

## The Practice Turn in International Relations Theory

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## Summary and Keywords

The “practice turn” in international relations (IR) refers to those scholars that explicitly take practices as a category of analysis in one way or another. This notion implies three things: that a significant number of scholars turn to practices, that they have enough similarities to be considered part of the same broad movement, and that they bring something novel to the discipline. Taken together, the concepts and logics developed in association with this shift in emphasis to practices form what has come to be labelled as “practice theory” (PT). The basic concepts and logics that provide the conceptual and theoretical foundation for PT’s use in IR include practices as shared, patterned, and embodied; the logic of habits/habitus; and field, capital, and symbolic domination. The epistemological foundation of PT is an interpretive and reflexive approach that builds on a pragmatic epistemology that considers knowledge as socially constructed. PT challenges rationalism and constructivism, but without denying that individuals make rational calculations, or that social norms constrain their behaviour. Practice theorists use different metaphors in locating PT within IR, such as the “gluon” or the “trading zone.” Another approach is to treat practices as an analytical tool. In addition, there are three different methods for studying practices: participant observation, interviews, and discourse analysis.

**Keywords:** interdependence, international organization, international relations, general international systems, world-systems theory, dependency, international integration, transnational relations

## Introduction

In the social sciences, international relations (IR) included, the study of practices starts from a simple intuition: what we call social realities—and international politics—are constituted by human beings acting in and on the world. Their ways of doing things delineates practices that “enact” and give meaning to the world. As Andersen and Neumann (2012, p. 468) explain, “One can look at states, organisations, wars, social movements, class or even personhood as practices.” Practice theorists seek to scale down their analy-

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ses to the basic feature of politics (i.e., practices) and study international politics through them. Indeed, “by focusing on what practitioners do, [practice turners] zoom in on the quotidian unfolding of international life and analyze the ongoing accomplishments that, put together, constitute the ‘big picture’ of world politics” (Adler & Pouliot, 2011, p. 1). When seen through these lenses, the concerns of other IR approaches—war, peace, negotiations, states, diplomacy, international organizations, and so on—are bundles of individual and collective practices woven together and producing specific outcomes.

As a result, scholars who do not explicitly refer to practice theory (or PT, henceforth) or even specify practice as a category of analysis still study international practices. Christian Reus-Smit’s *The Moral Purpose of the State* (1999) provides a perfect example. The book compares the institutional development of four societies of states—ancient Greece, the Italian Renaissance, absolutist Europe, and the modern society. Through this comparison, Reus-Smit explains why each of these societies varied in their basic institutional practices. To explain, for instance, why contractual international law and multilateral diplomacy have become the only legitimate basic institutional practices in the international realm today he looks at the normative foundations and the constitutional structure of today’s international society. As he puts it, “I begin from the assumption that international institutions matter, and proceed on the basis that explaining the form they take in different cultural and historical contexts is necessary if we wish to develop a complete understanding of the institutional dimension of international relations” (1999, p. 11). His account is thus a fascinating round trip that starts with international practices and ends with them, bringing the readers to the most fundamental aspects of international relations along the way.

Similarly, Barnett and Finnemore’s *Rules for the World* (2004) focuses on international practices without explicitly building on PT. Against the functionalist and statist explanations that consider international organizations (IOs) as existing to solve coordination problems between states, they open the black box of IOs and look at *how* they pursue their missions. This unpacking of IOs—they call it “an analysis of the ‘social stuff’ of which bureaucracy is made” (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004, pp. 9–10)—leads them to explore the bureaucratic culture within IOs and the practices that result, such as the practices of devising economic models or establishing technical assistance programs at the International Monetary Fund. Their study also speaks to practices outside the organizations: IOs matter in international politics because they can orient the action of other actors by defining “meanings, norms of good behaviour, the nature of social actors, and categories of legitimate social action in the world” (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004, pp. 7). For instance, IOs can affect NGO practices aimed at protecting human rights.

It is thus clear that “practices have long been a prime object of analysis in IR” (Adler & Pouliot, 2011, p. 1), even if IR scholars only recently began to explicitly study them. For Ringmar (2014, p. 2) “Practices of one kind or another are what scholars of international relations always have studied.” Even beyond those IR scholars explicitly situating their work within it, PT then speaks to common concerns for many IR scholars. The intention here is to map what Bueger and Gadinger (2014) have labelled “International Practice

Theory (IPT)" (i.e., the application/transposition of PT to IR) to make sense of the recent "practice turn" in IR and show what scholars stand to gain in using its concepts and analyses. Incidentally, this shows that practices are not an "opaque endpoint to reflection and explanation" (Turner, 1994, p. 43), but a promising focus for those seeking to understand international politics.

In earlier debates, many concerns of the practice turn were labelled otherwise, in terms of constructivism (Alexander Wendt, Fredrieck Kratochwil, and Nick Onuf), post-positivism (Roxanne Lynn Doty and Lene Hansen) and critical theory (Richard Ashley) In these works, practice "was primarily a supporting concept and remained only weakly conceptualized. In practice theory this is quite different. Here the concept of practice is promoted from a supporting role to the lead" (Bueger & Gadinger, 2014, p. 5). Though this article at times refers to these earlier attempts to conceptualize practices without explicitly theorizing them, it focuses on IR scholars that explicitly use PT.

There has been a proliferation of such works in the 21st century. For instance, a growing number of critical security scholars focus on the practices that inform and produce security and securitization. They study everyday administrative procedures and professional routines that constitute those security policies that had been previously analyzed through their textual or discursive traces (on [in]security governance in the [post]colonial world, see Hönke & Müller, 2012; on the governance of border security see Côté-Boucher et al., 2014). Parallel movements can be observed in diplomatic studies (Neumann, 2012, 2013; Sending et al., 2015; Pouliot & Cornut, 2015), in European studies (Adler-Nissen, 2011; Kuus, 2015; Mérand, 2010; Lavallé, 2011; Berling, 2012; Forget & Rayroux, 2012; Zaiotti, 2012) and in international organization studies (Bueger, 2015A, 2015B; Goff, 2015; Lachmann, 2011; Eagleton-Pierce, 2013; Hardt, 2014; Pouliot, 2010; Seabrooke, 2014). This review article builds on these innovative works to illustrate PT potentialities.

Before going further, a caveat is necessary. It is impossible to introduce PT, even merely PT in IR as this review article does, in any exhaustive or definitive way: "Given th[e] multiplicity of impulses, issues and oppositions, it is not surprising that there is no unified practice approach" (Schatzki, 2001, p. 2). The practice turn should thus be treated as a diverse, complex, and sometimes contradictory set of approaches. There "is no such thing as *the* theory of practice but a variety of theories focused on practices" (Adler & Pouliot, 2011, p. 4). To capture this diversity, Nicolini (2012, p. 9) uses the metaphor of a lake: "While [PT 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." The goal of this review article is to map in a preliminary way the "grand lake" of practice-based approaches in IR.

