

Prologue

The Crux of the Matter

We usually identify international orders with stability and established arrangements of units and institutionalization. But international orders also constantly change and sometimes evolve into new orders. When international relations (IR) scholars focus on international order transformation (e.g., Cox and Sinclair 1996; Nexon 2009; Phillips 2011), with a few exceptions (Pouliot 2016; Reus-Smit 2013a), they study either stability *or* transformation, but not how both occur simultaneously. Some scholars understand stability as the opposite of change (Ringmar 2014) and consider change to be either the transition between orders (Ikenberry 2001) or their opposite: “disorder” (Bull 1977). I aim to remedy the relative lack of focus on both change and stability with an approach that considers “order through fluctuations” (Prigogine 1980). I focus mainly on a range of spatially, temporally, and functionally overlapping international social orders that cut across domestic, international, transnational, and supranational boundaries.

This book aims to explain change and stability in international social orders as a subset of change and stability in social orders more generally. I suggest an *evolutionary constructivist* social theory and its metaphysical foundations, which I apply to the evolution of international social orders. We may even be able to apply this theory to the evolution of any kind of social order, for example, domestic political orders such as democracy, or to art, health, law, and economics. The IR discipline has been reluctant to engage in social theory.¹ But explicitly engaging with social theory (Wendt 2015) can enhance our understanding of world politics and, particularly, international social orders’ change and stability.

Drawing on a general model of evolutionary change associated with “evolutionary epistemology” and on a processual and interactive ontology, as well as on practice social theory (e.g., Schatzki 2002; Schatzki et al. 2001), I develop an evolutionary theory of change and stability of

¹ For exceptions, see Kratochwil 1989; Wendt 1999; Wight 2006.

2 Prologue: The Crux of the Matter

international social orders. Because I build on the notion that cognition is social (Fleck 1979; Tomasello et al. 2005; Vygotsky 1978),² I call this theory “cognitive evolution” (Campbell 1974b). Social orders originate, derive from, and are constituted constantly by practices, the background knowledge bound with them, and the communities of practice that serve as their vehicles. While American pragmatists (e.g., Dewey 1922) taught us that we know through action and practice, Etienne Wenger (1998a), who together with Jean Lave (1991) developed the concept of “communities of practice,” added that we practice in communities. Hans Joas (1996) showed how – because creativity is a socially emergent collective process – self-organizing collectivities, such as communities of practice, creatively learn. *Cognitive evolution thus aims to explain where social orders, and particularly international social orders, come from; how and why the world is organized and governed around certain configurations (Elias 2000) of practices rather than others; how, when, and why these configurations evolve from one kind to another; and how all this is related to collective learning.* Cognitive evolution is primarily a constitutive evolutionary social theory of international social ordering – a way to think through the conditions of their possibility – and an explanatory evolutionary social theory of why some social orders evolve instead of others.

It is, however, also a plausibility probe into normative theorizing. I use analytical social theory, namely cognitive evolution, to derive a normative theoretical framework on the propensity for *better practices* to evolve, when enacted, for *bounded progress* (Chapter 10). I therefore couple my (1997) argument about constructivism’s analytical “middle ground” with a new evolutionary constructivist argument for a second, normative, middle ground.³

² My approach to cognition as a social condition does not focus on the individual mind, which is what important theories in cognitive psychology, widely known as “social cognition” (Fiske and Taylor 2013) and “social cognitive theory” (Bandura 2001), do. Instead, I focus on the embodied and participatory aspects of social understanding, namely, on social cognition as constituted by social interaction (Dewey 1922; Fleck 1979; Goffman 1963; Nicolini 2012; Vygotsky 1978), particularly within communities (Lave and Wenger 1991). “An important shift is taking place in social cognition research, away from a focus on the individual mind and toward embodied and participatory aspects of social understanding. Empirical results already imply that social cognition is not reducible to the workings of individual cognitive mechanisms” (De Jaeger et al. 2010, 441. See Tomasello 2009; Tomasello et al. 1993, 2005). Engel, Maye, Kurthen, and König claim that in “cognitive science, we are currently witnessing a ‘pragmatic turn,’ away from the traditional representation-centered framework towards a paradigm that focuses on understanding cognition as ‘enactive,’ as skillful activity that involves ongoing interaction with the external world” (2013, 202). See also Bandura 2001; Krueger 2011; Lave 1991; Lemke 1997; Resnick 1991; Wenger 1998a.

