PART I

Practices in International Relations and social theory

1 | International practices: introduction and framework

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In this book, we invite students of International Relations (IR) to approach world politics through the lens of its manifold practices. By focusing on what practitioners do, we zoom in on the quotidian unfolding of international life, from multilateral diplomacy to finance trading through environmental negotiations. We analyze the ongoing accomplishments that, put together, constitute the "big picture" that is variously described by existing IR theories. Of course, practices have long been a prime object of analysis in the IR discipline. Building on the "practice turn"[1] that has recently been taken in social theory, we develop and systematize an interparadigmatic research program that takes competent performances as its main entry point in the study of world politics. Our claim is not that practice offers the universal, grand theory or totalizing ontology of everything social. Instead, taking international practices seriously spells out the many faces of world politics, including power and security, trade and finance, strategy, institutions and organizations, resources, knowledge and discourse, etc. in action, as part of a "doing" in and on the world.

The study of international practices has gained significant momentum recently. In IR, among the first scholars to draw attention to practices were the poststructuralists who, building on the path-breaking works of Michel Foucault, among others, revisited world politics as a set of textual practices.[2] One of the key insights brought to IR by poststructuralism is precisely that the complex pictures of world politics are made up of a myriad of everyday

[1] Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, and von Savigny, 2001.   [2] Der Derian and Shapiro, 1989.

practices that too often go overlooked in scholarly research.[3] At about the same time, a number of IR scholars inspired by the works of prominent social theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu started to put matters of practice at the center of their analyses.[4] Coming from the emerging constructivist corner, growing interest in "deeds"[5] and "practical reasoning"[6] also contributed to establish international practices as valid objects of analysis in the discipline. That said, the recent turn to practice in IR came only at the turn of the millennium when, building on a similar intellectual movement in social theory, Neumann advocated "returning practice to the linguistic turn."[7] Since then, a rapidly increasing number of scholars have joined the fray.[8]

This is not to say, of course, that before the mid-1980s the matter of international practices had been wholly ignored in the IR discipline. In fact, we contend that there is nothing arcane or even paradigm-specific in the study of international practices: most existing frameworks are at least indirectly concerned with them – though not always mindfully. For example, classical realists like Kissinger used to devote most of their energy on practices such as diplomacy and balancing.[9] Similarly, what the English School calls "the institutions of international society" – Bull's balance of power, international law, diplomacy, great-power management, and war – certainly comes quite close to our focus on socially organized and meaningful activities.[10] On the rationalist side, we show elsewhere that Schelling's theory of bargaining foretold, in very productive ways, many of the themes central to a practice framework.[11] As for liberals, one could argue, perhaps stretching a little, that what Keohane and Nye were looking for in their seminal *Power and Interdependence* is patterns of cooperative practices in dealing with monetary or environmental issues.[12] Overall, given their often implicitly acknowledged prominence as objects of analysis, the time is ripe for a coordinated, self-conscious, and theoretically informed scrutiny of international practices.

This book will purport to demonstrate that the momentum that the study of international practices has gained recently amounts to a research opportunity across paradigmatic divides. Whatever one's specific theoretical perspective, we

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[3] See, for example, Der Derian, 1987; and Doty, 1996.
[4] See Ashley, 1987; Bigo 1996; Guzzini, 2000; Hopf, 2002 and 2010; Huysmans, 2002; and Keck and Sikkink, 1998, 34–36.
[5] Onuf, 1989.   [6] Kratochwil, 1989. See also Reus-Smit, 1999.   [7] Neumann, 2002.
[8] See, for example, Adler, 2005 and 2008; Adler-Nissen, 2008; Brunnée and Toope, 2010; Büger and Gadinger, 2007; Gheciu, 2005; Katzenstein, 2010; Koivisto and Dunne, 2010; Krebs and Jackson, 2007; Krotz, 2007; Leander, 2005; Mérand, 2008; Mitzen, 2006; Pouliot, 2008, 2010a, and 2010b; Seabrooke and Tsingou, 2009; Villumsen, Forthcoming; Wiener, 2008; and Williams, 2007. On pragmatism in IR, see Friedrichs and Kratochwil, 2009; Haas and Haas, 2002; Hellmann, 2009; and Kratochwil, 2007.
[9] Kissinger, 1973.   [10] Bull, 1995.
[11] See Adler and Pouliot, 2011; and Schelling, 1980.   [12] Keohane and Nye, 2001.

claim, as soon as one looks into practices it becomes difficult, and even impossible, to ignore structures (or agency), ideas (or matter), rationality (or practicality), stability (or change): one becomes ontologically compelled to reach beyond traditional levels and units of analysis. By implication, there is no such thing as *the* theory of practice but a variety of theories focused on practices. In fact, an IR practice-oriented theoretical approach comprises a fairly vast array of analytical frameworks that privilege practice as the key entry point to the study of world politics. This is why the concept of international practices can supply a particularly fertile ground for making interparadigmatic conversations possible. Thus, instead of interparadigmatic competition, subsumption, synthesis, or even complementarity, we believe that the concept of practice promises cross-fertilization – the engine of social scientific refinement.