As is often the case with IR's (meta)theories, the roots of this movement come from outside of the discipline. Practice turners transpose and translate a conceptual apparatus developed and elaborated in other disciplines, most notably philosophy, anthropology, and sociology. Inspired by 20th-century philosophers (notably Ludwig Wittgenstein and Mar-

tin Heidegger), different threads in the work of several leading theorists heralded the development of this disparate movement, perhaps most notably sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and philosopher Michel Foucault. Many debates around the topics agency/structure, cultural turn, and complex ontologies referring to social theory (and notably Anthony Giddens, Ann Swidler, and Theodor Schatzki) are at its core major concerns of the practice turn.

A lot of misunderstandings of the practice turn exist in contemporary discussions. What are the implications of a practice turn for IR? How can we study international practices? Can everybody be a practice theorist? What are the epistemological, ontological, and methodological commitments? To answer these questions, taking up the challenge of showing what PT brings to IR, this article first introduces its core concepts. Then PT approaches are located within IR, before turning to the methodological, epistemological, and normative challenges faced by practice turners. Throughout, PT promises will be illustrated with substantive examples drawn from the most recent IR literature. As Duvall and Chowdhury (2011, p. 336) explain, “The focus on practice opens a can of worms.” Some of those worms are dealt with here. Those wishing to go further need to engage directly with the literature, notably the works referred to in this review article.

## Core Concepts in Practice Theory

The “practice turn” in IR refers to those scholars that explicitly take practices as a category of analysis in one way or another. Coined by Schatzki, Cetina, and von Savigny (2001), the notion implies three things: that a significant number of scholars turn to practices, that they have enough similarities to be considered part of the same broad movement, and that they bring something novel to the discipline. Taken together, the concepts and logics developed in association with this shift in emphasis to practices form what has come to be labeled “practice theory.” This section introduces those basic concepts and logics of PT that have provided the conceptual and theoretical foundation for its use in IR. In doing so, it provides answers to questions such as the following: What are practices? What do concepts like habits and fields offer for IR analysis? How can we conceptualize their influence on international politics?

## Practices as Shared, Patterned, and Embodied

As a first approach, we can define practices as “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” (Adler & Pouliot, 2011, p. 4). Sharpening their definition, Adler and Pouliot build on Cook and Brown (1999) and make a distinction between behavior, action, and practice. To wit, sitting at a desk is a behavior; sitting at a desk and checking a passport in an airport is an action; checking passports in airports is a (security) practice. There is a progressive gradation between the three concepts: behaviors are constitutive of actions, which are constitutive of practices. As they explain:

The concept of behavior evokes the material dimension of doing, as a deed performed in or 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 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. (2011, p. 5)

Based on this conception, various lists of “core commitments” or “main assumptions” are proposed by practice theorists. For Neumann (2002, pp. 637–638) practices are integrative, improvisational, reflective, quotidian, performative, and stylized. For Adler and Pouliot (2011, pp. 6–7) they are performed, patterned, competent, draw on background knowledge and weave together the discursive and material worlds. Finally, for Bueger and Gadinger (2014, p. 19) PT implies a focus on process, practical knowledge, collectivity, materiality, multiplicity, and performativity. Drawing on what is shared between these theorists, here the definition is unpacked around three concepts: practices are embodied, shared, and patterned.

First, practices are embodied. They are materially mediated through human bodies and bodies “internalize practices” (Bueger & Gadinger, 2014, p. 19). The focal point of practices is what actors do in and on the world. What matters is the corporeal interaction of human beings in the course of their everyday life. Writing a speech, gathering information, controlling a border, negotiating a treaty or an intervention are all performances of human bodies. For PT, the world is constituted by the flesh and blood of people doing things, not the abstractions of states, international organizations, bureaucracies, civil societies, and so on. Put differently, individuals and their body are what there is—they are the repository of any other driving forces of human activities. This is not to say that the mind does not play a part in PT. On the contrary, “Practices are merely the bodily manifestations of what has already happened in the brain” (Hopf, 2010, p. 546)—a point that will be expounded on below.

Second, practices are both individually performed and shared. They are the common way of doing things and are produced by the repetitive interaction between members of a group. They are “a social artefact” (Navari, 2011, p. 614) “always linked to a collective” (Bueger & Gadinger, 2014, p. 19) and “the products of social structures” (Hopf, 2010, p. 548). They “are acquired through socialization, exposure, imitation, and symbolic power relationships”—in a nutshell, “what may seem to be a set of individual dispositions is in fact profoundly social” (Pouliot, 2008, pp. 273–274). As explained below, this does not mean that PT adopts a structuralist approach to international politics. Agency is a cornerstone of PT, as practices not only constrain actors but also enable them.

Finally, practices are patterned in the sense that they imply regularity and repetition. A practice cannot be an isolated event or a unique performance and needs instead to be repeated in time and places. Two caveats are necessary here. First, this does not mean that practices do not change. As explained below, practices are adaptive. Second, what may

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seem an isolated or idiosyncratic event or a unique performance is often the instantiation of one or several practices (and can be analyzed as such). Hansen (2011), for instance, analyzes the Muhammad cartoon crisis as a bundle of specific practices. Many other scholars do the same. A specific meeting of the G20 is part of a broader practice of high-level encounter in multilateral settings (Cooper & Pouliot, 2015); a specific ministerial speech is the result of a complex interplay between diplomatic practices (Neumann, 2007, 2012).

### The Logic of Habits/Habitus

The basic logic of PT is straightforward. Most of the time, people do what they do because it is their regular way of doing things. As cognitive psychologists have shown in various contexts (Shannon & Kowert, 2012), people are largely driven by their habits and habits “account for what most of us do most of the time” (Hopf, 2010, p. 547). This is particularly true in international politics where habits are ubiquitous. For instance, “Institutionalized settings in general, whether international organizations such as the IMF, or foreign policy bureaucracies, are likely sites for the operation of the logic of habit because of their associated routines, standard operating procedures, and relative isolation from competing ideological structures” (Hopf, 2010, p. 547.).

It is important to add that some prefer the term “habitus” to “habits.” While there are some conceptual affinities, the concepts are not synonymous. For Pouliot (2008, p. 274), “Habitus is not habit, for the former is fundamentally generative while the latter is strictly iterative.” Reciprocally, for Hopf, the logic of practice is “more reflective and agential than the logic of habit and, consequently, expects far more change in the world” (Hopf, 2010, p. 544). The concept of habitus is linked to Bourdieu’s vocabulary as one of his key concepts, whereas the concept of habits is much broadly used in other practice approaches, for example in Giddens’s social theory or in Dewey’s pragmatism.