³ I thank Chris Reus-Smit for the invaluable insight that, by following this road, I am “seizing” a second, normative, middle ground.

Cognitive evolution theory claims that practices and the background knowledge bound with them are the structural “stuff” that is passed on in replication in the sociocultural world, that communities of practice are their vehicle, and that practices account for both the consecutive *and* simultaneous change and metastability of social orders in general, and of international social orders in particular. I understand metastability as practices’ continuity in a stable state of flow below a sociocognitive threshold. Fluctuations, such as practice learning, negotiation, and contestation, keep social orders in a metastable state.⁴ Near thresholds (the fall of the Berlin Wall comes to mind) – a single fluctuation or a combination of them – can become so powerful by positive feedback that an order tips, thus shattering the preexisting field of practices or social order, and leading to its evolution. A new order takes the place of the old one. Liminal states that have changes of flows or trajectories near thresholds, as well as resilience⁵ processes, create propensities for either social orders’ metastability or evolution. Change and flows occur continuously, even and especially when a social order is presumed to be stable. However, social order evolution is infrequent.

According to cognitive evolution theory, social orders develop, spread, and remain metastable when communities of practice establish themselves, when their background knowledge diffuses and becomes selectively retained, and when their members’ expectations and dispositions preferentially survive. The master mechanism for understanding cognitive evolution, and particularly selective retention processes, is *epistemic practical authority*. This authority is made up of deontic power – the structural and agential establishment of status functions, such as rights, obligations, duties requirements, and other entitlements (Searle 1995, 2010). It also involves “performative power” – the capacity “to present a dramatic and credible performance on the world stage” (Alexander 2011, 8), thus bringing epistemic practical recognition to a variety of audiences and stakeholders. Both types of social power refer to capacities and propensities to constitute social reality (Guzzini, personal communication). Together, they explicate *practical meaning fixation*: the structural and agential authoritative ascription of practical meaning to material and social reality, which promotes

⁴ For an excellent theory of norm contestation, see Wiener 2014, 2018.

⁵ Resilience is the measure of a social order’s ability to absorb change and remain metastable (Adler 2005; Holling 1976; Schoon 2006). I define and refer to resilience in more detail in Chapter 6’s last section, and apply the concept in Chapter 9’s last section.

4 Prologue: The Crux of the Matter

practices' horizontal and vertical spread, for instance, the practical meaning fixation of monetary value to a piece of paper.

Three sociostructural mechanisms and four agential social mechanisms play an important role in constituting social ordering and explaining the creative variation and selective retention of social practices, as well as of the background knowledge bound with them. These are, respectively:

1. endogenous collective learning within, competition among, and innovation of practices in communities of practice
2. practice-driven changes and stability in dispositions and expectations
3. transactions, negotiation, contestation, and identification-shaping processes
4. socially generated agents' reflection and judgment
5. practitioners' capacity to affect material and cultural-social environments in desired ways.

Technology, in turn, can exogenously affect all these mechanisms.

The mechanisms listed are part of two key processes associated with cognitive evolution or, more generally, with evolutionary epistemology (Campbell 1960): *creative variation* and *selective retention*. Creative variation from a cognitive-evolutionary perspective means social creation, which can be intentional, but it also derives from the uncertainty and contingency of social life (Katzenstein and Seybert 2018). Thus, epistemic and practice innovation are propensities rather than determinants of change. Agents' creation and innovation becomes social innovation via practice within collective processes that communities of practice help create. Selective retention's main mechanism – the alternative to natural selection in biological evolution – is epistemic practical authority, the legitimate power to rule on the adoption of practices and their meanings. Retention involves the mainly “horizontal” spread of practices across space, for example, across state boundaries, and time – and, as newcomers learn the communities' practices, also the “vertical” spread of practices within communities of practice.

