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Multi-Level Perspective and Theories of Practice: a mistaken controversy?

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Debates are the lifeblood of academic enquiry. In the thriving field of sustainability transitions, an interesting discussion has flourished about the merits of and relationship between two analytical approaches known as multi-level models of innovation and theories of social practice. For practitioners and researchers interested in mobility transitions, this discussion illustrates how different ways of conceptualising social change can result in different strategies for policy intervention. What is the nature of this debate and could it turn out to be a mistaken controversy?

‘Multilevel’ models of innovation were inspired by Rip and Kemp and were further developed by Frank Geels, among others. This analytical approach focuses on transitions in socio-technical systems and follows socio-technical (green) innovations (for example, fuel cell technology) from their inception to their adoption and application. A central concern is understanding how changes in the environmental, political, economic and cultural context (for example, the desire for speed) may create opportunities for environmental innovations to replace dominant socio-technical regimes (for example, oil-based automobility) and become normalized. The relationship between these three layers of analysis (niche, regime and landscape) is thus one of coevolution and mutual adaptation.

In the field of sustainable transitions, theories of practice gained prominence partly as a solution to sustainability concepts that consider behaviour a matter of individual choice and consequently advocate policy instruments that help individuals make more informed, ‘greener’ choices (for example, providing information or price incentives). Departing from this individualistic understanding of action and change, theories of practice ask what the difference is when we take practices, such as driving, cooking, cycling or bathing, rather than individuals as the unit of analysis. Practices here are understood as combinations of skills, meanings and materials. For example, cycling may be associated with a healthy body, but also requires a bicycle and knowledge of how to use it. Under this approach, the social dimension is understood as a thick, evolving fabric of interconnected practices that change as skills, materials and meanings change. This leads to an understanding of spatial and temporal rhythms of society as directly related to the emergence, diffusion, decline, and disappearance of practices.

Whereas the policy tools proposed by multilevel models of innovation often focus on the promotion and spread of technological innovations, policies informed by theories of social practice instead try to intervene in the evolving fabric of social practices in a way that helps spread sustainable practices and limit undesirable ones.

Although both conceptual approaches have been applied to a transition agenda since the early 2000s, it was only during the second half of the 2000s that a dialogue between advocates of both models emerged. Multilevel models were criticised for their emphasis on technological innovation and infrastructures of supply. And despite references to systemic, co-evolutionary processes, multilevel models were accused of ignoring lifestyles and patterns of consumption. Moreover, it was suggested that they reconsider tacit assumptions about the way problems are framed, who the key players in socio-technical transitions are and, above all, the very idea that transitions can be managed. In light of these shortcomings, the call was put out for a greater awareness of the diversity of approaches to social systemic change. Additionally, theories of social practice were highlighted for their ability to enhance the study of sustainability transitions. Subsequently, the dialogue has been enriched with nuanced understandings of how each analytical approach conceptualises the social in the

socio-technical tandem, the role of power, agency and inequality in transitions, the explanatory power of each model, and ways of accounting for change and stability.

In light of this unfolding exchange, certain questions may be posed. To what extent have the differences between the two models been overemphasised or even misunderstood? What similarities may have been overlooked? Is there a way to combine theories of practice and multilevel models so as to produce more comprehensive and detailed accounts of transitions and more accurate policy tools? Is this possible and/or desirable? What is lost or gained in this process? Two scholars who have contributed to the development of transition studies explain their understanding of each conceptual model, their respective virtues and implications, and the potential and limitations of combining different approaches.

Javier Caletrio

To learn more on these topics:

Two essential readings (by Javier Caletrio):

• *The Dynamics of Social Practice: Everyday Life and how it Changes* - by Elizabeth Shove, Mika Pantzar and Matt Watson

• *Automobility in Transition? A Socio-Technical Analysis of Sustainable Transport* - by Geels, Kemp, Dudley and Lyons Crossed perspective (by Matt Watson and Frederic de Coninck):

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