PT locates the source of most human behavior in the unreflective and unconscious part of the human mind. Habits are indeed “unintentional, unconscious, involuntary, and effortless, that is, they do not consume limited cognitive processing capacity” (Hopf, 2010, p. 541). They appear “self-evident” and “commonsensical” (Pouliot, 2008, p. 259). Habit should therefore be seen as a comprehensive concept. It comprises a wide range of other phenomena—definition of self, past experiences, internalized social norms, ways of thinking, background assumptions, prejudices, beliefs, expectations, and so on—in a nutshell, any pre- and un-conscious source of meaning making an individual may have. To some critics, this makes the definition of the concept murky (see, for instance, Kratochwil, 2011, pp. 53–54).

Habits generate practices. They allow individuals to make sense of the world and go along in it. Based on the mental dispositions they have, individuals will do certain things and avoid others. Even the most rational individual will make choices based on preconceived views, because it is impossible to consider the infinite number of possibilities in a neutral way and balance each of them carefully before taking a decision each time some-

thing is done. Habits act as a filter among the possibilities each individual faces when doing anything. As Hopf (2010, p. 541) explains, “Habits both evoke and suppress actions. They imply actions by giving us ready-made responses to the world that we execute without thinking.” He continues: “They prevent other behavior by short-circuiting any need to think about what we are doing. So an infinitude of behaviors are effectively deleted from the available repertoire of possible actions.” For instance, diplomats in embassy select their contact based on their unarticulated conviction that these contacts will be the most useful to understand the social realities of their host country (Cornut, 2015A).

Habits thus reduce world uncertainty and enable action. They tend to be constant and repetitive; actors unconsciously do what is expected from them and expect others to act according to their own habits. In the logic of habits, the past is a good indication of what will happen in the future. For Hopf (2010, p. 549), “It requires doubt to have thought, and thought to have doubts, and since habit precludes thought, and works to eliminate any perception of doubt, it preserves certainty, even when uncertainty might be rational.” PT thus starts with the idea that what happens in world politics is often bound to happen. On the contrary, most approaches in IR take uncertainty as their starting point. Hopf takes the security dilemma as an example. For a realist, it develops through states’ mutual uncertainty about the intentions of other states. From a PT perspective, this phenomenon is grounded in habitual expectations about enemies: “An enemy identity in the other state” is produced, which “automatically evoke[s] a certain habitually hostile response” (2010, p. 552). Habits thus make many reactions of people and states predictable.

Yet, this does not mean that habits do not change. On the contrary, they tend to be both stable and changing. This question has been much debated among practice turners. For some, PT tends to emphasize stability (Duvall & Chowdhury, 2011; Hansen, 2011); while others consider it particularly useful to think about change (Neumann, 2002; Bueger, 2014; Pouliot & Thérien, 2015). Some go even further and use the study of practices to emphasize “the fragility, uncertainty, and disorder of the social” (Bueger & Gadinger, 2014, p. 51). Hopf disagrees with those interpretations of PT that put too much emphasis on change (2010). On the one hand, it is true that mental dispositions do not change easily. Any new pieces of information or new experience are integrated within the existing mental dispositions that individuals have acquired since the beginning of their existence. Rapid changes in mental dispositions are therefore uncommon—most of the time, background assumptions do not change, or change only marginally. And because mental dispositions are stable, practices also tend to be repetitive.

On the other hand, this does not mean that mental dispositions—and thus practices—never change. Mental dispositions adapt and evolve as much as they are rigid. It is precisely this dialectic that makes them functional on a day-to-day basis. Because context is always changing, no one can survive in the world with obstinately fixed mental dispositions. Practices imply adaptation. That is why, for most practice turners, PT transcends an opposition between change and continuity. They frame this dialectic in different ways. For Bueger (2014, p. 391): “Practices are repetitive patterns, but they are also permanently displacing and shifting patterns. Practices are dispersed, dynamic and continuously rear-

ranging, but they are also reproducing clusters.” For Hopf (2010, p. 543), “Habits are paradoxically both vulnerable to many sources of change, and yet very durable and well-defended. Overall, however, habits are strong promoters of the status quo. It is instrumentally rational to break habits if the costs of following them becomes too high and are recognized as such.” Finally, for Adler and Pouliot (2011, p. 16), “Practices partake in both *continuity* and *change* in social and political life. On the one hand, practices are the vehicle of reproduction... . At the same time, however, it is also from practices that social change originates... . Practice-qua-performance is a process; change not stability is the ordinary condition of social life.”

Thus, the logic of habits is not, strictly speaking, causal. Habits form a set of mental dispositions that define individual preferences, choices, behaviors, and more generally, ways of being in the world. This points to and builds on a specific definition of causality. As Merje Kuus explains,

An analysis of [practices] does not allow us to outline a neat set of causes (why a policy outcome occurred); it rather enables us to develop a deeper understanding of the causal structures that tilt the field of policy practice in particular ways. Causality works on this terrain not in terms of clearly identifiable causes but in terms of conditions of possibility ... One’s position in the field does not cause specific practices but it leaves dispositional traces that make certain practices more likely ... The analysis does not allow us to predict certain outcomes but it helps us to grasp the multiple forces that produce any specific outcome. (2015, p. 380)

That is why for Pouliot habits are “dispositional” as they generate “inclinations, propensities, and tendencies” (2008, p. 274). Practices are “nested phenomena” (Neumann, 2002, p. 629) (on the causality of practices, also see Pouliot, 2014).

### Field, Capital, and Symbolic Domination

Several interrelated practices form a “field” of practice (Bourdieu, 1977; Adler-Nissen, 2012). The notion of fields thus captures a basic reality: practitioners are in constant interaction with one another. Their practices are constantly reinforcing, emulating, imitating, and hybridizing one another. Fields are the result of these intersections repeated over a long period of time. Yet, they should not be “turned into rigid structures that blind us to the fluidity, complexity, and instability of world politics” (Leander, 2011, p. 296). They are dynamic sites of contestation full of individual struggles and conflicts. They are artifacts of the past struggles that tend to be both enacted and changed through day-to-day interactions. For that reason, they are sometimes conceived as games. Other practice theorists describe practices in terms of relations, passage points, translations, and performativity as it is done in ANT and assemblage approaches (Bueger & Gadinger, 2014).

