing practice.

De Certeau & the Practicing of Everyday Life

In the book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau (1988) theorizes consumers as “immigrants in a system too vast to be their own, too tightly woven for them to escape from it” (1988: xx). Such echoes of Baudrillard and the ‘iron cage’ of consumption are however soon erased. De Certeau (1988) provides a critique of the work of Bourdieu. He dissects what he sees as the distinct ‘two halves’ of Bourdieu, comparing his more aesthetic ethnological work on the Kabyle house (2002, orig. 1970), to his more formal later sociological contribution on practice, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977). De Certeau argues that something is lost in this movement through his *oeuvre*, or as he explains on the Kabyle house (or the world reversed) “Through the practices that articulate its interior space, it inverts the strategies of public space and silently organizes the language.” (ibid: 52). Bourdieu later suggested that this work was written in honour of his mentor Levi-Strauss, as the last work which he wrote as ‘a blissful structuralist’ (Bourdieu, 1990: 9). De Certeau is thus suggesting that practices lie beyond the ken of existent knowledge and understanding (at least for Bourdieu); so much so that any inkling of tactics and everyday practices are bracketed, or as he prefers ‘blanketed’, from inquiry. The exclusion of such practices, for de Certeau is significant; for it is upon this basis that Bourdieu’s discourse can make its knowledge claims.

In part, the bracketing of resistance can be understood as an unintended consequence of the seductive appeal of the work of Bourdieu (1984), which, for all its contribution to theoretical inquiry into the ‘habitus’ of consumption, serves to ‘blanket’ questions of practice and resistance

from empirical inspection. This point is made in the work of de Certeau (1988), who claims that to bridge the gap between practices and structures Bourdieu has to turn his ‘theory’ of their genesis: “*This ‘genesis’ implies an interiorization of structures (through learning) and an exteriorization of achievements (what Bourdieu calls habitus) in practices.*” (1988: 57). In his notion of ‘habitus’ Bourdieu constructs a powerful apparatus for framing practice as a manifestation of internalized second nature, the product and carrier of embodied history. As he writes “*The conditions associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring systems, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them*” (Bourdieu, 1977: 53). For de Certeau, however, there is a price to be paid for this powerful (re)conceptualization of the intentional agent: that is, “*A passive and nocturnal actor is substituted for the sly multiplicity of strategies.*” (ibid: 58).

A similar interpretation of the fallout of the work of Bourdieu (1984) for subsequent analyses of consumption practices is made by Miller (1991) and du Gay (1996). Both argue that the view of the consumer which emerges from the work of Bourdieu is unduly constrained, over-determined and normative – an approach to consumer culture, where, as Miller (1991) writes, “*The actual brilliance often displayed in the art of living in modern society by people of all classes, and the use of ambiguities, inconsistencies, resistance, framing and such devices in individual and social strategies, are thereby lost.*” (1991: 157). Miller attributes this exclusion to problems with Bourdieu’s preferred research instrument, a conclusion also reached in the work of du Gay (1996): “*Bourdieu is unable to express what people actually make or do with the objects they consume, or to articulate what practices of consumption mean to those engaged in them.*” (ibid: 85). What is needed instead, as Reckwitz details, is a cultural theory of practices which “*consists in explaining and understanding actions by reconstructing the symbolic structures of knowledge which enable and constrain the agents to interpret the world according to certain forms*” (2002: 245). This seems to offer an approach that could offset the strength of the place of the status quo and social order in Bourdieu’s account, for as McNay suggests “*by producing an account of power that is structurally committed to the status quo, Bourdieu forecloses the possibility of resistant practice emerging from the margins.*” (2004: 1801-181).

The work of de Certeau in contrast frames the everyday as the sphere of creativeness *par excellence*, a realm wherein the carnival of the subversive lies continually beneath the surface. Resistance here becomes reconfigured as *bricolage*, as expressed in the work of Holt (1995), that is the extent to which consumers are constantly responding to an already-made or ready-made consumer culture, so that ‘making do’ is transformed through acts of everyday creativity to reuse and recombine the materials and resources furnished by the capitalist market. Explaining the stance of de Certeau in a way which problematizes the position held by Baudrillard, Poster observes that the former’s work serves to “*confirm the unsutured nature of the social, the impossibility of the full colonization of daily life by the system, the continued fact of resistance to the temporal logic of democratic capitalism, and the ubiquitous eruption of the heterogeneous.*” (quoted in Highmore, 2002: 150). Here what might be termed the poetics of practices such that for de Certeau the emergent politics and dialectics of the practices of everyday life are granted especial attention. Here the everyday (what Bourdieu might have relegated to the ‘choice of necessity’) is reframed as an assemblage of cultural practices and ‘little victories’ (in Fiske’s terms, 1988). As de Certeau himself explains:

“Many everyday practices (talking, reading, moving about, shopping, cooking, etc) are tactical in character. And so are, more generally, many ‘ways of operating’: victories of the ‘weak’ over the ‘strong’ (whether the strength be that of powerful people or the violence of things or of an imposed order, etc.), clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things,

'hunter's cunning', maneuvers, polymorphic simulations, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike.' (ibid: xix).

Further consideration reveals that de Certeau sees 'cunning' and 'wiley' intelligence in the everyday practices and tactics of contemporary consumer society. To make this leap of perspective, de Certeau employs a similar tactic as that expressed in the writings of Foucault: he looks to the past, *the view from afar*, as Levi Strauss might say, to reimagine and reinvoke the unimaginable, a world in which the conditions of possibility for transcendence become possible.

To do so, he turns to notions of 'practice' and 'ways of operating' in the writings of D tienne and Vernant (1978) who explore such "*m tis*" in ancient Greek society. For these authors *m tis* refers to "*a type of intelligence and of thought, a way of knowing; it implies a complex but very coherent body of mental attitudes and intellectual behaviour which combine flair, wisdom, forethought, subtlety of mind, deception, resourcefulness, vigilance, opportunism, various skills, and experience acquired over the years.*" (1978: 3). The contribution of de Certeau is to perceive such 'cunning' and 'wiley' intelligence not in Greek society ('from afar'), but in our own consumer culture backyard. For de Certeau then such everyday tactics and practices are considered as "*silent productions ('making do'), practices which 'produce without capitalizing'*" (1988: xx). In this sense their significance is apparent in the ways that they enable consumers to reappropriate spaces (the streets, the city) and texts (reading) so as to make them 'habitable'. As he continues:

"...like a rented apartment. It transforms another person's property into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient. Renters make comparable changes in an apartment they furnish with their acts and memories; as do speakers, in the language into which they insert both the messages of their native tongue, and, through their accent, through their own 'turns of phrase,' etc., their own history; as do pedestrians, in the streets they fill with the forests of their desires and goals. In the same way the users of social codes turn them into metaphors and ellipses of their own quests." (1988: xxi-xxii).

Practices can then be understood as a form of resistance. A kind of resistance within particular limits but which still manage to bring forth subversive opportunities and potentialities on the margins. Such a view draws on the fact that de Certeau defines resistance as one might talk of the concept within electronics and psychoanalysis, as that which "*hinders and dissipates the energy flow of domination. Resistance is what resists representation.*" (Highmore, 2002: 152). Practice, we reckon has a similar character, as something that will always escape the act of representing or the desire to segment, plan and classify.

Writing in the second volume of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Giard observes that "room remains for microinventions, for the practice of *reasoned differences*, to resist with a sweet obstinace the contagion of conformism [in order] to reinforce the network of exchanges and relations" (de Certeau et al., 1998: 213, italics in original). Such microinventions are defined more specifically by Giard as "the power to seize power over one part of oneself...[most importantly perhaps, through] gestures, objects, and words" (ibid: 213). De Certeau, himself alludes to the power of poetics in his rendition of everyday life and its modes of operation:

"Culture is judged by its operations, not by the possession of its products. In art, understanding a painting involves recognizing the gestures that gave birth to it, the painter's 'strokes', 'brushwork', and 'palette'. The art of the cook is all about production, based on a limited choice of available ingredients, in a combination of gestures, proportions, utensils, and cooking or transformation methods. Similarly, communication is a cuisine of gestures, of words, or ideas and information, with its recipes and its subtleties, its auxiliary instruments

and its neighboring effects, its distortions and its failures.” (de Certeau and Giard, 1998: 254).

