

Louis Althusser, “What is Practice?”

The word “practice” . . . indicates an active relationship with the real. Thus one says of a tool that it is “very practical” when it is particularly well adapted to a determinate labor on a determinate material, and yields expected results. Thus one says of a person that she has a “good command” [bonne pratique] of English, in order to signify that she has sufficiently direct contact with this language and can “practice” it, that is to say, use it effectively. In the same sense, one says of a man that he has “no experience” [aucune pratique] with agricultural machines, when he knows about them only through books and without knowing the way to drive them.

The idea of practice thus contains the notion of active contact with the real: and the idea of activity, which is prior to it, contains the notion of a human agent (or subject). And since the human subject or agent is, as opposed to animals, a being capable of “formulating in his head a plan of action,” at least in principle, one agrees to reserve the word “practice” to designate the active contact with the real that is the property of human beings. Thus, one doesn’t talk about the “practice of bees,” despite the wonders they are capable of accomplishing, but of the practice of the carpenter, mechanic, architect, engineer, doctor, jurist, politician, etc.

But one immediately sees that, since it is reported about human beings, and a human being is an animal endowed with “consciousness,” that is to say, with the capacity to distinguish and detach from external things their representation, to work on this representation, and to formulate in his or her head a plan of action—one immediately sees that this idea of practice replies to the idea of theory as its inverse echo.

It is not necessary to believe that theory is the property of “theorists.” Their theory (that of scientists, philosophers) is only the most abstract, purest, most elaborated form of a capacity that is the property of every human being. The word “theory” comes from a Greek word that means “to see, to contemplate”—implying: without putting into one’s hands, therefore, leaving things as they are. To the hand that “handles,” that labors, is thus opposed the eye that sees at a distance, without touching or changing its object. The word “theory” thus contains within it a notion of distance taken and maintained with regard to the immediate real: in principle it expresses what one commonly calls consciousness, that is to say, this capacity of receiving and retaining perceptions of the real, and equally, to favor this retreat, and the “interplay” it allows, to connect them, and even to anticipate them. In this sense, all human beings are theorists. The peasant who begins the day on his tractor has made a plan of his day in his head, and he sees well beyond this day alone, or else he could not manage his exploitation.

We have called “consciousness” the capacity that human beings have to receive and retain perceptions of the real and equally to anticipate them. It is for convenience, imposed by a long usage. For the term “consciousness” is also one of the terms of predilection of idealist philosophy. One can say the same thing by saying that human beings are endowed with language, for it is language that institutes beforehand this distance between the immediate real and its representation: beforehand, since it contains it by the very fact of its abstraction. In this sense, one can say that all human beings are theorists, not because they see, but because they talk. And we know why: because language is constituted by abstractions (noises from which one makes abstraction, in

order to treat them as words that designate concrete realities from which one makes abstraction).

This is why it is necessary to treat with a lot of precaution the opposition between theory and practice.

In the concrete reality of the relations of human beings to the world, one never deals with, on the one hand, only practice (a purely animal and blind labor) and, on the other hand, only theory (a pure contemplation without any activity). In the most elementary practice (that of the roadworker who digs ditches), there are some ideas regarding the way of proceeding, the plan to follow, the tools to use, and all his “ideas” only exist in language—even if the human beings who use this language don’t know that it is already theory. And in the most elevated theory, that of the most abstract mathematics, there is always practice—not only the labor of the mathematician on his or her problems but the inscription of his or her problems in mathematical symbols with chalk on the blackboard, even if the mathematician doesn’t know that this symbolization is a practice.

It is inside this complex dependence that is posed the philosophical question of the primacy of practice over theory (which defines the materialist position) or the primacy of theory over practice (which defines the idealist position). By asserting the primacy of theory, idealism asserts that it is the contemplation or activity of reason that determines every practice in the last instance. By asserting the primacy of practice, materialism asserts that it is practice that determines every form of knowledge in the last instance.