A field should not be confused with a community of practice. Wenger identifies three “sources of coherence” in communities of practices (2000, p. 229). First, “Members build their community through *mutual engagement*. They interact with one another, establishing norms and relationships of mutuality that reflect these interactions. To be competent



is to be able to engage with the community and be trusted as a partner in these interactions.” Then, “Members [of a community of practice] are bound together by their collectively developed understanding of what their community is about and they hold each other accountable to this sense of *joint enterprise*. To be competent is to understand the enterprise well enough to be able to contribute to it.” Finally, communities of practice “produce a shared *repertoire of communal resources* [...]. To be competent is to have access to this repertoire and be able to use it appropriately.” The repertoire formed by these resources “can be very heterogeneous” and includes “routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence” (Wenger, 1998, pp. 82–83).

Building on this definition, several authors have applied the concept of community of practices to various IR sites. It has notably been applied to analyze security communities of practice (Adler, 2008; Pouliot, 2010), the humanitarian community (Gross Stein, 2011), communities of practice in international law (Brunnée & Toope, 2011), EU diplomacy (Bicchi, 2011), Somali pirates (Bueger, 2013) and the Alliance of Civilization (Lachmann, 2011; Goff, 2015). In each of these different social and political contexts, these scholars have shown how practitioners engage mutually on some joint enterprise, sharing a repertoire of communal resources. They put the creation of these communities in a historical context and indicate how these communities shape international politics in the 21st century.

A field of practice can be defined as a community of practice with no joint enterprise. Because members in a field have different positions and dispositions within this field, they do not share the same goals and interests. Of course, in a field, “All contestants agree on what it is they are seeking—political authority, artistic prestige, economic profit, academic reputation, and so on” (Pouliot, 2008, p. 275). Practice turners—in the line of Pierre Bourdieu—call this “doxa” (i.e., the knowledge, ideas, and values members of a specific field have in common). In a field, all agree on the object of their struggle, as well as on the general contours of the game. To be part of a field is to share its doxa and mostly leave these contours unquestioned.

Yet, this doxa falls short of being a joint enterprise. Members of a field have opposing interests and are in conflict with one another. In particular, fields are hierarchical, with practitioners at unequal positions in their struggle. Depending on their positions, they have more or less capital of one kind or another—social, economic, cultural, or symbolic. According to Pouliot (2008), this “is the control of a variety of historically constructed capitals [...] that defines the structure of power relations in the field and the positions that result” (p. 275). Power relationships between dominating and dominated structure and define fields. In a community of practice, these power relationships are less prevalent.

In a field, each practitioner defends their own interests through various strategies. Practice “can involve improvisation and strategic thinking as well as habit” (Brown, 2012, p. 444). Dominant actors will use their mastery of the rules of the game and their capital to

maintain their domination and keep the field functioning to their own advantage. The dominated can attempt to subvert the field by changing or challenging its rules. Fields “are characterized by both struggles over the distribution of currently recognized forms of capital and by struggles to change the social relationship by changing the structures of valorization within the field” (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2011, p. 313). The doxa itself can be an object of struggle. For instance, Adler-Nissen (2014) showed that the European External Action Service challenges European national diplomacies on a symbolic level. Senn and Elhardt (2014) showed how four influential decision makers and experts (William Perry, George Shultz, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn) used their symbolic capital in a doxic battle over nuclear weapons to successfully promote the idea of nuclear disarmament.

All this being said, the dominated most often abide by the rules of the game. This is what practice turners call “symbolic domination”: “As a form of immediate adherence, a field’s doxa is obeyed not only by dominant agents who benefit from it but also by the dominated ones who clearly do not” (Pouliot, 2008, p. 275). For instance, informal practices, social norms, and interpersonal relations constantly inform diplomatic negotiations and decision-making processes. Those who have mastered the informal rules of the game often have a comparative advantage and are able to promote the interests of their country more efficiently. Ambrosetti (2009, 2012) focused on the evolution of informal rules, norms, and routines within the UN Security Council. He convincingly shows that these practices influence the interventionist practices of the Security Council often at the advantage of the permanent members of the Security Council. In a similar vein, Schia (2013) demonstrated that in the UN Security Council, representatives of smaller countries do not often perfectly master the informal rules of the game. As a consequence, they run the risk of “going native” by giving precedence to UN Security Council consensus at the expense of the interests of their country (for analysis of symbolic power in the World Trade Organization, see Eagleton-Pierce, 2013; on symbolic power and security, see Williams, 2007).

## Locating PT within IR

What are the links and connections between PT and other approaches? What is PT—a theory, a model, a space for interparadigmatic dialogue, a collection of concepts? These are open questions. Many practice turners consider PT to be closely linked with constructivism (Adler, 2008; Leander, 2011; Pouliot, 2007; Brown, 2012; for a critical analysis, see Epstein, 2013), while others see connections with realism (Brown, 2012), neoclassical realism (Ripsman, 2011), the English school (Navari, 2011; Little, 2011) or post-structuralism (Hansen, 2011). In this section, PT is first contrasted with both rationalism and constructivism. This section then indicates the different ways practice turners situate their analysis within IR.

### PT, Rationalism, and Constructivism

PT tends to go against rationalist explanations of human behavior. In a rationalist perspective, agents minimize costs and maximize gains in accordance with the “logic of consequences.” From a PT perspective, there are problems with this approach. As mentioned above, individuals do many or even most things without really thinking about them. This conception is also self-defeating, because it is irrational for even the most rational individual to do everything only after rational calculi. As “agents are confronted with practical problems that they must urgently solve” they cannot carefully consider each possibility: “In the heat of practice, hunches take precedence over rational calculations” (Pouliot, 2008, pp. 261). For Hopf (2010, p. 548), habits are “not rational, not even boundedly rational, as there is not deliberate consideration of even one alternative to what is automatically perceived and practiced.” This is how habits “eliminate” rationality.

Practice turners are also dissatisfied with constructivism’s overemphasis on intersubjective structures. Constructivists tend to have a structuralist/holist/macro view on human behavior and are often unable to explain *individual* variations of mental dispositions (Shannon, 2012). They generally explain variations in action with variations in the social norms that individuals conform to. Among the multiple sources of individuals’ mental dispositions, constructivists thus emphasize collective ones. Yet, social norms are but a small part of what leads people to do the things they do. On a daily basis, a large number of mental dispositions are intrinsically individual and local. Norms of behavior are characteristics of the collective in a constructivist perspective; for PT, practices are individually performed. That is why even within a role whose practices are quite well defined there is sometimes a great deal of variation along multiple dimensions from one practitioner to another (Hansen, 2011; Cornut, 2015A).