Consumption & Praxis

For Miller, one key characteristic of consumption is allied to the notion of consumption practices as a form of everyday *praxis*: “that is, a working out of philosophical conundrums by other means.” (1991: 207-208). This approach to consumption and material culture sees it as more than a game of social distinction, *a la* Bourdieu (1984); or the social logic of differentiation of Baudrillard (1988); or the ‘functionally inevitable generative rules of human praxis’ of Bauman (1999). Rather consumption practices are the stuff of sociality. They are the stuff of belonging and without them, as Miller suggests, ‘the feeling is one of insignificance within a vast sea.’ (1991: 212). Adrift in such an inhospitable environment, living amidst the alienating currents and tides of consumer culture, Miller proposes:

“The sheer profusion encouraged by the transience of fashion was expected to overwhelm us in its very diversity, but in practice there is the building up through bricolage of specific and particular social groups which define themselves as much through the rejection of all those cultural forms they are not as from the assertion of their particular style. Small sections of the population become immersed to an extraordinary degree in the enormous profusion of hobbies, sports, clubs, fringe activities, and the nationwide organizations devoted to interests as diverse as medieval music, swimming, ballroom dancing, steel bands and fan clubs. The building of social networks and leisure activities around these highly particular pursuits is one of the strangest and most exotic features of contemporary industrial society, and one which is forever increasing.” (1991: 209-210).

Within the consumer research canon talk of ‘praxis’, and talk of consumption as praxis (Bauman, 1999) has remained remarkably absent. The notion of consumption as praxis can be found in the work of the Birmingham School of Contemporary Culture which employs Gramsci’s notion of hegemony to highlight that power and domination are never universal or given, rather it “*has to be won, worked for, reproduced, sustained*” (1986: 61). Here the language of struggle, resistance and negotiation express the relations between a subordinate and a dominant culture whose outcome is “not given but *made*” (1986: 63). Hall is more explicit on this matter when he suggests: “...meaning is always a social production, a practice. The world has to be *made to mean*.” (Storey, 1998: xvii). So we are told that working-class culture brings to this terrain “*a repertoire of strategies and responses – ways of coping as well as of resisting*” (1986: 63) its continued subordination. Such strategies are said to ‘solve’ in an imaginary way, largely at the level of ideology, the problems of the broader social formations, including “...*the ‘Teddy Boy’ expropriation of an upper class style of dress ‘covers’ the gap between largely manual, unskilled, near lumpen real careers and life chances, and the ‘all-dressed-up-nowhere-to-go’ experience of Saturday evening...the ‘Mods’ cover the gap between the never-ending weekend and Monday’s resumption of boring, dead-end work.*” (1986: 65). By this reckoning, the Birmingham School was able to turn attention to the sphere of leisure and recreation – the world of consumption and consumer culture - as constituting the ‘paramount’ reality for (male) youth. A world characterised by possessions and objects – “the boot-lace tie and velvet-collared drape jacket of the Ted, the close crop, parka coats and scooter of the Mod, the stained jeans, swastikas and ornamented motorcycles of the bike-boys, the bovver boots and skinned-head of the Skinheads, the Chicago suits or glitter costumes of the [David] Bowie-ites, etc.” (1986: 69). What matters here is the organisation of all this material into stylistic ensembles (meaningful styles) to enact a group-identity capable of expressing their being-in-the-world, or as Hebdige reckons, on their ability to make a ‘virtue of necessity’ (1991: 109).

Another example of such resistant interpretive practice lies in the work of McLaughlin (1996), where he considers the production of ‘zines’ around such fan obsessions as programmes like Star Trek, or popular music forms. In terms of the nature of such creative and critical practices he suggests: “Zines are high-attitude productions; each zine takes an attitude rather than passively consuming pop texts, and each attitude taken has the *urgency of resistance*.” (1996: 54, italics added). The notion of tactics is crucial. Lury (1996) suggests that such *tactics* are “natural, unknowing or deceptive” in contrast to *strategies* which are “sufficiently knowing, or self-consciously reflexive” (ibid: 231).

McLaughlin’s concept of ‘vernacular theorizing’ adds flesh to this notion of practices as tactics, when he theorizes consumers as poachers employing creative and critical practices, namely through their ability to question the culture produced by corporate culture (1996: 56). Our work on practices of debadging (Hewer & Brownlie, 2009a; Hewer & Brownlie, 2010) shares this preoccupation. In this paper we explored a particular consumption context – that of consuming cars - in order to frame the study of consumer resistance as a form of creativity wherein consumers improvise ways to articulate market adjustments through communal acts of *bricolage* that surround practices of erasure and concealment. Or in our work on celebrity, where our analysis turns to what we might think of as the enterprise and brand appeal of celebrity chefs through their embodied practices (Brownlie & Hewer 2007; Hewer & Brownlie 2009b). Here we might refer to debadging and cheffing as forms of embodied rhetorics, or as de Certeau speaks on walking rhetorics: “*There is a rhetoric of walking. The art of ‘turning’ phrases finds an equivalent in an art of composing a path...Like ordinary language, this art implies and combines styles and uses... Style and use both have to do with a ‘way of operating’ (of speaking, walking, etc), but style involves a peculiar processing of the symbolic, while use refers to elements of a code. They intersect to form a style of use, a way of being and a way of operating.*” (1988: 100).