Cognitive evolution theory claims that all practices are normative. Society sets normative standards in and through practice and practitioners' acquired performative knowledge. Norms enter practices, among other ways, through ascription of function, status, and value. They become part of practices' background knowledge and are related to standards of competence and virtue (as in practicing well) and to justification processes (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). In contrast to views that normative change relates to reason attached to transcendental values, or to values particular to national communities, I make the case

that normative standards reside in practices that diffuse by means of communities of practice. While all practices are normative, however, *not all practices are ethical*. This argument opens a space for considering better practices and social orders, as well as bounded progress.

The concepts of better practices and bounded progress transcend unhelpful dichotomies, such as practice approaches and normative approaches. I also mean cosmopolitanism (Beitz 1979; Rawls 1971) and communitarianism (MacIntyre 1981; Taylor 1985; Walzer 1990), transcendental and immanent values, the Enlightenment idea of progress and normative relativism, practice and discourse, interconnectedness and disassociation, and realism and idealism, the latter of which is why I call my approach “humanist realism.” My emphasis on better practices is consistent with what I consider to be humanist values beginning with the value of life, which in my view is based on the acknowledgment (Markell 2003) of our “common humanity” (Stuurman 2017). This acknowledgment suggests a reinterpretation of the “golden rule” as *value other human beings’ lives as you value your own*. At a minimum, this is what accounts for our common humanity. Equality, liberty, fraternity, and mutual self-respect follow from this golden rule, albeit as a propensity rather than a determinist and teleological process. Bounded progress, however, is also realist because it takes progress as being based on the evolution *away from* humanist values’ antithesis, namely, less domination, poverty, and war, and because better practices are not necessarily related to creating a global community.

A bounded idea of progress based on a common humanity ethical value is partial, nonteleological and indeterminist, reversible and contingent, and rests on a practice principle, namely, on practices and interactive learning and contestation in and among communities of practice. Moreover, better practices and bounded progress are more likely to be associated with interconnectedness and horizontal systems of rule rather than with disassociation and vertical systems of rule.⁶ While interconnectedness – for example, regional integration and democratic social orders – is a double-edged sword, meaning that it can lead to both bounded progress and regress (Linkater 2011), it is, however, associated primarily, but not exclusively, with informal horizontal systems of rule, in which epistemic practical authority and

⁶ This view is consistent with Darwin’s little-known moral theory of evolution (see Chapter 3, note 11), and more recent findings (Henrich 2016) that explain how the main reason for *Homo sapiens*’ success is humans’ ability to collectively interconnect and learn from one another.

6 Prologue: The Crux of the Matter

accountability are distributed horizontally, and the politics associated with them.⁷ Disassociation, on the other hand – die-hard, ethnic, religious, and populist nationalism and power politics – is primarily, but not exclusively, associated with vertical/hierarchical systems of rule and the politics associated with them. Horizontal systems of rule, therefore, have the propensity for enhancing human well-being within and across national borders, if, and when, the negative effects of interconnectedness are controlled. Vertical systems of rule and their disassociation practices, on the other hand, tend to underscore a lack of freedom and equality, suffering, and violent coercion. Systems of rule in IR are usually a hybrid of both along a continuum.

Democracy, for example, is mainly about the horizontal distribution, rather than vertical concentration, of power (Bernstein 2018) and epistemic practical authority, which is why, comparatively speaking, it has the propensity of promoting better practices. Moreover, what sustains democratic institutions are knowledge and identity, and primarily practices (Dewey 1916), not all of which are discursive (Habermas 1996). Seen this way, one of the largest threats to a democratic social order is what I call *epistemological insecurity*. Without epistemological security, namely collective trust in a common-sense reality, the distribution of rule becomes precarious; thus, liberal democratic social order may erode.

Cognitive evolution theory suggests a concept of multiple international social orders, which for now I define briefly as configurations of practices that organize social life. Even before, but primarily since the advent of nationalism and liberal internationalism in human history, international social orders have distinctly spanned a spectrum between nationalist and liberal-internationalist practices and communities of practice.⁸ My

⁷ I thank Stefano Guzzini for the argument that horizontal power and accountability, as much as vertical domination, amount to a system of rule, albeit informal. See Arendt 1965, 174; 1970, 44.