PT challenges rationalism and constructivism, but this does not mean that it denies that individuals make rational calculations, or that social norms constrain their behavior. Practice turners’ contention is different. They focus on the motives of human behaviours that ontologically precede both the rationalist logic of consequences and the constructivist logic of appropriateness: “Even while an agent is reflecting upon what action will yield the most benefits or correspond to her normative commitments, she is doing so against a taken-for-granted background of habit that has already constrained her imaginable outcomes” (Hopf, 2010, p. 547). As Pouliot (2008, p. 276) put it, “It is thanks to their practical sense that agents feel whether a given social context calls for instrumental rationality [or] norm compliance.”

### The “Gluon,” the “Trading Zone” and the “Overcrowded Circus”

Practice theorists use different metaphors in locating PT within IR. For Adler and Pouliot, practices are the “gluon” of international politics (i.e., “the ontological entity that cuts across paradigms under different names but with a related substance” (2011, p. 10). Bueger and Gadinger, inspired by Peter Galison, use the metaphor of the “trading zone.” PT is not “a theory in the conventional sense,” but rather “an intellectual space in which

different scholars ‘trade’ ideas on how to study practices and cooperate to further develop the project” (2014, p. 6).

The “gluon” and the “trading zone” approaches share much in common. They both consider PT to be agnostic about many issues that have been controversial in the field for several decades. For them, the study of practices does not preclude any specific answers to debates that have long pervaded the field—on the contrary, it provides a framework of analysis where different ontologies may find or even share a place. For Adler and Pouliot (2011, pp. 3–4), “as soon as one looks into practices, it becomes difficult, and even impossible, to ignore structures (or agency), ideas (or matter), rationality (or practicality), and stability (or change): one becomes ontologically compelled to reach beyond traditional levels and units of analysis.” Thus PT “overcomes entrenched ontological gaps.” For Bueger and Gadinger (2014, p. 3), “practice theorists argue that most of our traditionally learned dichotomies are more of a hindrance than a help to better understand the world. These are dichotomies such as the division between agency and structure, micro and macro, subject and object, individual and society, mind and body or the ideational and the material.”

Take for instance the “agent-structure problem” famously identified in IR by Wendt (1987), and that deals with the tricky question of how agent and social structure relate (see also Carlsnaes, 1992). PT has its own solution to this problem. The “relational” approach of PT “avoids the structure-agency dilemma” (Bigo, 2011, p. 236). To some extent, PT is structural, as it emphasizes shared structures of meaning within social fields. On the other hand, there is an important place for agency, individual emotions, and strategies in a determinate practice (on the agency of emotion, see Bially Mattern, 2011). PT makes “much greater room for individual psychologies and improvisations” than is usually suggested (Leander, 2011, p. 300). As Adler and Pouliot put it, “Practices are both individual (agential) and structural.” On the structural side: “We understand practices as structured and acted out by communities of practice, and by the diffusion of background knowledge across agents in these communities, which similarly disposes them to act in coordination.” On the agential side, Adler and Pouliot assert that “when ‘disaggregated’, practices are ultimately performed by individual social beings and thus they clearly are what human agency is about” (2011, p. 16). Many practice turners take the same stance and consider that PT overcomes the agent-structure dichotomy (e.g., Brown, 2012, p. 444; Navari, 2011, p. 618; Hopf, 2010, p. 547).

This does not mean that PT is another attempt at (potentially hegemonic) synthesis. Practice turners celebrate pluralism within PT and IR. For Adler and Pouliot (2011, p. 28), “Taking international practices seriously leads not to synthesis but to dialogue. Instead of interparadigmatic competition, subsumption, or even complementarity, the concept of practice promises cross-fertilization.” For Bueger and Gadinger, the trading zone metaphor provides an analytical framework to think about PT without downplaying the important disagreements about core issues that practice theorists have. As they explain, in the trading zone, “Different (IR) practitioners meet and trade ideas of how to conduct intelligible IR research in relying on concepts of practice. In engaging in this trade IR

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practitioners might continue to fundamentally disagree over the meaning of core concepts” (2014, p. 12). The pragmatic epistemology expounded below provides a space for dialogue, eclecticism, exchange of different views, and cross-fertilization—not synthesis (Cornut, 2015B).

Despite their many similarities, the two interpretations presented above disagree on an important point. On the one hand, Adler and Pouliot argue that PT can accommodate scholars coming from different and even opposed parts of the epistemological spectrum. For them, the “concept of practice has unparalleled potential in providing a conceptual intersection around which IR theories may cluster. As an entry point to the study of world politics, it accommodates, and speaks to, a variety of perspectives in a coherent yet flexible fashion” (Adler & Pouliot, 2011, p. 28). Practice “may help promote the development of a common language despite theoretical divides” (2011, p. 11). Virtually any approach can turn to practices to produce new and interesting insights without fundamentally changing its core assumptions. From this perspective, deterrence, balancing, and arms races can be studied by realist scholars as specific practices (for a study of the practice of deterrence, see Morgan, 2011; on the influence of domestic practices on balancing, see Ripsman, 2011); liberal scholars could focus on cooperative practices such as international law and the creation of international institutions (for an application of PT to international law, see Brunnée & Toope, 2011); constructivists could look at practices that constitute social groups and interaction (for such an analysis of the community of international peacebuilders see Autesserre, 2014); and so on for any IR approach.

On the other hand, for Bueger and Gadinger (2014, p. 13), “Not every IR theorist is a practice theorist, can be a practice theorist or is doing practice-oriented research.” They agree to say that “the opposition of practice theory to other approaches should not be overemphasized” (Bueger & Gadinger, 2014, p. 10), but for them, “Many IR scholars, although talking about practice, do not share the epistemological and ontological commitments that practice theories imply, such as a performative understanding of the world, or an understanding of science as one cultural domain among others” (Bueger & Gadinger, 2014, p. 13). They identify five clusters around what they call “core approaches” in international PT of traders within the PT trading zone: the praxeology of Pierre Bourdieu; the communities of practice of Etienne Wenger; the narrative approaches inspired by Michel de Certeau; the Actor-Network Theory (ANT) of Bruno Latour, Michel Callon and Karin Knorr Cetina; and the pragmatic sociology of Luc Boltanski. The last two in particular have gained some attention among critical PT IR scholars.

Profoundly relationalist, ANT starts with a controversial statement: non-humans should be considered “actant” in the same way humans are, as they both enter into relations and form networks. These “assemblages” of human and non-human practices are constitutive of world politics as ANT scholars have demonstrated in various contexts (on the role of materials on paradigm shift in climate change perception, see Mayer, 2012; on the epistemic practices of knowledge generation about piracy by IOs, see Bueger, 2015B). Analy-

ses of these networks provide new insights, notably because they contribute to an understanding of practices that does not reify processes (Nexon & Pouliot, 2013).

