Proposal for the Conference “From ‘Practice Turn’ to ‘Praxeological Mainstream’?”
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The fragile and the silent Site – Practice theory and the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty

Following the discussion about the *practice turn* which has been diagnosed by Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina and von Savigny 2001, practice theoretical approaches have opened the doors for questions beyond dichotomies such as structure vs. action or system vs. individual/actor. Contemporary practice theoretical approaches do not work on syntheses between the two poles of the micro- and the macro-level to describe, observe and analyze the social. Leaving behind the dualistic way of thinking the social, different practice theoretical approaches offer heterogeneous perspectives and scopes on diverse issues concerning involvements of humans, bodies, artifacts, media, knowledge and materiality. The later Wittgenstein (1953) and his aphorisms and remarks on language, rules and know-how as well as Heidegger’s argument of ‘being in the world’ (Heidegger 1927) are often marked as central inspirations to focus on practices as a theoretical account (Schatzki 1996, Reckwitz 2003). Considering the tradition of ethnomethodology based on Garfinkel (1967) and the laboratory studies (Knorr-Cetina 1981, Latour und Woolgar 1979, Lynch 1985) practice theoretical approaches share caution toward “general explanations of why social life is as it is” (Schatzki 2001: 4). They integrate themselves into the everyday-life-cultures and observe the mechanisms and practical elements which ensure continuity, stability, transformation and change of ongoing practices: Schatzki asks for the ‘shared practical understanding’ which depends on a continuous process of ‘doings’ and ‘sayings’ related to ‘teleoaffective structures’ (1996, 2002); Knorr-Cetina describes the manufacture of knowledge (1981), construction-apparatuses (1989) and epistemic cultures (1999). Fields of investigations are production practices with their own production logsics and implicit and explicit rules of their own. Although practice theoretical perspectives try to deal with the two sides of practices – the repetitive side and the open side (Reckwitz 2003: 295ff.) – often a latent technical and formalized impetus can be identified which privileges the first named one: 1) practices are often analyzed oriented toward their stability and their repetitive and routinized qualities and performances; 2) the vocabulary famous approaches use is often inspired by technical terms.

At this point I want to suggest the well-known position of Merleau-Ponty (2002 [original edition 1945], 2003 [original edition 1996]) as enrichment for practice theoretical discussions by reading his phenomenology with a practice theoretical interest. In the field of social and cultural research his phenomenological approach has become famous for the integrated body (Crossley 1995) and “embodiment” (Csordas 1994) which – inter alia – has been absorbed for proclaiming a “body turn” (Gugutzer 2006). Following the argumentation of Merleau-Ponty the body is not only a physical apparatus for a thinking mind or a performer of cultural techniques: only through the body the world is accessible and at the same time the body is in the world. Therefore, the argument to describe embodied practices as situated, located and embedded seems to be plausible. But the approach of Merleau-Ponty implies a complex interplay of the perceptive body, perception and the perceptible, which reveals ‘blind spots’ and ‘pausing moments’ in the ongoing process of the ‘practical being’. In his concept of perception Merleau-Ponty focuses on the
implicitness of having a body, using language, observing the world and thinking ideas, but he also accent the *fragile, tentative* and *silent* ‘site of the social’ in an extensive way.

First I want to go into to the basic question why I suggest Merleau-Ponty’s approach to enlarge a *practice theoretical discussion* with a phenomenological impetus. 1) Practice theoretical approaches oppose against purely mentalist and intellectualistic positions. In his phenomenology Merleau-Ponty argues against these philosophical positions too by postulating the ‘intentional body’. 2) Practice theoretical approaches are interested in the ‘knowing-how’ as tacit, incorporated or implicit knowledge, which is also mentioned in Merleau-Ponty’s theory of bodily perception. 3) Practice theoretical approaches refer to material, objectual practices and artifacts. In the theory of Merleau-Ponty things are constitutive for the perceptive body in ‘the world as perceived’. Subsequently, in my lecture I would like to discuss the question which practices can be described inspired by the approach of Merleau-Ponty? Focusing on *perceptive practices* enables us to widen and open an *empirical and theoretical field* of praxeological interests concerning uncertainty, doubt and inquiring practices of transcendence and approximation. Practices with a careful, hesitant and silent character become important and also practices which question themselves and their content. For instance the difference between the speaking and the spoken speech (Merleau-Ponty 1993, 2002) or the complexity of the visible and the invisible (Merleau-Ponty 2004) open doors for understanding practices which are not anchored in ongoing routines. These practices can be irritating and searching. They are not simply describable with adjectives like ‘dynamic’, ‘innovative’ or ‘creative’. Fields in which such an ‘experimental use’ of this phenomenological approach could be inspiring in order to enlarge the ‘fragile and silent site’ are the visual arts, for instance, or other *artistic practices*. But also scientific, philosophical and pathological practices or even the playing child’s practices might be addressed.

Literatures inter alia: