The Play of International Practice

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The core claims of the practice turn in International Relations (IR) remain ambiguous. What promises does international practice theory hold for the field? How does the kind of theorizing it produces differ from existing perspectives? What kind of research agenda does it produce? This article addresses these questions. Drawing on the work of Andreas Reckwitz, we show that practice approaches entail a distinctive view on the drivers of social relations. Practice theories argue against individualistic-interest and norm-based actor models. They situate knowledge in practice rather than "mental frames" or "discourse." Practice approaches focus on how groups perform their practical activities in world politics to renew and reproduce social order. They therefore overcome familiar dualisms—agents and structures, subjects and objects, and ideational and material—that plague IR theory. Practice theories are a heterogeneous family, but, as we argue, share a range of core commitments. Realizing the promise of the practice turn requires considering the full spectrum of its approaches. However, the field primarily draws on trajectories in international practice theory that emphasize reproduction and hierarchies. It should pay greater attention to practice approaches rooted in pragmatism and that emphasize contingency and change. We conclude with an outline of core challenges that the future agenda of international practice theory must tackle.

The Practice Turn in International Relations

The practice turn has, after many fits and starts, arrived in International Relations (IR) theory. (Pouliot 2008; Adler and Pouliot 2011b; Acuto and Curtis 2013; Adler-Nissen 2013b; Bueger and Gadinger 2014). But current work fails to adequately elaborate on the promise of the practice turn. It supplies partial—and sometimes unclear—answers to what distinguishes international practice theories from alternative frameworks, such as rationalism and mainstream constructivism. For example, Adler and Pouliot (2011a:28) suggest not only that practice approaches constitute a new paradigm for the study of IR, but that practice theory provides a "big tent" capable of accommodating all of the wide range of ontological and epistemological stances found in the field.

We argue, in contrast, that the practice turn entails a distinctive way of studying the world. Since they take practices as the core unit of analysis, practice approaches provide a different understanding of the international. Thereby, they move away from models of action that focus on the calculation of interests or the evaluation of norms. At the same time, practice theories adopt many of the same assumptions and sensibilities that IR scholars elsewhere describe as "cultural" (Lapid and Kratochwil 1996), "critical" (Ashley 1987), "cognitive" (Adler 1991), or "constructivist" (Guzzini 2000). In seeing "practices" as the stuff that drives the world and makes it "hang together," the everyday practices of diplomats, terrorists, environmentalists, or financial analysts become the object of investigation. Focusing on them allows us to better understand dynamics of order and change.

Confusion about the practice turn, as well as the very idea of international practice theory, abounds. We seek to reduce this confusion by laying out its assumptions, promises, and challenges. To do so, we adopt a multilayered strategy. We first clarify how, in ideal-typical terms, practice theory differs from other social-theoretical frameworks. We show that practice theory not only opposes rationalism and norm-oriented theories, but also distinguishes itself from common culturalist approaches. We then introduce and discuss six core commitments of practice theory at the level of ontology, epistemology, and methodology. Practice theory implies emphasizing process, developing an account of knowledge as action, appreciating the collectivity of knowledge, recognizing the materiality of practice, embracing the multiplicity of orders, and working with a performative understanding

of the world. We talk about commitments—rather than principles or shared assumptions—in order to emphasize the heterogeneous character of practice theory. In other words, it is a diverse "family." Specific theorists interpret the commitments differently.

Hence, we next discuss the spectrum of practice approaches. We argue, in particular, against the tendency to equate international practice theory solely with Bourdieu's praxeology. The field requires a broader understanding of international practice theory in order to make sense of the diverse phenomena found in world politics. This includes, most notably, sustained engagement with practice theoretical approaches rooted in the tradition of pragmatism. Such a broader understanding entails paying attention to core points of contention within practice theory, and recognizing the challenges that they raise for a practice theoretical research agenda. We discuss four major concerns practice approaches will have to deal with in one way or another: questions of change, scale, methodology, and reflexivity. How scholars address these concerns will, we contend, prove critical to the fate of international practice theory.