Discussion

In this paper we have sought to unpack the contribution to be gleaned from a return to theorists of practice who remain silenced within current debates over the notion of Marketing as Strategy and Practice, namely the work of de Certeau (1988) and others (de Certeau et al 1998). Our theoretical discussion argues that current conceptions of practices and strategy within management and marketing are limited by their inattention to early traditions of thought around these concepts; for the uninitiated it’s as if theories of practices start with Echeverri & Skålen (forthcoming) or Schau et al (2009) with an all-too-brief nod in the direction of Bourdieu (1977; 1990) and Foucault (1977). Instead we suggest we need more than this gesturing around practices, more work within our discipline which does a similar job to that of Warde (2005). Our paper in its own small way seeks to attend to one such theorist largely bracketed from extended discussion in the work of Warde (2005). In this way, our paper pays tribute to the debts we owe to social theorists who foregrounded ways of thinking practices, and asks what might be revealed by a turning back to such theorists. We guess the unintended consequence of this foregrounding is to refocus academic attention upon the practices and writing of theorizing itself. Here theorizing itself becomes a form of engaged practice in its own right (see also Zundel and Kokkalis, 2010); a struggle to work with the materials available to us. In many senses when we practice that act of theorizing, tensions emerge, sleights of thought produce ways of thinking, representations sometimes take us down blind alleys of circumstance, staging a contribution is often at the expense of others, and contributions belie ambiguity. However, the practice approach adopted in this paper suggests the central to practice of theorizing is that of dealing with uncertainty and ambivalence, here we return to the thoughts of Bauman:

“The ambiguity which truly matters, the sense-giving ambivalence, the genuine foundation on which the cognitive usefulness of conceiving human habitat as the ‘world of culture’ rests, is the ambivalence of conceiving ‘creativity’ and ‘normative regulation’. The two ideas could not be further apart, yet both are – and must remain – present in the composite idea of culture. ‘Culture’ is as much about inventing as it is about preserving; about discontinuity as much as about continuation; about novelty as much as about tradition; about routine as much as about pattern-breaking; about norm-following as much as about the transcendence of norm; about the unique as much as about the regular; about change as much as about monotony of reproduction; about the unexpected as much as about the predictable.” (1999: xiii).

In the fast-moving world of academic production, distribution and diffusion something we suggest remains lost; that is, in our all too eager haste to publish, depth of analysis or considered theorizing is too often forsaken, instead theory is skirted over in our haste to get to method and findings and the holy grail of impact. Ambivalence within contexts is often erased or concealed for the purposes of staging a contribution. But a return to the insights of de Certeau (1988) suggests that much is still to be gained from revisiting those theorists who have sought to question the import of practices and ways of making practices as amenable to cultural analysis. Much is still to be gained from acts of remembering their insights and provocations rather than forgetting in the name of staging impact and contribution.

Our work opens up a set of questions for the emergent domains of Strategy as Practice and Marketing-as-Practice as Strategy. In some senses, it offers a problematisation of what we naively speak of as practice, exploring the ways in which practice operates, exploring the praxis of practice, what Bourdieu termed the logic of practice. Naive questions such as how do marketers do what they do? How best can we sensitise ourselves to the doings of marketers? How do marketers do marketing? What are the discursive and social practices of marketing which marketers in different domains draw on to enact and perform their professional role? What is the role of marketing in the strategy process, and the role of strategy in the marketing process? How are the political tensions between strategy and marketing played out in interactional organizational settings? How does marketing-as-discourse, including academic discourse, order organizational action and roles? What are the purposes of these ordering activities, in other words, who gains and who loses? How can local intra-organizational marketing practice be understood against common and shared marketing practices on the field level? How do marketing practices evolve and transform? Whom or what do they transform and how does this transformation impact on human subjectivity? Answers to such questions lie beyond the remit of this paper, but they look like the kind of questions which should be asked if we are not to reproduce the mistakes of yesteryear and foreclose rather than open up the possibilities to emerge from practice-based approaches.

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