In this introduction, we argue that a focus on international practices promises four key advances for the IR discipline. First, by focusing on practices in IR we can understand both IR theory and international politics better or differently. In other words, world politics can be understood as structured by practices, which give meaning to international action, make possible strategic interaction, and are reproduced, changed, and reinforced by international action and interaction. This focus helps broaden the ontology of world politics, serves as the basis for a new research program around which debates in IR theory can be structured, and can be used as a unit of analysis that transcends traditional understandings of "levels of analysis." Second, the concept of practice supplies a "focal point" making interparadigmatic conversations possible. Starting from the assumption that dialogue is a key driver of theoretical advancement, we develop a modular framework that allows scholars with different theoretical preferences to talk to, as opposed to across, each other. Our definition of practice is sufficiently flexible to accommodate a variety of perspectives. Third, a practice-oriented approach promises to avoid many of the traditional dichotomies in social and IR theory. We show how the notion spans divides between stability and change, agency and structure, as well as ideas and matter. As a result, a number of new possibilities for cross-fertilization emerge among competing IR paradigms. Finally, putting practice at the center of IR theory opens an exciting and innovative research agenda. We illustrate how our framework revisits central concepts of our discipline, including power, history, strategy, and others, and we suggest a few new research questions and puzzles that derive from our focus on international practices. In order to structure our interparadigmatic dialogue, in this introduction we also devise a theoretical framework centered on the transformative dynamics of practices. We conceptualize practice as either *explanans* or *explanandum* and inventory the many ways in which socially meaningful and organized performances interact with the natural and social environments. In order to operationalize this framework, we also discuss methodological issues, including levels of aggregation, and encourage pluralism in the study of international practices. But first, we define the central notion of this book.

Practices

Practices are competent performances. More precisely, practices are socially meaningful patterns of action which, in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world. Practices, such as marking a linear territorial boundary, deterring with nuclear weapons, or finance trading, are not merely descriptive "arrows" that connect structure to agency and back, but rather the dynamic material and ideational processes that enable structures to be stable or to evolve, and agents to reproduce or transform structures. We shall explore the social-theoretical implications of this definition in the second part of the chapter. Here our objectives are, first, to differentiate between behavior, action, and practice, and, second, to unpack the notion of practice by looking into its main conceptual elements.

In common parlance, the concepts of behavior, action, and practice are often used interchangeably. Conceptually, however, they are not the same. An easy way to grasp their differences is to conceive of these notions as a gradation: actions are a specific type of behaviors, and practices are a particular kind of action.[13] In a nutshell, the concept of behavior evokes the material dimension of doing, as a deed performed in and on the world; then the notion of action adds an ideational layer, emphasizing the meaningfulness of the deed at both the subjective and intersubjective levels; and, finally, the term "practice" tacks another layer on to the edifice – or, better put, makes it hang together as one coherent structure, by pointing out the patterned nature of deeds in socially organized contexts. The distinction between behavior and action is the easiest to grasp: action is behavior imbued with meaning. Running in the streets aimlessly is mere behavior, running after a thief is an action endowed with meaning. Practices, however, are patterned actions that are embedded in particular organized contexts and, as such, are articulated into specific types of action and are socially developed through learning and training.[14] Action is always a constitutive part of any practice, yet the reverse is not necessarily true. Action is specific and located in time; practices are general classes of action which, although situated in a social context, are not limited to any specific enacting. Police squads chasing down a criminal gang is a practice, because it is socially structured and reiterated. Similarly, an American carrier entering the Strait of Hormuz is an

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[13] Cook and Brown, 1999, 387. As these authors illustrate: "In the simplest case, if Vance's knee jerks, that is behavior. When Vance raps his knee with a physician's hammer to check his reflexes, it is behavior that has meaning, and thus is what we call action. If his physician raps his knee as part of an exam, it is practice. This is because the meaning of her action comes from the organized contexts of her training and ongoing work in medicine (where it can draw on, contribute to, and be evaluated in the work of others in her field)."

[14] Corradi, Gherardi, and Verzelloni, 2010. Consequently, a focus on practice, as opposed to action, is more encompassing than Weber's *Verstehen* or Schütz's subjective hermeneutics.

action endowed with social meaning. The same action, however, when embedded in an organizational context, repeated over time and space, constituted by knowledge about the exploitation of potential force, and articulated as part of a complex set of other social performances, which may require learning and training, is part and parcel of the practice of coercive diplomacy.

