

Part I

Introduction: Conversations and the
Evolution of Practice Theorizing

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1 Conceptualizing International Practices

Establishing a Research Agenda in Conversations

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The practice turn arrived in International Relations (IR) because it had become obvious to many that what goes on in international politics every day was largely ignored by IR theory. While many scholars were focused on what elites said and wrote, not many were paying attention to what they, let alone people in general, actually did. Notably, practice scholarship highlights a significant gap between IR scholars' theoretical endeavours and how practitioners of international politics themselves understand what they are doing. It thus allows scholars to shed light on phenomena that have hitherto been at the margins of IR scholarship. When we examine in microscopic detail how state representatives actually conduct negotiations, how international organizations operate or how wars are being fought, we find a series of puzzling phenomena that shape IR. For example, by zooming in on how the permanent representatives of member states negotiate in the European Union, Adler-Nissen and Drieschova (2019) found that, contrary to bargaining theory and rational choice approaches, diplomats reach compromises by editing text. When there are many parties to negotiations that operate at high speed, diplomats can occasionally lose track of the circulation of texts and even agree to something that none of the negotiating parties intended. Such practical activities tend to be overlooked by the more macroscopic generalization-driven scopes that IR scholarship often adopts, be it in the form of large N-studies, grand theory development, causal hypothesis testing or theoretical modelling.

The often unconscious and habitual doings and sayings of people make a difference to international political outcomes. Random coincidences and encounters with technologies matter, whether it is struggling with a bureaucratic form, or the glitches of a social media account. Everyone may potentially be involved in politics, be it interpreters who work in the UN General Assembly or farmers who help to smuggle migrants across their territory. As Walters observes (Chapter 6), everyday practices of farmers in southern France can operate as resistance against the state's migration policies. Farmers smuggle migrants across borders, not for

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profit, but out of a sense of moral obligation. Only a practice perspective allows us to identify these activities as part of the making of world politics, as it is the practices of not-for-profit smuggling that give meaning to the farmers' resistance. Austin and Leander (Chapter 10), in turn, show how aesthetic practices of making torture invisible, and the more or less competent performances of these practices of rendering invisibility, lead world public opinion to perceive some state regimes, such as the Syrian one, as crueller than others, for example the United States.

Several scholars, each from a slightly different theoretical angle, have introduced into IR scholarship practices as an ontological phenomenon and analytical framework, and they have spelled out the spectrum and consequences of the practice turn for the field (Adler and Pouliot, 2011a, 2011b; Bueger and Gadinger, 2015, 2018; Hopf, 2010; Neumann, 2002; Pouliot, 2010). Other works have explored the internal theoretical diversity of practice theories (Frost and Lechner, 2016b). And still others have advocated for a distinct version of practice theory to analyse and interpret specific phenomena in IR with the help of the work of Luc Boltanski (Gadinger, 2016), Pierre Bourdieu (Eagleton-Pierce, 2013; Mérand, 2008; Pouliot, 2010), Michel DeCerteau (Neumann, 2002), Michel Foucault (Neumann and Sending, 2010; Walters, 2012), Gilles Deleuze (Acuto and Curtis, 2013), Erving Goffman (Adler-Nissen, 2014), Karin Knorr Cetina (Bueger, 2015), Bruno Latour (Bueger and Gadinger, 2007; Walters, 2002), Theodore Schatzki (Bially Mattern, 2011; Navari, 2011), Etienne Wenger (Adler, 2005, 2019) and Ludwig Wittgenstein (Frost and Lechner, 2016a; Grimmel and Hellmann, 2019), among others.

These theoretical approaches have informed the study of a wide range of empirical phenomena, ranging from the workings of international organizations (Bueger, 2015; Pouliot, 2016a) and global governance (Best and Gheciu, 2014a; Neumann and Sending, 2010) to processes of European integration (Adler-Nissen, 2016; McNamara, 2015), international law (Brunnée and Toope, 2010), the international political economy (Eagleton-Pierce, 2013; Seabrooke, 2012), peace-building (Autesserre, 2014), diplomacy (Neumann, 2002; Sending et al., 2015), security (Abrahamsen and Williams, 2011; Adler-Nissen and Pouliot, 2014; Mérand, 2008; Villumsen, 2015) and war (Sylvester, 2012).