(Mis)Understanding the Practice Turn

The idea of a practice turn in IR has already produced significant criticisms. In an article-length critique, Ringmar expresses extreme skepticism about international practice theory. As he argues, "practices of one kind or another are what scholars of IR always have studied" (Ringmar 2014:2). Indeed, practice has gradually emerged as a core category within constructivism. More than two decades ago, for example, Wendt (1992:413) invoked it as an intermediary between agents and structure. However, when Neumann (2002) suggested the need to pay greater attention to practice theory, he advanced a different argument: that we should promote the concept of practice from a supporting to a leading role. Neumann's suggestion, as we demonstrate later, entails major implications for ontology, epistemology, and methodology in IR.

More recently, the work of Adler and Pouliot (2011a,b) has become closely associated with the practice turn. They do not claim that practice theory constitutes a "universal grand theory" or a "totalizing ontology of everything social" (Adler and Pouliot 2011a:2). But their approach stresses practices as a concept capable of integrating a broad range of work in contemporary IR. This move obscures key wagers of practice-turn theories while minimizing its potential contributions to understanding international affairs. Not every IR theory is, or should be, a practice theory; many approach the world in ways incompatible with practice-driven research. Although they discuss practice, many IR scholars do not share the epistemological and ontological commitments that practice theories imply. Thus, while we praise Adler and Pouliot for beginning the discussion in IR and promoting the cause, there is the danger of turning practice theory into an overcrowded circus. The ontological and epistemological commitments that give practice theory its distinct value must be safeguarded. This is not an argument for isolation. It does not imply that practice theorists cannot (or should not) productively cooperate and converse with other IR theories. On the contrary, such cooperation and collaboration, notably in empirical work, holds a great deal of promise. The precondition for such cooperation is, however, a clear understanding of what practice theory

is and what it is not. Theoretical rigor provides the foundation for dialogue. In contrast to the position of Adler and Pouliot, we argue for, and work from, what we call a cautious position of coherence. Such a position does not claim to find a definite core that represents the concept of practice (Kratochwil 2011:37); however, it draws attention to a number of core commitments that, despite being interpreted and implemented differently, are shared within the family of practice theory.

The history of earlier "turns" in the discipline highlights the need to demarcate clearer boundaries of international practice theory. The rise of constructivism remains a well-known example of the difficulty in developing a productive research program on weak conceptual grounds. After the euphoria surrounding the emergence of the constructivist approach began to wane, the field witnessed a growing sense of disillusionment. Some of this stemmed from the dominant position of Alexander Wendt's articulation of constructivism and, concurrently, the increasing dilution of constructivism's basic premises (Fierke 2002). Scholars spent vast intellectual energy resolving resulting epistemological and ontological confusion and designing consistent and coherent avenues for research (Kratochwil 2008). The same fate could befall the practice turn in IR. If we lose sight of the ontological and epistemological commitments that give practice theory its distinct value, then we render the practice turn vulnerable to precisely the kinds of criticisms leveled by Ringmar (2014:2) that "there is nothing truly new about this research," because the field has always studied the activities of people, states, and other actors in world politics.

Sorting Things Out: The Foundations of International Practice Theory

Reckwitz (2002a, 2004a,b, 2008, 2010) maps social theories in a manner that helps specify the distinctiveness of practice theories. He sorts approaches into different streams and situates practice theory within them. Reckwitz identifies three major categories: rationalism, norm-oriented theorizing, and cultural theory (Table 1). Within the last, he locates three families: mentalism, textualism, and practice theory.

Classes of Social Theory: Interests, Norms, and Culture

One major class of contemporary social analysis builds upon assumptions of instrumental rationality. Theories within this class rely on methodological individualism and concentrate on individual action; they treat individuals as self-interested and equipped with subjective rationality. In

TABLE 1. Three Classes of Contemporary Social Theory

	Central elements of meaning	Behavior as an explanatory problem
Homo oeconomicus	Interests and beliefs	Individual actions
Homo sociologicus	Normative order	Intersubjective coordination of action
Cultural theories	Collective orders of knowledge: symbolic-cognitive orders	Repetitive patterns of action

Reckwitz (2004a:318), own translation.

consequence, they view the social sphere as essentially the product of individual actions (Reckwitz 2002a:245). In contrast, norm-oriented theories focus on the social in rules that establish conditions of possibility for action. These theories assume that actors consent to normative rules. This enables them to distinguish between allowed, prohibited, worthwhile, and worthless behavior. Normative consensus guarantees social order (Reckwitz 2002a:245). Normative expectations and roles prevent a potential endless confrontation of disparate interests. Despite their differences, both of these approaches deviate from culturalist theories in an important way. They "both dismiss the implicit, tacit or unconscious layer of knowledge which enables a symbolic organization of reality" (Reckwitz 2002a:246).