By *international* practices, we denote socially organized activities that pertain to world politics, broadly construed. In so defining the scope of our volume, we do not take a position in the many definitional debates that rage in the discipline, such as those between comparative vs. international politics, or global governance vs. international relations. Instead, we argue that one of the key epistemological consequences of taking international practices seriously precisely is to bring those scholarly debates "down" to the ground of world politics in order to empirically scrutinize the processes whereby certain competent performances produce effects of a world political nature. Put differently, the scope of analysis – global, international, transnational, regional, organizational, substate, local, etc. – is itself a matter of practice: defining what counts as an international practice and what does not is best left with practitioners themselves in their actual performance of world politics.

Let us now unpack the notion of practice. First, a practice is a *performance*[15] – that is, a process of doing something. Contrary to entities or substances, which can be grasped in a reified way, practices have no existence other than in their unfolding or process.[16] The performance of practice goes with, and constitutes, the flow of history. As a form of action, practice differs from preferences or beliefs, which it expresses, and from discourse or institutions, which it instantiates. Second, practice tends to be *patterned*, in that it generally exhibits certain regularities over time and space. In a way reminiscent of routine, practices are repeated, or at least reproduce similar behaviors with regular meanings. These patterns, as we explained above, are part of a socially organized context, which not only gives them meaning, but also structures interaction. This is not to say that practice is strictly iterative, however, as there is always wiggle room for agency even in repetition.[17] As a general rule, though, iteration is a key characteristic of practices – and the condition of possibility for their social existence.

Third, practice is more or less *competent* in a socially meaningful and recognizable way. The structured dimension of practice stems not only from repetition but also, and in fact primarily, from the fact that groups of individuals tend to interpret its performance along similar standards.[18] Social recognition is thus a fundamental aspect of practice: its (in)competence is never inherent but attributed in and through social relations. The notion of performance implies that of a public, of an audience able to appraise the practice. As Barnes notes, contrary to

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[15] See Goffman, 1959; and Butler, 1990.   [16] Jackson and Nexon, 1999.
[17] De Certeau, 1990. See Goffman, 1959; and Turner, 1994 for a critique.
[18] Goffman, 1959.

habit, which is performed on an individual scale (and is apprehended as such), a practice can be done correctly or incorrectly.[19] The ascription of (in)competence is an eminently complex social process: for instance, in some contexts incompetent practice might be more "successful" in bringing results than virtuoso performance. Fourth, practice rests on *background knowledge*, which it embodies, enacts, and reifies all at once. Knowledge not only precedes practice as do intentions, beliefs, etc. In addition, intersubjectivity is bound up in the performance and can only be expressed as such.[20] Background knowledge is practical; it is oriented toward action and, as such, it often resembles skill much more than the type of knowledge that can be brandished or represented, such as norms or ideas.[21]

Finally, practice weaves together the *discursive and material* worlds. Without language, communication, and discourse, people could not tell the difference between behavior and practice. Not only is language the conduit of meaning, which turns practices into the location and engine of social action, but it is itself an enactment or doing in the form of "discursive practices."[22] By nature, practices represent the world in specific ways: they implicitly make the claim that "this is how things are."[23] At the same time, practices are mediated by material artifacts.[24] Practice typically is enacted in and on the world, and thus can change the physical environment as well as the ideas that individually and collectively people hold about the world.

As an illustration, take the practice of international summitry – G8 annual summits, for example. These meetings of state officials constitute an international practice insofar as they conform to the five dimensions that we have just laid out. First, G8 summits are performances: they consist of a number of actions and processes that unfold in real time, from the welcoming ceremony to the joint press conference through the official photography. Second, these performances are patterned from one year to the next. Although each meeting boasts its own particularities, there is much regularity in their staging, including the pecking order or the mixture of formal and informal discussions. Third, participating state officials generally exhibit a variable degree of competence as they attend the summit. The media and populations typically recognize the meaning of a clip featuring the British prime minister casually joking with the US president, for example. Fourth, much of the performance rests on a form of background knowledge that is bound up in practices. For instance, there is a very specific and skillful way for state officials to subtly take a little distance from the consensus forged for the official communiqué. Fifth, and finally, G8 summits are both ideational and material. Participants spend a lot of time publicly and privately talking about their meetings in order to represent preferences and

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[19] Barnes, 2001.   [20] See Wittgenstein, 1958; and Taylor, 1985.   [21] Bourdieu, 1990.
[22] Foucault, 1980.   [23] Swidler, 2001.   [24] See Reckwitz, 2002; and Latour, 2005.

policies. To do so, they make use of a variety of materials – conference rooms, ceremonial artifacts, the internet, note exchanges with Sherpas, etc.