With so much theoretical and empirical work already in place, it seems to be the right time to reflect and clarify in what ways the community of practice scholars shares a common agenda that is broad enough to allow for disagreements and controversies but is also recognizable as a dedicated form of IR scholarship. This implies further elaborating what forms the convergence among practice scholars, but also invites discussion of the boundary zones to other forms of IR theorizing, in particular

constructivism. To date no explicit collective discussion has taken shape about the contours that define the practice turn in IR as a distinct set of theoretical approaches, or about the added value of practice theories in general compared with other IR approaches. The purpose of this edited volume is to do precisely that. It provides a clearly laid out understanding of practice theories as an analytical vocabulary with a history anchored in IR theory that can grasp the diversity of practice scholarship on the one hand but also provide a shared direction on the other.

In IR, theoretical approaches have sometimes coalesced around a single monograph, such as Waltz's (1979) *Theory of International Politics* or Wendt's (1999) *Social Theory of International Politics*, which have provided the core to neorealism and constructivism, respectively. In many ways, these texts established an authoritative, quite complete and closed statement around which other texts of the given theoretical approach have grouped. While a *Practical Theory of International Politics* might be in the making, scholars engaged in the practice turn do not consider practice approaches to lend themselves to grand theory-making. Practice theories differ. In the words of Nicolini (2013: 9), 'while [practice-theoretical approaches] can be compared to the tributaries of a lake (the "grand lake" of practice-based approaches) they do not contribute to a "grand" theory of practice and form; instead, they comprise a complicated network of similarities and dissimilarities'. Practice approaches do not appear to lend themselves to a definitive canonical and internally complete text that provides a firm foundation on which others can build. Perhaps this is so because of the ways in which practice scholarship has developed in the discipline of IR, with one of its most authoritative texts so far being an edited volume (Adler and Pouliot, 2011c), followed by an emerging plurality of practice voices. Another reason could be the world view that emerges once we direct our attention to practices as the fundamental ontological entities.

Instead of a canonical text this volume proposes a new way for setting out the intellectual identity of practice scholarship and how it relates to other forms of IR research. Concepts, rather than generalized systems of assertions (theory), provide the building blocks of international practice theorizing and allow for unity in diversity (see Chapter 12). Concepts also allow for more ready comparison with existing streams of IR thought, hence highlighting precisely what the contributions of practice theories are to broader debates. How scholars agree and diverge over the meaning and use of concepts, and how they are shared with other approaches in IR, provides the contours of international practice theorizing. The volume thus structures its discussion around concepts. This helps to open up collective, dynamic and necessarily open-ended conversations

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to explain different practice-theoretical approaches. The contributions to the volume look at practices through the prism of a key concept in IR (such as power, norms or change) and engage with their interlocutors through that prism. Each chapter showcases how a practice-theoretical understanding sheds new light on familiar IR concepts or introduces an underexplored one. This allows scholars to ask different kinds of questions, direct attention to uncommon empirical material and reach new conclusions about IR phenomena. Each chapter has an empirical illustration that showcases how practice theories provide a gateway to new empirical insights. A focus on key concepts allows for conversations with other IR theoretical approaches and enables conversations and debates within practice theorizing. Each chapter engages in cross-linkages and conversations with other concepts developed in the volume. The outcome is an intellectual clarification of the promises, contours and challenges of practice theorizing and associated research. On the basis of collective conversations rather than canonical texts, the volume situates practice research as a distinct set of theoretical perspectives in the discipline and outlines the agenda for their further advancement.

In this Introduction, we first identify the value-added of practice theorizing for IR scholarship. Next, we provide a narrative of the evolution of practice-theoretical thinking in IR. This is to demonstrate that such research in many ways advances earlier thoughts expressed in the discipline, but also to argue that practice-driven research breaks with existing ideas in significant ways. With this narrative we respond to some allegations and misunderstandings within the discipline that the practice talk is plainly a reinvigoration of old ideas, that there is little new about practice approaches or that they present us with a new version of constructivism (McCourt, 2016; Ringmar, 2014). Third, we proceed in discussing the scope and contours of practice-driven research by discussing how the practice debate might be ordered. Arguing against pitching discrete practice approaches against each other, we draw attention to a number of fault lines that run through the practice debate. We then showcase how each chapter in this volume engages with broader IR scholarship, and how it provides a new practice-driven vista on relevant IR questions.