The pragmatic sociology of Boltanski starts from the contested nature of the normativity and morality of practice. The role of orders of justifications and legitimacy struggles that stem from their encounter is central to this approach. Practice has normative and moral dimensions, and whether it is performed well or not depends on a fragile mutual accountability (on the justification for the legitimacy of the veto of the five permanent members at the United Nations Security Council, see Niemann, 2015). This provides an analysis of the normative dimension of practices on the conceptual level, beyond the more common focus on the normativity of practices in terms of epistemology.

Bueger and Gadinger's PT trading zone does not include any IR approaches, but only those that belong to one of the five clusters they identify: "Rather than turning practice theory into an overcrowded circus, the ontological and epistemological purity which gives practice theory its distinct value has to be safeguarded" (2014, p. 13). The "trading zone" is therefore more restrictive than the "gluon"—only approaches that explicitly relate to PT and share specific epistemological assumptions can be included. Nonetheless, it includes very different philosophical traditions. On the one hand, this creates spaces for innovative approaches beyond Bourdieu's dominating praxeology and its specific definition of relationality, agency, and change. On the other hand, authors from different clusters identified by Bueger and Gadinger disagree on fundamental issues. In their works, the former often construct their core assumptions in opposition to one another. As a consequence, many sociologists and philosophers consider that these traditions are incompatible.

### Practices as a Model

In the line of Bueger and Gadinger's criticism, Adler and Pouliot's broad conception of PT has been challenged on several grounds. Several scholars consider that their definition of practices is too vague to be heuristically meaningful. For Andersen and Neumann (2012, p. 468), these ambiguities are "part of the explanation for the difficulties of formulating a 'practice approach' and the vagueness of the concept of 'practices'". When studying the social world, practices can easily come to mean everything and thus nothing at the same time." For Ringmar (2014, pp. 3–4) there "is no definition of practices that can command broad assent and yet retain sufficient explanatory power." First, this section reviews Ringmar's criticism, and then it will focus on the criticism of Andersen and Neumann.

For Ringmar, Adler and Pouliot's conception of practices is too broad to be meaningful; it is epistemologically flawed, less innovative than it claims, and potentially hegemonic: "There is no unique role to play for practices in bridging ontological gaps" (2014, pp. 3–4). Incompatibilities supposedly bridged by PT cannot be overcome. For instance, it is not clear how the study of practices creates a space in which rationality (which emphasizes the maximization of utility) and practicality (which emphasizes the role of inarticulate knowledge) can both stand. The same can be said about the gap between meaning and

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materiality, supposedly bridged by Adler and Pouliot's conception of practices: "As long as a sharp distinction is drawn between our bodies and our minds, the dichotomy between the material and the meaningful cannot be transcended" (2014, p. 11) (for criticisms that go in the same direction, see Kratochwil, 2011; Duvall & Chowdhury, 2011).

An interparadigmatic research program is not even conceivable for Ringmar. The way that Adler and Pouliot sought to reframe the agent-structure debate is a good illustration of this impossibility. Because practices—instead of agents or structure—are made "ontologically primitive," there "is no longer an agent who faces a structure, but instead practices that are responsible for the production of both." This makes PT "in complete agreement with post-structuralist scholars of international relations who repeatedly have made the same claim" (2014, p. 17). This is therefore not a genuine interparadigmatic research program but a reworking of post-structuralist ideas—even if, for Ringmar, it is not recognized as such by Adler and Pouliot.

Andersen and Neumann devise a conception of PT in which practices are a model of reality and not the reality itself. At the heart of the disagreement between them on the one hand, and Adler and Pouliot on the other, lays the debate between a conception arguing that "bringing practice to the forefront of IR theory intends not to promote a new 'ism' but to serve existing 'isms'" (Adler & Pouliot, 2011, p. 10) and another one that sees PT as a "new approach to IR" (Andersen & Neumann, 2012, p. 468) and "a good complementary alternative to more widely used approaches" (Andersen & Neumann, 2012, p. 461).

For Andersen and Neumann, Adler and Pouliot verge on empiricism when they contend that practices are "the raw materials that comprise [the world]" (Adler & Pouliot, 2011, p. 13) or that data collection should be done "prior to theorization and objectification" (Pouliot, 2008, p. 285). They take issue with these conceptions. Practices are not "real existing everyday phenomena" (Andersen & Neumann, 2012, p. 461). Adler and Pouliot's conception would contradict a basic methodological and epistemological cornerstone in the philosophy of science, which is that there exists no "fact" outside of a theory (Bueger & Gadinger, 2014, p. 6).

Andersen and Neumann take a different starting point. Practices should not be understood as something practitioners really do (i.e., as something having a real ontological existence outside any theoretical framework). Practices should be considered an analytical tool entirely constructed by scholars to make sense of what is going on. They explain:

For practices to add both clarity and analytical leverage to the study of world politics, the concept must be included and defined at the level of models, and not just as the practical counterpart in the world to a model of some *other* phenomenon. Practices should not be what is represented by the model. Practice should be the representation.

(Andersen & Neumann, 2012, p. 466)

They therefore build a *model* of practice. This model has four assumptions: what is a practice is defined by practitioners themselves, processes matter more than fixed entities, there is no a priori distinction between material and ideational objects, and there is nothing unobservable behind practices. To illustrate the heuristic value of this model they apply it to the “wampum diplomacy” that occurred between the Iroquois Confederacy and the European colonies in the 17th and 18th centuries.

One of the main advantages of Andersen and Neumann’s model is methodological: seeing practices as a model avoids the problems faced by any inductive research agenda—namely the identification and selection of data among (infinite) empirics. Practices become a “workable category” instead: “We can analytically specify our area of investigation without having to lean on a definition of practices that forces us to take into account all that is being done to be consistent” (2012, pp. 479–480). For them, this provides a stronger basis for PT.

## Epistemological, Methodological, and Normative Challenges and Debates

Habits are not directly accessible. They are located in the mind of practitioners, and this creates a series of epistemological and methodological difficulties. The last section of this review article deals with these difficulties. How can we study practices? What are the meta-theoretical assumptions implied by any such study? This section first introduces the promises and pitfalls of three different methods for studying practices—participant observation, interviews, and discourse analysis. Then, the epistemological foundation of PT is presented: it is an interpretive and reflexive approach that builds on a pragmatic epistemology that considers knowledge as socially constructed. Finally, the normative debates practice turners have are introduced.

