Comments on Schatzki’s text.

Par Hervé Regnauld



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Schatzki’s analysis of social practices relies on a very clear idea, which is expressed at the beginning of the text, as follows :

Because the relationship between practices and material arrangements is so intimate, it is the notion of a bundle of practices and arrangements, and not just that of a practice simplicitor, that is fundamental to analyzing social phenomena. The conviction that some amalgam of activity and materiality is ontologically and dynamically fundamental to social analysis is shared by a range of contemporary theoretical approaches including actor network theory, sociocultural theories of mediated action, object-centered socialities, and some accounts of science. By a material arrangement, incidentally, I mean linked people, organisms, artifacts, and things. To say that practices and arrangements bundle is to say (1) that practices effect, use, give meaning to, and are inseparable from arrangements while (2) arrangements channel, prefigure, facilitate, and are essential to practices.

Anyone studying social, spatial practices will agree. In 1992, when the main meeting of the International Association of Geographers took place in Washington, Donald Janelle edited a great book in which many short papers were dedicated to the amalgam of activities and materialities. Some of these papers (such as the one written by C. L. Salter, page 325) explicitly discussed the epistemic consequences of considering practices as ontologically linked to materialities, such as people using or bypassing road intersections, houses, or monuments. In the same book David Seamon explains that in order to understand “the natural and built worlds […] humanistic and phenomenological perspectives offer incisive conceptual and methodological tools” (p. 78). He also says that this is “nothing new : earlier geographers like Paul Vidal de la Blache and Carl Sauer regularly enlisted careful firsthand observation to study landscape, environnement and places” (*ibid.*, p. 78).

Therefore, the theorization of an amalgam between activities and materiality is probably one of the oldest bases of geographical science. Schatzki adds the words “arrangement” and “bundle”. The arrangement is comprised of linked people, organisms, artifacts and things, whereas the bundle refers to the interweaving of practices and arrangements with a two-ways relation : on one hand, practices force arrangements, while on the other hand arrangements force practices.

This approach to practices and arrangements is a typical systemic view of an object (or a set of objects) impacting another one and being simultaneously retro impacted (either in a positive or a negative way).

In Carroué, Collet and Ruiz (2006), a classical geography textbook, we find an example of this double forcing system :

la mondialisation repose fondamentalement sur l’exploitation des différences du monde par une multitude d’acteurs. Et, en retour la mondialisation elle-même est productrice de nouvelles singularités qui modifient, effacent ou renforcent les précédentes. (p. 15)

In Schatzki’s text, this “double bind” also aims at reconsidering the usual views according to which some practices are linked with some local facts, while others

depend on global objects.

Instead of examining social life through the idea of distinct, systematically related levels, it is better to think of a single plenum of practices and arrangements that varies in the thinness and thickness, and in the directness and circuitousness, of relations among practices and arrangements. Practices and arrangements form bundles and constellations of smaller or larger spatial-temporal spread as defined by these variations and gradients. As a key dimension of variation in social phenomena, this ontology promotes smaller and larger, not micro/macro or global/local. This thesis is not original.

Finally, Schatzki suggests to understand the epistemic object of social sciences as a set of bundles that have different “spatial and temporal spreads” and are defined not essentially by what they “are” but how they change, that is by their variations and gradients.

I agree that this is nothing new from a guattaro-deleuzian “agencement” as it is re-interpreted by Sloterdijk in *Spheres* (2005). This thesis is “not original” at all. So why does Schatzki wish to use philosophy to understand such a non-original scalar issue ?

It is worth turning to the discipline philosophy for elucidation of the pervasive idea of levels. In the philosophy of science, levels of reality are conceived of as domains of entities between which systematic relations of causality or supervenience exist (e.g. Little 1990). The two most familiar alleged levels attributed to society are (1) a micro level composed of individuals together with their actions and interactions and (2) a macro level containing entities such as social structures, systems, and institutions. These two alleged levels are distinct only if what populates the macro level — structures and the like — systematically arise from or systematically supervene on what populates the micro level, i.e. individuals and their activities, or if they themselves exert systematic causal effects on individuals and individuals’ activities. Macro level social phenomena are often conceived of as “arising from” micro ones, though some prominent theories (e.g. structural Marxism) reverse this dependence, and still other theories (e.g. critical realism) envision a reciprocal relationship between entities on the two levels. All these positions presuppose the integrity of the two levels…

[…] Some social theorists and researchers, however, treat them as denoting something substantial. In this section, I want to critically examine one particularly prominent alleged substantial division between macro and micro, which is also sometimes applied to global and local.

I think that the main point is here. Schatzki thinks of philosophy as a dominant, top-down theory organising all scientific activities that are below it. In his eyes, social sciences have wrongly understood how scales work, how retroaction works, how causality works, or does not work… Thus social sciences and social scientists should feel the need to appeal to somebody from outside, somebody speaking from the point of view of an overwhelming philosophy of science, to tell them how they should understand their own practices and arrange their theories.

As a scientist, I acknowledge the immense amount of intelligence that is stored in philosophy of science. Moreover, I think that many of the books that belong to this branch of philosophy (Van Fraassen, Quine, Kistler, Laugier, etc.) are deeply useful to help scientists think about themselves. But these philosophers do not tell scientists what to do. None of them would “critically examine” present scientists’ works, especially in scientific fields that they do not know well. Maybe the reason for this is that philosophers of science have read a lot of science and have understood that in some sort of retroactive way, they can also learn from science, instead of telling science what to do.

I think the relation between philosophy and science is both a symmetrical one and a non-scalar one. Science and philosophy interact and neither is macro or micro regarding the other. That is why I think Schatzki’s position (a philosopher defining an ontological and fundamental point for social sciences) is irrelevant.

Résumé

Schatzki’s analysis of social practices relies on a very clear idea, which is expressed at the beginning of the text, as follows : Because the relationship between practices and material arrangements is so intimate, it is the notion of a bundle of practices and arrangements, and not just that of a practice simplicitor, that is fundamental ...

Bibliographie

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