The Value-Added of Practice Theorizing in IR

For practice scholars, quotidian and more aggregated practices matter. Central banking is, for example, an aggregated practice composed of many individual practices. As an aggregated practice, central banking had a specific historical starting point and went through an evolution

with important consequences for international political economy (see Dumouchel, Chapter 7). Yet even seemingly mundane practices can make a difference. The outcomes of international negotiations are not only influenced by calculations of the national interest, material capabilities, and norms, but also by small practical details. Quotidian details have an effect, such as at what point in the process negotiators are served a drink, have a smoke, when a light lunch or big meals are provided, how the chairman of the negotiation is dressed, or what degree of language proficiency participants possess (Adler-Nissen and Drieschova, 2019). When alcohol starts rolling in the Council of Ministers of the European Union, the diplomats may become each other's best friends. They frequently pat each other on the shoulder, the negotiations become more amicable and agreeable. A hungry stomach (as well as sleep deprivation), in turn, can lead negotiators to more easily accept an agreement to be able to break for lunch (or finally get some rest). It might not be a coincidence that many multilateral agreements are reached in the early hours of the morning. If diplomats lack adequate language proficiency, and so perform incompetently, their interlocutors might not understand their negotiating position appropriately, and the misunderstood diplomats will not be able to adequately defend their national interest.

Rather than focusing on the motivations in people's heads, or structures of power and meaning, practice scholars direct attention to concrete and observable processes and patterns of activities that shape international outcomes, or to the norms that underlie such activities. They start from a conception of human nature that accentuates the entanglement of conscious and unconscious processes and focuses on situated and embodied action in concrete places, or that highlights the dispersion of global practices. They hence oppose Cartesian assumptions of human beings as disembodied minds wandering in a stylized world. Practical reasoning emerges as an analytical category that is distinct from instrumentalist calculations or technical rule following (Adler, 2019; Bourdieu, 1990; Pouliot, 2008; Kratochwil, Chapter 11). The goal is not to derive abstract theoretical models with universal generalizability. Experience-near research methodologies, such as participant observation and ethnography, lead many practice scholars to favour more inductive or abductive research designs through which they develop empirically grounded, and spatially and temporally specified theoretical perspectives.¹ In the process, practice scholars often uncover and demonstrate the surprising effects of

¹ An abductive approach moves back and forth between deduction and induction, between theoretical generalities and empirical specificity.

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actors, things and processes that might be deemed trivial from the outset in formalized models of theory. Some scholars adopt a more macroscopic lens and historicize practices to get a better understanding of change over time (Go, 2008; Nexon and Neumann, 2018). For instance, Lechner and Frost (2018: 3) conceive of practices as ‘an institution which constitutes a meaningful framework for interaction’ and focus on global practices, such as non-intervention. Adler (2019) develops a perspective of cognitive evolution to understand how social orders remain meta-stable or change over time through changes and adaptations in practices. Or scholars study anchoring practices and analyse how specific key practices hold societies together by creating a foundational scaffold on which other practices depend (Sending and Neumann, 2011; Swidler, 2001).

Given that a focus on practices has the potential to shed light on the phenomena conventional IR scholarship was at pains to explain, a quite significant number of scholars turned to developing practice-based research and theories. After a series of prolific publications introduced the notion of practices as a distinct ontological phenomenon to the discipline (Adler and Pouliot, 2011a, 2011b; Neumann, 2002), International Practice Theories (IPT) have become a strong voice in the repertoire of IR theory over the last decade. Practice-driven research remains a set of very young, elastic and dynamic theoretical approaches to the study of IR.

Several promises are associated with practice as an analytical lens. Most importantly perhaps, the focus on practice promises empirical insights into the working of IR that have gone unnoticed so far (Pouliot, 2008). It is also seen as opening up avenues for cross-paradigmatic debates (Adler and Pouliot, 2011a). ‘It offers a way out of Procrustean yet seemingly inescapable categories, such as subject and object, representation and represented, conceptual scheme and content, belief and desire, structure and action, rules and their application, micro and macro, individual and totality’ (Stern, 2003: 185). It promises research that is more perceptive to short-term change and the transformation of order and power relations (Adler, 2019; Neumann, 2002). And lastly, it creates possibilities for engaging in forms of knowledge production that have practical value and are carried out through different forms of collaboration with practitioners (Eikeland and Nicolini, 2011; Tickner, 2014). An expanding community of scholars has seized the opportunity practice theories provide for understanding world politics, developing new kinds of theory and engaging in new forms of empirical analysis. Indeed, the practice turn appears to be one of the most productive theoretical and empirical endeavours of IR scholarship in the present decade.