Instead of understanding social order as the coordination of actions through norms and rules, culturalist approaches focus on understanding what makes actors believe that the world is ordered in the first place, and therefore renders them capable of acting within it. This capacity to grasp the world as ordered presupposes a layer of symbolic and meaningful rules, that is, culture. Culture regulates the ascription of meaning to objects and provides procedures for understanding them (Reckwitz 2002a:246). Culturalist approaches enable analysts to address questions of social order that elude alternative frameworks. Theorizing based on instrumental rationality reduces the challenges of social order to the unequal distribution of resources. It therefore omits collective patterns of action. For their part, norm-based theories claim to more fully explain collective actions and change. However, they struggle to explain the emergence and constitution of norms themselves.

Culturalist approaches provide an elaborate solution to this problem. Rather than presuppose that norms guide acting subjects, they instead scrutinize the "how" and "why" of the prior ordering. In their view, it is precisely collectively shared orders of knowledge, systems of symbols, meanings, or cultural codes that generate rules for action. Culturalist theories locate the social within collectively meaningful orders and the symbolic organization of reality (Reckwitz 2002a:246–47). They understand social order as a product of collectively shared knowledge.

Three Families of Culturalist Theorizing: Ideas, Discourse, and Practice

Culturalist approaches differ in how they conceptualize collectively shared orders of knowledge. Reckwitz identifies three families of culturalist theorizing based on this difference: mentalist, textualist, and practice theoretical.[1] Mentalist accounts see shared orders of knowledge expressed in the human mind and its cognitions. They understand culture as a mental and cognitive phenomenon; they therefore locate it in the human mind, mental structures, or the "head" of human beings (Reckwitz 2002a:247). Mentalist approaches treat shared cognitive-mental schemes as the smallest unit of the social and as

their main object of analysis. Classical representatives of this perspective are Max Weber's world images (*Weltbilder*), the phenomenology of Alfred Schütz or Edmund Husserl or French structuralism presented by thinkers such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss (Reckwitz 2002a:247).

Whereas mentalists focus on the minds of individuals to study shared knowledge, textualists take the opposite route. They do not identify shared knowledge in the "inside," but rather on the "outside" (Reckwitz 2002a:248), that is, in symbols, discourses, communication or in "text" that lie outside the individual's mind. Post-structuralism, radical hermeneutics, constructivist systems theory, or semiotics associated with scholars like Clifford Geertz, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Niklas Luhmann, Paul Ricœur, or Roland Barthes mostly represent this mode of theorizing. Despite their divergences, these approaches unite in their focus on extra-subjective structures of meaning. They tend to rely on discourse analysis to decipher cultural codes and rules of formation. Foucault's (1972) early work *Archeology of Knowledge* and Geertz's (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures* are paradigmatic in this regard.

The third family—practice theory—embraces the importance of mentalist and textualist ideas, yet suggests locating shared knowledge in practices. The focus is neither on the internal (inside the head of actors), nor on the external (in some form of structure). Instead, scholars see practice as ontologically in between the inside and the outside. They identify the social in the mind (since individuals are carriers of practices), but also in symbolic structures (since practices form more or less extra-subjective structures and patterns of action). Practice theorists foreground an understanding of shared knowledge as practical knowledge. They are interested in concrete situations of life in which actors perform a common practice and thus create and maintain social orderliness. For practice theorists, the intentions and motivations of actors are less relevant. Their actual activities and practical enactments in concrete situations matter. In other words, situations become more significant than actors.