But the very generality of these positions allows us to glimpse something important: the general, therefore “abstract,” character of human practices. We said: practice designates an active contact of human beings with the real. Certainly, there exist entirely singular practices in appearance (such as the so-called “abnormal” practices of madness). And one can even hold the idea that there exists no practice that is not, in a certain respect, individual, since every practice requires an individual human agent. We know, for example, the praise made regarding the medieval artisan, who by himself produced an object with a single copy, destined for a unique client. But even this artisan reproduced a general social practice: he applied certain socially recognized procedures, inherited from a collective past, to a definite social demand. Certainly, he was alone before his “work” (oeuvre), but silently beside him thousands of other artisans carried out the same gestures, with the same tools, in order to supply the same products to the same market. And if he added something “personal” to his work, it was within the social limits imposed both by the usefulness of the object produced and by the reigning mode in the existing society.

This point is very important, for the practices at question can only be individual to the extent that they are first of all social. What is true of the artisan producing in an apparent solitude is still truer for workers submitted to a collective organization of labor and producing in order to satisfy both the “solvent” social goods of the existing society and for the accumulation of wealth in the hands of the capitalist class.

Every practice is therefore social. And, being social, it implements such a complexity of elements (for production: raw materials, agents of production, instruments of production, under social relations of production) that it is not possible to think about it as a simple act or even as a simple activity. For both act and activity invite us to imagine

that they have a cause or an author: namely, a subject or an agent, and that it would suffice to go back as far as this cause, this origin, in order to understand what happens in a practice. We are therefore naturally led to conceive of social practices not as acts or simple activities but as processes, that is to say, as a totality of material, ideological, theoretical, and human (the agents) elements sufficiently adapted to one another for their reciprocal action to produce a result, which modifies what is given at the start.

We shall therefore call practice a social process placing agents in direct active contact with the real and producing results of social usefulness. One can doubtless speak of “social practice” in its totality, when this expression is justified, that is to say, when one wants to think about the interdependence of different practices in relation to one another. But one must be wary of this expression which, when its use is not justified, has the disadvantage of “drowning” different practices in the night of “social practice,” the disadvantage of not indicating the specificity of each practice, and of submitting, for example, scientific or philosophical practice to political practice as its “servants” (see the example of Lyssenko under Stalin). In order to understand what practice is, it is necessary to proceed through the recognition of the existence of distinct, and relatively autonomous, social practices. Technical practice is not scientific practice, philosophical practice is not to be confused with scientific practice, etc.

But, once having well taken this precaution concerning method, one can give an idea of a valuable usage of the notion of “social practice” in its totality. When one invokes this notion, it can only be to try to give a meaning to the primacy of practice over theory inside of the social formation in general.

We observe, in fact, in every social formation, a certain number of practices at work: practice of production, practice of technical then scientific knowledge, political practice, ideological practice, aesthetic practice, etc. The question that arises, then, is not so much to identify all existing practices, and to classify them, as it is to know that it is, among all these practices, practice that is determinant in the totality of practices.

This question is not, as one might believe, purely speculative: it has practical effects, to the extent that the representation one offers of the determination of practices constitutes part of the practices themselves, can arise from either an ideology or science. Of course, these effects are relative, for the action of ideology on the development of a society is itself relative, depending on the balance of forces between classes. And it is because it is not purely speculative that it is one of the major questions of philosophy.

For idealist philosophy, which asserts in often very subtle forms, the primacy of theory over practice, the practice that determines other practices in the last instance is to be found alongside the most “theoretical” practices, alongside ideology, science, or philosophy. Thus Hegel was able to show—in an impressive system that embraced all of human history, all practices, from political production to science, religion, and philosophy—that it was the philosophical Idea that governed the world: all practices inferior to philosophical practice being already in themselves philosophical, but without having consciousness of it, and only preparing—through labor, class struggles, wars, religious crises, scientific discoveries—the advent of the “self-consciousness” of their own philosophical nature in Hegel’s philosophy itself. This gigantic enterprise was not innocent, since it provided the bourgeois ideology of history (“it is ideas that rule the world”) with its own guarantee in the form of a philosophical “demonstration.”