Border Zones: The Evolution of Practice Thinking in IR

Practice theorizing has not developed from nowhere. Practice-theoretical thinking has seen quite an evolution, and in consequence the list of ancestors is long. It makes little sense to draw out a fully fledged history of the concept of practice (or practice as it relates to the international). Let us point to some of the ways in which the concept of practice has emerged in the discipline before the phrase ‘practice turn’ was introduced. This brief historical narrative, like any other, is incomplete and highlights certain developments, while underplaying others. If we cannot offer a ‘representative’ narrative (whatever this may mean), we have two goals. First, revisiting the history of practice thinking in IR allows us to understand where some of the divergences within practice thought come from. Second, it provides us an understanding of the ‘border zones’ that exist between practice theories and other research programmes in IR.

Historical sketches of practice thinking written in other disciplinary contexts have alluded to the importance of a range of theoretical predecessors (see Freeman et al., 2011; Guzman, 2013; Hillebrandt, 2014; Miettinen et al., 2009). Aristotelian philosophy, Francis Bacon’s relational understanding of science and Karl Marx’s Feuerbach Theses are emphasized. These thoughts find continuation in the work of Antonio Gramsci, American pragmatists such as John Dewey and George Herbert Mead, the later works of Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. More contemporary thinkers, who have been influential for practice scholarship include Hannah Arendt, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Harold Garfinkel, Erwin Goffmann, Michel Foucault, Anthony Giddens, Jürgen Habermas, Thomas Kuhn, Richard Rorty and William Sewell – a list which could without doubt be extended substantially. As Hillebrandt (2014) observed, in particular in two emerging disciplines – science studies and cultural studies – these ideas were taken forward to form a sort of collective movement that speaks about a ‘practice turn’ (see Schatzki et al., 2001).² Following these leads, a number of other empirically oriented social science disciplines picked up these ideas. Especially in organization studies, educational sociology and policy studies, the idea of turning to practice gained a strong foothold from the late 1990s. Indeed, in organization studies, a quite extensive series of collective

² It is revealing that the majority of contributors to the edited volume which is hailed as kick-starting the talk about a practice turn are situated in science studies.

publications, even including a handbook devoted to the practice turn (Golsorkhi et al., 2010), documents the strength of the field. IR is therefore to be seen as a relative latecomer to practice theorizing.

For understanding the trajectory of practice thinking in IR, some of the ancestors important in other disciplines, such as the work of Kurt Lewin or of Chris Argyris and Donald Schon in the 1970s, are largely irrelevant. Each of the social sciences has developed its own trajectory towards practices. In IR, prior to the practice turn, practice thought emerged in several different strands of scholarship. Many of these strands present versions of what is conventionally described in the discipline as ‘constructivism’.³ Practice theorizing is rooted in post-positivism and closely related to the interpretive, hermeneutic, phenomenological or post-structuralist traditions to knowledge production. These have often in the discipline been equated to constructivism. As such, the history of practice theorizing, at least in methodological terms, is closely tied to the rise of constructivist thought in IR.

All of the strands presented in the following sections of this Introduction have contributed to shaping the practice turn in IR, and they continue to be close ‘neighbours’ to practice theorizing, with which they share substantial ‘border zones’.

Practice Thinking in IR: A Short History

The first strand of IR scholarship that theorized practices was *pragmatism*. Although hardly recognized by the writers of disciplinary history, pragmatism is a sort of hidden paradigm in IR. Its authors have focused on questions of knowledge and action. A line of thought, influenced by American pragmatism, stretching from the work of David Mitrany and Karl Deutsch to Ernst Haas, John Ruggie and Emanuel Adler, argued that the foundation of IR is epistemic. Approaches such as the epistemic community framework relied, for instance, on ideas presented by Thomas Kuhn and acknowledged the importance of the practical conditions of knowledge production. The core focus of this pragmatist research has been to understand how knowledge is produced and relates to (international) action. Although emphasizing key categories of importance in practice thinking, these scholars did not focus their work on the concept of practice. With the arrival of culturalist theorizing and the reception of the linguistic turn in the discipline in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Ashley, 1989; Ashley and Walker, 1990;

³ As many authors have pointed out, the term ‘constructivism’ is ambiguous and has served to cluster together various forms of theorizing. For a recent re-construction, see Kessler (2016).