⁸ Nationalism and liberal internationalism are individual and collective categories of identification that become institutionalized in the practices of international entities. Namely, national communities (Brubaker 1996, 21) and supranational communities (e.g., the European Union) are dynamic processes of, and entities constituted by, practices. But whereas classical nationalism takes the world as being classified, categorized, and divided exclusively by nations, many of which consider themselves “exceptional,” and emphasize practices of disassociation from other nations, liberal internationalism puts a premium on practices of interconnectedness between nations and other entities. International social orders, for the last couple of centuries, have been characterized and constituted by a dialectical relationship between classic-nationalist and liberal-internationalist practices. However, international social orders can be, and at least in the case of the European Union have been, characterized by a mixture between liberal-nationalist and communitarian-internationalist (some call the latter communitarian cosmopolitan) practices (McCormick 2010).

understanding of multilevel (regional and functional) international orders is thus more dynamic and comprehensive than the one suggested by the concepts of “international regimes” (Krasner 1982) or multilevel global governance (Enderlein et al. 2010; Hurrell 2007a).⁹ This is the case particularly as communities of practice participate in the joint performance of institutions and organizations that help prevent regional and global chaos (Linklater 2010, 2011).

For example, when observed beyond its reified institutions, the postwar European social order amounts to novel practices of interconnectedness or integration – such as economic, security, citizenship, and human rights – which, in spite of their contested political nature, became selectively retained in communities of practice, their practices, and their normative and practical epistemic intersubjective understandings bound with them. To understand postwar European order, and its bounded progress in preventing interstate war (Adler and Barnett 1998), we therefore have to identify the practices, background knowledge, and communities of practice that made postwar European social order possible: those currently associated with its metastable, albeit increasingly contested condition as well as the practices that are currently challenging Europe’s social order.

From a cognitive evolution perspective, the collective learning that helped constitute a European social order based on interconnectedness after World War II is being seriously challenged by alternative practices of disassociation and nationalism, their background knowledge, and the communities of practice that serve as their vehicle. Fluctuations of practices (particularly contestation of the present social order) may be approaching a sociocognitive threshold. If it gets crossed, Europe’s social order could tip and evolve. Whether the European social order will evolve or not depends largely on the resilience of interconnectedness practices. Understanding why and when social orders evolve requires us to also identify the alternative set of practices, the background knowledge bound with them, the communities of practice that carry them, and the mechanisms and processes through which they may become dominant.

In a similar way, the corporate social order became possible by the coalescence of a community of practice around a set of core or “anchoring” (Swidler 2001) practices such as the corporation’s legal personality. The idea of a company’s identity confers on a corporation:

⁹ The concept of multiple and overlapping international social orders, while different from the concept of multilevel governance (Zürn 2010), can contribute to better understanding this concept.

8 Prologue: The Crux of the Matter

(1) a separate legal personality from that of its owners, with its own rights and obligations; (2) the limited liability of its shareholders (who are not liable to compensate creditors with their own assets in case the corporation defaults on its debts); and (3) the separation between the corporation's ownership and management, that is, the delegation of management to a group of agents other than the shareholders. These practices' content was interpreted, contested, and reinterpreted, eventually spreading from within the original geographical area in which they emerged – Great Britain, the United States, and some Western European countries such as France and the Netherlands – to other areas. This is not to say that the spread was uncontested or inevitable. Grasping what the corporate order means today, including the partial change of its ethical practices (a bounded progress of sorts), requires us to identify the core practices and background knowledge that informs corporate order, as well as how they spread and were historically contested or reinforced by actors within and outside corporate communities of practice.

Cognitive evolution theory, while eclectic and building on a variety of sociological, philosophical, political theory, and IR theory-established traditions, suggests a novel way of thinking about social and cultural evolution. By highlighting sociocultural evolution as carried in and by communities of practice, it also suggests a novel way of thinking about social order, change, and metastability, and the role of practices in constructing the social world. Because the concept of communities of practice transcends our understanding of social reality as organized in levels (Onuf 1995), it enables a better understanding of agency and structure. A dynamic cognitive evolutionary social theory adopts a processual or “becoming” ontology, and evolutionary epistemology that, beefed up with complexity-theory concepts, does not rely by analogy, homology, or metaphor (Ma 2016) on natural evolution mechanisms and processes.