### Method

Taking the term from Mol (2002), Bueger uses the label “praxiography” in reference to reflections about how PT can and should be applied (2014). Practice turners emphasize the need for scholars to conduct empirical research within the sites where practices are performed—against what Neumann (2002, p. 628) called “armchair analysis,” that is, “text-based analyses of global politics that are not complemented by different kinds of contextual data from the field, data that may illuminate how foreign policy and global politics are experienced as lived practices.” Uncovering practices often calls for a direct involvement within practitioners’ field of practice.

That is why several practice turners choose participant observation and ethnographic methods of inquiry. This engagement gives scholars an insider view of this field, without which they are unable to link practices with the mental dispositions these practices stem from. As Bueger and Gadinger (2014, p. 4) explain, “Rather than trying to be ‘objective’ and ‘distant’ observers, they had to engage with their subject of investigation. This re-



quired not only to observe practices, but also learn and adapt and become active.” They continue: “Doing practice theory is observing the practices of others, talking about practices, participating in practices, and reflecting on practices all at the same time.” For instance, Neumann builds on his experience in the Norwegian foreign service to study diplomatic practices within ministries of foreign affairs (2012); Ambrosetti (2009, 2012) and Schia (2013) both start from a months-long involvement within the UN Security Council.

Yet, ethnographic methods of inquiry are not always possible—they often require more time and resources than scholars can afford. For Brown (2012, p. 442), “Knowing how to get along in the world takes time.” For Bueger (2014, pp. 399–400), “Participant observation is a demanding research technology, it requires considerable logistics (such as organizing a lengthy field stay), may put the researcher at a high professional, social, or physical risk (e.g. field research in conflict zones), and it is resource intensive and implies significant time and often considerable financial investments.” This is particularly the case in international security, where access is often problematic (Pouliot, 2012). When scholars want to study difficult-to-access sites, they often must use other methods.

Many PT scholars thus rely on interviews. The interviewees provide an insider point of view that scholars do not have. Through various techniques, scholars can reconstruct practitioners’ point of view, their mental dispositions, their strategies, the doxa, and the rules of the game in the specific field of practice under study. Pouliot (2012, p. 49) identifies four of them: (1) “ask interviewees to recount their everyday practices,” (2) “ask interviewees to describe the practice of their colleagues and other interlocutors,” (3) “recreate part of the practical context by doing group interview,” and (4) “treat interviews themselves as performances.” For instance, Adler-Nissen and Pouliot (2014) reconstructed the concrete workings of power in international politics and analyze the negotiation of the Libyan war in 2011 at the UN Security Council and NATO through dozens of interviews with diplomats, political experts, and international civil servants. Hardt (2014), also using interviews, shows how informal practices influence diplomatic negotiations over peace operations in international organizations.

This method should be used with caution because interviews only indirectly give access to ways of doing things. PT points to implicit knowledge and tacit understanding, whereas interviews often provide reflexive analyses by necessity. As Pouliot explains, practical knowledge “appears self-evident to its bearer” (2008, p. 271) and that is why it “cannot readily be verbalized or explicated by the agents themselves” (2008, p. 269). Also, practical knowledge “is often like asking fish to describe the water in which they swim” and “chefs do not explain their recipes the same way they perform them.” Interviews always need to be interpreted with this in mind: “Background dispositions must be read between the lines” (Pouliot, 2008, pp. 284–285). Habits, doxa, and mental dispositions are such because they are taken for granted. Being unarticulated is precisely what makes them powerful—one could even argue that the more hidden they are, the more influential they will be.

Scholars should also consider the fact that practitioners are never neutral observers of their own practices. They frame these practices in particular ways (Bueger, 2014, p. 400). Their answers generally serve their interests, positioned against other interests. These answers should never be taken at face value and need to be interpreted as part of struggles in the field (Leander, 2011, p. 296). Yet, despite these caveats, interviews often provide precious and solid information to analyze fields of practice.

Some scholars use texts, objects, and discourses to reconstruct practices: “Praxiography analyzes documents—including manuals and handbooks—, ego-documents—such as letters and auto-biographies—, or artifacts which record practice—such as videos, paintings, or architecture” (Bueger, 2014, p. 389). Texts and objects are here considered artifacts of the tacit knowledge and background assumptions of practitioners. Sometimes—as in a study of historical practices—there is just no other solution. Such is the case with Andersen and Neumann’s study of “wampum diplomacy.” Their analysis is as follows: “It is the account of participants’ experiences that is the point of departure” even if this is through “recounted observed experiences.” “That the participants are to specify what the practice consists of,” they continue, “is not dependent on direct, first-hand observation, but could equally rely on second-hand sources” (2012, p. 470). It is important to add that texts and discourses are often even more reflexive and manipulative than interviews. These documents should be used with even more caution.

### Epistemology

In a way or another, most scholars consider that practices are the observable traces left by habits: they look at practices and inductively infer practitioners’ habits from them. Here, as Hopf (2010, p. 551) explains, “Absence [of reflection] is evidence.” As a consequence, from an epistemological point of view, any inference regarding practices and habits should remain cautious. As Brown (2012, p. 456) puts it, “Those who focus on practice should be particularly careful to be modest in the claims they make about the status and authority of their conclusions.” PT stands against neo-positivism and its “hubristic claims” that the world can be explained (Brown, 2012, p. 456; also McCourt, 2012; Navari, 2011).

The analysis of traces left by habits and the disclosure of mental dispositions are always dependent on the analysts’ point of view. As Turner (1994, p. 24) put it, “Practices are objects of a peculiar kind, dependent on a cultural perspective.” Bueger (2014, p. 389) writes that “the praxiographic research process is one of turning implicit knowledge into explicit. This implies a high degree of interpretation.” It builds on a specific epistemology that locates it among interpretivist approaches. In this epistemology, the position of the researcher is characterized by a subtle equilibrium between distance and involvement, as well as between an understanding of practices “from the inside” and “from the outside” of the field under study. Pouliot therefore suggests a “subjectivist” methodology that combines subjectivity and objectivity in the conduct of inquiry (2007).

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What Turner labelled the “Mauss problem” explains more precisely why practices cannot be studied objectively. At the beginning of the 20th century, French sociologist Marcel Mauss observed that French women changed the way they walk, tending to walk like American women. The “Mauss problem” is the fact that Mauss needs to be within French society to understand this difference as a difference of practices. Only by being within that culture can he attribute causality to culture. How can he be sure that this is not a “natural” phenomenon? Turner (1994, p. 21) explains: “Mauss could distinguish the walk as habit *because* he could say that the difference in walks he had noticed was not a natural difference, and he could say that it was not a natural difference because he could give a historical account of it. He started, so to speak, within a culture with its expectations.” Turner imagines a Martian making the same observation. This Martian would be unable to see the different ways women walk as a difference of habits and practices because she is outside French (or U.S.) culture; in other words, the attribution of causality to practice requires knowledge of that culture. Practices are always (implicitly) compared with other practices.