Marxist materialist philosophy, on the contrary, defending the primacy of practice over theory, supports the thesis that the practice determinant in the last instance of all others is the practice of production, that is to say, the unity of the relations of production and the productive forces (means of production + labor force) under the relations of production. Marxist materialist philosophy defends not only the idea, which idealists don't contest, that to have a history, and to live in politics, ideology, science, philosophy, and religion, human beings must first of all simply live, physically subsist: therefore to produce materially their means of subsistence and their instruments of production. For this would here be an "abstraction with two terms" (human beings and their sustenance).

Marxist materialist philosophy defends the idea that the relationship of human beings with their means of subsistence is governed by the relations of production and is therefore a social relation (an "abstraction with three terms"). And it is because the practice of production thus includes this basic relation, as its condition, that the relations that govern other practices can be related to this first relation. Marxism doesn't say: given that you produce a certain object, you have a certain society—but depending on the social relations of production under which you produce your subsistence, you have certain political, ideological relations, etc. and since these social relations are, in class societies, conflictual, antagonistic relations, the determination by production (the base) is not mechanical but includes an "interplay" that belongs to the dialectic. This is why this determination is called "in the last instance," in order to indicate that there are other "instances" than production, arranges a certain open space, can "act in return" onto the base, onto production.

It is in order to indicate this determination "in the last instance" that Marx presented his general hypothesis on the nature of social formations and of history under the form of a topography [topique]. A topography is a space within which one arranges certain realities in order to reveal well their respective place and their relative importance. Marx laid out this topography in the Preface to the Contribution of 1859. He shows that every social formation (society) is comparable to a house with one or two floors. At the ground floor or "base" or "infrastructure" one finds production (the unity of the relations of production and productive forces under the relations of production). At the first floor is found the "superstructure" that includes, on the one hand, law and the State and, on the other hand, ideologies. The base is "determinant in the last instance"; the "superstructure," while being determined by the base, acts in return on it. This topique is a simple establishment, an indication of "nodes" of determination, of the totality of "instances" and their social efficacy. The whole work needs to be done, and it cannot be done on "society" or "the social formation" in general but only on existing social formations or on ones that have existed.

This firm but very prudent indication regarding "determination in the last instance," is extremely valuable for the investigation of the superstructure and ideologies, and also of science. For Marx's paradox is that scientific practice doesn't figure anywhere in his topography. Does this mean that should we at all costs fill in this lacuna and put science either on the side of ideologies (and fall into the idea of bourgeois science and proletarian science dear to Stalinist ideologues), or on the side of the productive forces and even to make it a "full-fledged "productive force"? In truth, Marxist theory has no such requirements. It doesn't claim to account exhaustively for all practices as a function of its topography. It has a limited object. Marx never had any other pretension

than to lay the foundations of a science of class struggle: nothing more. That scientific practice can be influenced by ideology, and thus the class struggle, is quite clear. That the results of science can be enlisted in the ideological class struggle is obvious. That science is, for the most part, and more and more, driven by the “demands” of production is certain. That the relations it thus enters as much with production as with ideology, philosophy and therefore class struggle are profound is certain. But these relations vary with the conjunctures, and at any rate scientific practice is irreducible to other practices, since it is the only practice that provides objective knowledge of the real. It is therefore necessary to study scientific practice in its specificity, and to discover each time the relations it undergoes, without being impressed by the requirement, which Marx never had, of arranging all practices either on the side of the base, which is well defined, or on the side of the superstructure, which only contains the State and ideologies.

This is why in this introduction [to philosophy for non-philosophers] we freely talk about the principal existing practices (in their detail they are unlimited in number)—not only the practices that figure in Marx’s materialist topography but also practices that don’t figure, such as scientific practice, psychoanalytical practice, and aesthetic practice. But we speak of them without losing sight of the programmatic philosophical indications of the Marxist topography, which has for its essential object to illustrate the primacy of practice over theory.

(Translated by Ted Stolze and excerpted from Louis Althusser, Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2014], pp. 163-74)