A social theory of cognitive evolution can be particularly important and useful to IR theory because the theory's notion of social order remains stuck in a dated debate between materialist and/or utilitarian theories, on the one hand, and holistic normative theories, on the other. Its understanding of change is undertheorized and usually studied as derivative of theoretical agendas that aim to explain something else. Until the recent “practice turn” in IR (Adler and Pouliot 2011a, 2011b; Bürger and Gadinger 2015; Neumann 2002), practices were taken as mostly exclusively material outcomes of other factors and were seldom understood as what orders social life or, as Ruggie notably said, as what “makes the world hang together” (1998b).

I wrote this book neither to participate in (let alone to settle) a particular debate now raging in IR nor to replace a particular theory. The book adopts practice social theory (Schatzki et al. 2001) and the “practice turn” in IR (Adler and Pouliot 2011a; Büger and Gadinger 2015; Neumann 2002) – a relational approach (Jackson and Nexon 2009; McCourt 2016) and an evolutionary approach that does not borrow from natural evolution’s processes and mechanisms. Cognitive evolution theory, as a specific account of evolutionary constructivism, is distinct from mainstream IR evolutionary approaches (e.g., among others, Axelrod 1984; Cederman 1997; Florini 1996; Gat 2009; Modelski 1990; Spruyt 1994; Sterling-Folker 2001; Tang 2013; Thayer 2004; Thompson 2001) and improves on past constructivist perspectives that invoked cultural evolution (e.g., Wendt 1999).

I recognize that cognitive evolution theory is (1) large-scale in scope; (2) systemic, without hardly invoking the concept of systems; (3) dynamic, trying to explain simultaneously change and stability; (4) general, as applicable to a multitude of social orders across space and time; (5) synthetic in tying together existing knowledge in new ways; (6) novel as a social-science evolutionary theory; and (7) ambitious in attempting to understand the social world and social change. While I would not call cognitive evolution a “grand theory,” but rather a theory of world ordering, I nevertheless believe that, though they are rare, grand theories should not be objectionable. Although past IR grand theories (e.g., Bull 1977; Deutsch 1963; Haas 1964; Morgenthau 1949; Waltz 1979; Wendt 1999) did not settle outstanding issues in international politics, they did open new ways of framing IR. They suggested new research programs, elicited new debates, and showed the way to theorize at the middle-range level (Rosenau 1968). I will be pleased if I can achieve some very small portion of this, especially generating criticism and other scholars’ attempts to improve and expand the theory.

Although this book has an abundant number of empirical examples, it is primarily theoretical. For reasons of space and expediency, incorporating detailed case studies here was not an option. My aim and hope are that the book will open a space for original empirical work that revises or contests cognitive evolution theory.

I derived cognitive evolution social theory and normative ideas related to it from IR theory, rather than the other way around. Throughout my career, my work has been driven by a desire to develop dynamic theories of change, collective meanings (such as ideology, identity, and scientific knowledge), international relations’ epistemic foundations, international practices, and progress in international

10 Prologue: The Crux of the Matter

relations. So while this book is to some extent a synthesis of my past work, it suggests a new theory and looks ahead to new vistas for theoretical reasoning and empirical work.

Finally, but not less important, the book is unusual because it approaches international relations from the perspective of neither states, their interests, resources, and ideologies nor of nonstate actors and international organizations, such as the United Nations. These perspectives are, to use a computer metaphor, international relations' "hardware." Practices, background knowledge, and communities of practice, as well as the social orders they constitute, are international relations' "software." The main purpose of cognitive evolution theory and my use of the concepts of communities of practice, practices, background knowledge, and social order is inspecting what lies behind the computer screen, the 010101, the "ghost in the machine." The computer needs both hardware and software to run. Unlike most studies in IR, cognitive evolution theory uncovers international relations' mostly hidden epistemic and practice instructions, and shows how international social orders remain dynamically metastable or, alternatively, evolve.