As all practice is analyzed through the lenses of researchers’ own practices of theorization, it is impossible to study practices without being reflexive. Because “the inquirer is constituting the practice” (Turner, 1994, p. 36), reflexivity—the objectification of their own practice by the researcher themselves—is a cornerstone of PT methodology (Bourdieu, 2004). For Kratochwil (2011, p. 38), a “focus on practice also requires embedding the practice of knowledge production in wider social processes.” More specifically, scholars should be aware that their potential biases are a two-way street, going from the scholar to the object of observation as much as from the object of observation to the scholar. “If left unchecked, the habitus of the scientist will distort scientific claims both because s/he will look selectively at the observed but also because the observed text, person, image will speak back selectively... [Reflexivity] is not a ‘narcissist’ navel gazing exercise. It is a ‘scientific exercise’ (Leander, 2011, p. 307). Practice turners should therefore reflect on their own practices as members of specific social groups and cultures (on reflexivity, see also: Bueger, 2012; Bueger & Gadinger, 2007; Bigo, 2011; D’Aoust, 2012; Hamati-Ataya, 2012; Berling & Bueger, 2013; and Madsen, 2011; for a critical assessment of PT reflexivity, see Schmidt, 2014).

Anderson and Neumann (2012, p. 465) take issue with this conception. For them, “the model as a creation of the researcher is logically distinct from what the model is said to represent.” Yet their opposition has more to do with the inclusion of what researchers do inside an ontology of practice than with reflexivity per se. They admit that research “is also a social category, involved in what it investigates.” How they elaborated their model of practice shows that they know that the model they create is the result of subjective and political choices that are influential on their findings—and as such, they have to make these choices explicit: “The goal and position of the researcher should be made clear and systematised from the start” (Anderson & Neumann, 2012, p. 468).

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This locates PT within the pragmatic and post-foundationalist epistemological tradition, in line with pragmatists William James, John Dewey, and Charles Sanders Peirce and neo-pragmatists Hillary Putnam and Richard Rorty. In this tradition, the validity of any scientific attribution is decided through adjudication (i.e., consensual agreement among scholars about the validity of the knowledge claims). Pragmatism “implies turning away from abstractions and ideal conceptions, from a priori, axioms, and the ideal of compelling demonstrations, to arguments and justifications... . ‘Truth’ is not simply given, revealed, or intuited by theoretical reason; rather, it results from practical activity, from learning and contestation” (Kratochwil, 2011, p. 46).

Ontological coherence makes such an epistemological stance necessary. Indeed, if the social world is constituted by fields of practice, the world of scientists should also be considered as such. As Turner (1994, p. 9) explains, “If practices are diverse and therefore ‘local’, then truth and validity are themselves local, and only local, because they are always relative to practices that are themselves local.” He continues: “The truths we can construct within our practices are thus ‘socially constructed’—constructed by relying on practices that are themselves shared within a particular social group or network.” Put differently, if each field has particular doxa, hierarchies, and rules of the game, the scientific field is defined by its own (scientific) doxa, hierarchy, and rules of the game. Thus, the tools used to analyze social realities could and should also be used to analyze the field of research itself (on pragmatism, also see Friedrich & Kratochwil, 2009; Haas & Haas, 2002; Hellman, 2009; Bauer & Brighi, 2011; Cornut, 2014, 2015B; Franke & Weber, 2012; Sil, 2009; Bueger & Gadinger, 2015).

### Normativity

There is a certain consensus about PT’s interpretive, reflexive, and pragmatic epistemology. On the contrary, the normativity implied by this epistemology is much more contested. Three approaches should be distinguished. There are problem-solving, critical, and mainstream practice turners.

First, some practice turners see the turn to practices as a way of building bridges between scholars and practitioners. For these scholars, a focus on practice and a theory of practice invite scholars to leave their ivory towers and interact with practitioners. This ideally leads to more policy-relevant work. For them, PT “includes the promise to get closer to the actions and lifeworlds of the practitioners who do international relations, to produce knowledge which is of relevance beyond the immediate group of peers and might even address societal concerns or contribute to crafting better policies” (Bueger & Gadinger, 2014, p. 5). Put differently, they consider that a methodology that emphasizes direct involvement with practitioners leads to the same direct involvement at a normative level. This is in line with some interpretations of methodological pragmatism as bridging the gap between theory and practice (Sil & Katzenstein, 2010; Sil, 2009).

A second group of scholars considers that PT is an approach that opens up the possibility of a *critical* involvement in the world. These scholars envision their work as siding with

the dominated. Instead of producing policy-relevant works that reinforce the status quo and support the dominating class, they consider that PT analytical tools unravel the multiple ways through which the domination is produced and reproduced in practice. They thus generate critical reflections and create the condition for changes in the hierarchical distribution of social positions. For Leander, PT works to “open up scope for politics and revisions. It is only by unveiling and clarifying the positions/dispositions that underpin the constant reproduction in practices ... that one can ever hope to alter it, that is to introduce politics into the process” (2011, p. 306).

A third group of practice turners rejects both calls for a policy-relevant research and those in favor of a critical involvement on the side of the dominated. For these mainstream PT scholars, reflexivity does not entail engagement. They see PT as an approach that provides new tools with which to think about international politics. These tools do not imply any kind of direct engagement with the “real” world of practitioners other than a focus on their practices. Engagement with IR mainstream often requires this cautious distance from any kind of political involvement outside of the ivory tower. PT in this perspective shares with mainstream IR approaches skeptical views about the extent to which academic analyses could be directly applicable by and useful to practitioners, whether dominant or dominated. This is sometimes explicit. For Mérand and Pouliot (2008, p. 604), “Authors who refer to Bourdieu in IR often belong to a critical camp that does not share [their] ambition to reach the heart of the discipline and its dominant approaches.” Mérand and Pouliot “see no reason to assume a radical incommensurability with the ‘mainstream’ discipline.” Works produced by the third group of scholars thus do not bridge the policy/theory or activist/analyst divide.

For some, this posture is questionable. Critical scholars consider that there is no fundamental difference between the first and the third group of practice turners. For Anna Leander, the “disinterestedness [of mainstream PT scholars] is all the more effective in (re-)producing social hierarchies because it is misrecognized” (2011, p. 306). From a normative point of view, critical practice turners are more faithful to Bourdieu and Foucault’s thinking on the matter. In their own works, the latter emphasized scholars’ responsibility to critically engage with the world against the alienation of the dominated.

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