As Reckwitz (2002a:249) defines it, "a practice is a routinized type of behavior which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge." Performing a practice always depends on the interconnectivity of all these elements. We cannot reduce practice to any one of them (Reckwitz 2002a:250). Schatzki's (2012:2) understanding of practice as an "open-ended, spatially-temporally dispersed nexus of doings and sayings" emphasizes, in a similar way, the site of the social in practical activities. Sociologists provide examples such as the everyday practices of consumption, work, and family life (for example, Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012). In IR, such everyday practices obtain in diplomacy, international business transactions, and military activity. Theorists of practice criticize the tendency of mentalists and textualists to overintellectualize the social. Although such a criticism should not be overstated, action, including political action, remains more banal than textualist and mentalists assume. In distancing themselves from practical activities, mentalists and textualists tend to overemphasize intellectual constructs at the price of practical human competencies and evaluations.

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[1] Reckwitz (2002a:249) initially included intersubjectivism as a fourth family of culturalist theorizing. There the social is not located in mental qualities or symbolic orders, but in interaction and the use of ordinary language. Habermas's "theory of communication" is the paradigmatic case for an intersubjective understanding that is well established in IR (Deitelhoff 2009). As Reckwitz (2010) showed in later articles, this differentiation can however be neglected due to the strong convergence between intersubjectivism and the concerns of practice theory.

Reckwitz's mapping provides a useful tool for situating practice theories in IR. Since the 1990s, a controversy between rationalist and norm-oriented approaches drives IR theorizing (for example, Fearon and Wendt 2002), often presented as a debate between a *logic of consequences* and a *logic of appropriateness*. Yet, a number of "via medias," "middle ground" constructions and "hybrids" also thrive in the field and often blur the lines between the two approaches or creatively combine elements (cf. the diagnosis of Guzzini (2000) and Patrick T. Jackson (2008)). In particular, this applies to the usage of terms such as "culture." Although some would claim that IR has seen a cultural turn (Lapid and Kratochwil 1996), scholars frequently reduce the cultural to an intervening variable added to an otherwise rationalist explanation (for example, Katzenstein 1996). Such an understanding has little to nothing in common with the notion of culture in social theory. What Reckwitz describes as "culturalist theorizing" in IR, moreover, often has other labels. For instance, an early description of "critical theory" by Richard Ashley comes close to Reckwitz's understanding of cultural theorizing. He argued that:

> approaches meriting the label 'critical' stress the community-shared background understandings, skills, and practical predispositions without which it would be impossible to interpret action, assign meaning, legitimate practices, empower agents, and constitute a differentiated, highly structured social reality (Ashley 1987:403).

Leaving problems of labeling aside, the Reckwitzian map of mentalism, textualism, and practice theory can usefully capture current international theory. We find expressions of the mentalist stream in IR, for instance, in early cognitive-psychological works or constructivist research on "ideas" (although much of this research is hybridical in so far as it remains committed to a positivist epistemology, Laffey and Weldes 1997). Also, studies operating with concepts such as "belief systems," "world views," "operational codes," or "frames" rely on mentalist reasoning. They focus on mental "sense making" events as the object of analysis and explore, for instance, the impact of past experiences on future action. Although based on individuals' cognitive acts of interpretation, such studies adopt a mentalism perspective. They focus on the shared knowledge and meaning structures that coexist in a groups mind. Yet, they distance themselves from the rational actor models of methodological individualism (Goldstein and Keohane 1993:7). Studies, for example, analyze the shared effects that "experience" has on political actors in collective decision making (Hafner-Burton, Hughes, and Victor 2013) or draw on cognitive psychology to explain the link between personality profile and leadership style of world leaders (Steinberg 2005) or the mental schemes of terrorists (Crenshaw 2000).