Conceptually, any given practice can be appraised through different levels of aggregation. For example, the practice of international summitry is an aggregate of several competent performances, including formal dining, press conference delivery, bilateral work meetings, etc. We suggest that the identification of the most appropriate level of aggregation should be based on two criteria. First, the research puzzle: should it deal with international summitry, then it is more appropriate to conceive of G8 summits as one aggregate practice; a study into intergovernmental rites, however, may want to zoom in at a lower level. Second, the practical experience of performers helps decide what the most appropriate level of aggregation is. In the case at hand, should state officials act out G8 summits as one whole, then it is a relevant starting point. Sherpas, however, may conceive of the informal multilateral meetings as "where the action is." Methodologically speaking, sense-making and situated-ness are particularly important aspects of the study of international practices.

We find Hansen's distinction, in Chapter 11 of this volume, between specific and general practices[25] compelling for thinking about practice aggregation and constellation of practices. We will say much more about constellations of practice in this chapter's fourth section. Right now, suffice it to say that the importance of Hansen's distinction lies in the notion that specific practices often may be asserted as though they belong to general practices, whereas "uncontested specific 'routine' practices" may be crucial for the reproduction of general practices. Methodologically, this distinction may require us to examine prominent specific practices, asking "which general practices they mobilize and whether a specific practice's claim to a general category of practice is stable or not."[26] In the G8 case, for instance, it would be important to inquire about the extent to which joint press conferences may play a role in the reproduction of multilateral diplomacy, and whether changes in conference procedures may be indicative of changes in more general patterns of such diplomacy.

The study of international practices also faces the issue of corporate practices – that is, practices that are performed by collectives in unison. In world politics, most practices belong to this type: war, for example, is a socially meaningful pattern of action which, in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embodies, reifies and acts out background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world. In a very important sense, G8 summits are performed not only by singular heads of state but also by large teams of representatives. In fact, because of the background knowledge that is necessarily bound up in it, practice is always a "collective accomplishment."[27] Consequently, we explain corporate practices as being both structured and acted out by communities of practice, and by the diffusion of background knowledge across agents in these

[25] Hansen, Chapter 11 in this volume. [26] *Ibid.* [27] Barnes, 2001.

communities, which similarly disposes them to act in coordination. For example, through country-to-country discussions held at different levels (heads of state, Sherpas, political advisors, expert groups, etc.), a given country mission seeks to grasp, in a very coordinated fashion, what the position of a foreign capital is on a particular issue and how flexible it could be. Such corporate practices are not the action of one corporate agent (a state) but that of a community of representatives whose members enter in patterned relations, within an organized social context, thanks to similar background dispositions.

Fostering interparadigmatic conversations in IR

Bringing practice to the forefront of IR theory intends not to promote a new "ism" but to serve existing "isms." As such, it is justified because being the "gluon" of IR – the ontological entity that cuts across paradigms under different names but with a related substance – practice may help promote the development of a common language despite theoretical divides.

Gluons are elementary particles that "glue" the quarks together and mediate or carry the strong or nuclear force. The more separated the quarks are from each other, the stronger the force. We use this powerful metaphor to emphasize practice's role as "glue," not only at the ontological, but also at the epistemological, level. Mediating between the material and meaningful, and between structure and process, practice may be considered the ontological core concept that amalgamates the constitutive parts of social international life. And, in spite of the fact that when it comes to epistemology, scholars from different IR theory traditions often talk across, rather than to, each other, the concept of practice partly helps draw disciplinary boundaries and bind different communities into a single discipline. While we do believe in the benefits of a healthy dose of competition in intellectual refinement, we are also convinced that open dialogue is a necessary companion. Putting practice at the center of IR theory is not meant to discourage researchers to establish the value of their respective paradigms; instead, it provides a conceptual structure to reflexively and critically appraise one's own theoretical assumptions in relation to others. Practice, we propose, can "glue" students of world politics together in spite of their metatheoretical differences.

Whether one speaks of balancing, human rights protection, deterrence, or finance trading, these practices have traditionally been theorized in isolation from one another in IR. Some are seen as the preserve of neorealism because of their materiality, whereas others allegedly fall on the constructivist turf by virtue of their symbolic nature. All too often, practices that belong to world economic processes are studied separately from those of international security, and reciprocally. Moreover, a lack of dialogue between practice approaches at the micro- and macro-levels promotes inward-looking theorizing and lack of cross-fertilization. Systemic theories conceive of practice as the functional