Textualism had a very sustained effect on international theory, notably in European and Canadian IR. Introduced in the late 1980s by the "dissidents in international thought" movement (Ashley and Walker 1990), expressions of textualism have become well anchored in the discipline. We find them under labels such as "post-structuralism," "discourse theory," or "discourse analysis." In the aftermath of the third debate (Lapid 1989), the study of textual structures became particularly influential in critical security, European integration, and foreign policy studies. A range of classical contributions draws on discourse analysis to study textual structures as preconditions for the actions of diplomats, regional cooperation, transnational identity, the identification of threats, or the development of security strategies.[2] If authors rely on different theorists—including Derrida or Foucault—their studies share the same objective. They want to understand world political phenomena by investigating extra-subjective structures of meaning through which agents achieve the capability to act. They show, for instance, that shared knowledge establishes authority and that textual genres render distinct forms of knowledge as acceptable (Hansen 2006:7). Thus, language is "a site of inclusion and exclusion" and creates a "space for producing and denouncing specific subjectivities within the political realm" (Herschinger 2011:13).

International relations theories develop their own disciplinary understandings of the Reckwitzian categories. Yet, the framework allows us to capture the major lines in the field. This also becomes visible if we ask how practice theory was introduced to IR theory. Neumann (2002) introduced practice theory by contrasting it with textualism, while Pouliot (2008) did so by demonstrating the difference between rationalist and norm-oriented approaches.

The Reckwitzian map gives a sense of orientation. It allows for understanding practice theory by a strategy of "othering." Such a "negative" strategy however runs the risk of underplaying the commonalities between culturalist theorizing and neglecting the many links which exist between de facto expressions of mentalism, textualism, and practice theory. This is notably the case for different variants of post-structuralism that emphasize practice (Wodak 2011). Carving out intellectual space through othering is a helpful, but also dangerous tool. Hence, we require also a positive approximation of what practice theory is. This can be done by identifying the commitments that practice theories rely on.

Commitments of International Practice Theory

Understanding practice theory as composed by a number of core commitments provides a minimal definition of it. In consequence, our understanding of what should count as practice theory changes. The range is narrower than suggested by Adler and Pouliot. Put another way, not everyone who studies practices is a practice theorist. However, it is broader than what is conventionally understood in IR. Notably different variations of pragmatist theorizing are included. In adopting the notion of commitments, our claim is not to have found a definite core that every variant of practice theory or every practice theorist shares or "believes" in. Instead, we argue that conducting practice theoretical analysis involves engaging with a number of themes and concerns. The commitments concern what one can achieve with a practice theoretical approach and clarify the reasons of centering analysis on the unit of practice. Questions such as what a practice *is*, however, remain open to continual interpretation and reconstruction in the conduct of actual practices of research (Kratochwil 2011:37–43).

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[2] See among many others the contributions by Doty (1996), Weldes (1999), or Hansen (2006), which develop textualist accounts based on post-structuralist insights.

First, practice theories emphasize process over stasis. They emphasize the procedural dimension of practice and that any process requires activity. Practice theorists hence prefer verbs such as "ordering," "structuring," and "knowing" over the respective (static) nouns of "order," "structure," or "knowledge." With such a "prioritization of process over substance, relation over separateness, and activity over passivity" (Guillaume 2007:742), practice theories interpret the international through relational ontologies (Jackson and Nexon 1999). As a consequence, scholars bypass essentialist and static notions of the international and sideline distinctions that emphasize these, such as the one between agency and structure.

Second, practice theories offer a distinct perspective on knowledge. They situate knowledge in practice and thereby develop a unified account of knowing and doing (Friedrichs and Kratochwil 2009). Connecting "practice," "acting," and "knowing" implies understanding knowledge as "knowing from within" (Shotter 1993:7). Such a conception of knowledge extends beyond conventional understandings of "knowing that" and "knowing how." Yet, practices cannot be reduced to background knowledge. While knowledge, its application, and creation cannot be separated from action, "it would be wrong to see the concept of practice as merely a synonym for action" (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003:20). In practice, the actor, his beliefs and values, resources, and external environment are integrated "in one 'activity system', in which social, individual and material aspects are interdependent" (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003:20). As a result, knowledge cannot be essentialized, but is instead a spatiotemporally situated phenomenon.

Third, practice theories grasp knowing and the acquisition of knowledge by learning as inherently collective processes. Members of a distinct group (for example, medical professionals, football players, or children in a kindergarten) learn and internalize practices as "rules of the game" mostly through interaction. Practices as "repeated *interactional* patterns" achieve temporary stability because "the need to engage one another forces people to return to common structures" (Swidler 2001:85). In the medical sphere, for instance, formal rules and algorithms provide guidelines in medical operations to guarantee standard practices. These prevent doctors from having to make every decision anew in complicated situations. Yet, performing a practice does not necessarily presuppose an interactional dimension. Human collectiveness is not a general criterion for the sociality of practices. Practices can also involve an "interobjective structure," for example, when actors learn a practice through interaction with a machine or computer without necessarily communicating with other people (Reckwitz 2010:117).

Fourth, practice theorists submit that practices have materiality. Bodies are the main carrier of practices. But they are not the sole one. Material artifacts or technologies can also be carriers of practices. The materiality and embodiment of the world is an aspect which tends to be marginalized in other social and culturalist theorizing. For practice theorists, the world is "continually *doing things*, things that bear upon us not as observation statements upon disembodied intellects but as forces upon material beings" (Pickering 1995:6). To stress the impact of objects, things, and artifacts on social life is not merely adding the element of materiality; it is an attempt to give non-humans a more precise role in the ontologies of the world.

Fifth, social order is appreciated as multiplicity. Instead of assuming universal or global wholes, the assumption is that there are always multiple and overlapping orders (Schatzki 2002:87). There is never a single reality, but always multiple ones. This does not imply chaos, limitless plurality, or an atomized understanding of order. Orderliness is, however, an achievement. It requires work and emerges from routines and repetitiveness in "situated accomplishments" of actors (Lynch 2001:131). As such, order is always shifting and emergent. The assumption is that actors are reflexive and establish social orders through mutual accounts. Thus, the permanent (re-)production of "accountability" is preserved through ongoing practical accomplishments. Practices therefore have a dual role, both creating order through accountability and serving to alter the "structure" by the innovativeness of reflexive agents.

Sixth, practice theories embrace a performative understanding of the world. The world depends on practice. This "world of becoming" is the product of ongoing establishment, reenactment, and maintenance of relations between actors, objects, and material artifacts. The concept of enactment turns the focus away from the idea that objects or structures have assumed a fixed, stable identity and that closure is achieved at some point. Enactment stresses the genuine openness of any construction process. Construction is never complete. Objects, structures, or norms, then, exist primarily in practice. They are real because they are part of practices, and are enacted in them. Such a performative understanding avoids attempting "to tame" practice and to "control its unruliness and instability," as Doty (1997:376) noted early on. In practice theory: "[…] practice must entail an acceptance of its indeterminacy. It must entail a decentering of practice" (Doty 1997:376).

These six commitments stress that doing practice theoretical analysis implies engaging with a range of core themes and concerns. Laying out these commitments gives us a sense of how practice theory coheres and defines its limits. Our intention is, however, not to "police" what practice theory is and what not. Considering these commitments clarifies some of the boundaries. Ringmar's (2014) general attack on the promises of practice theory, for instance, targets two studies. He criticizes Abrahamsen and Williams (2011) as being nothing more than rational choice theory (Ringmar 2014:10). Abrahmsen and Williams indeed combine different approaches and do not follow Bourdieu dogmatically. But it is through this comprehensive practice-oriented approach that they successfully explain the growth of private security in globalization as a complex relational phenomenon and thus overcome the dualism of local and global. The study hence relies on the outlined commitments. We agree, however, with Ringmar (2014:13) criticism of Patrick Morgan's study on practices of deterrence (Morgan 2011) that offers a "reconstruction of the intentions and aims of actors involved." Morgan's argumentation is rooted in methodological individualism and strategic action that has little in common with the concerns of practice theory.

The outlined commitments provide general criteria to bring coherence to international practice theory. As discussed in the next section, one should not read the commitments as "shared assumptions and beliefs." Practice-driven approaches draw on the commitments and develop them in different ways.

The Spectrum of International Practice Theories

As several commentators have noted, practice theories are a heterogeneous set of approaches.[3] To speak about practice theory in the singular is problematic. Reckwitz adopts the metaphor of a "family" to emphasize this heterogeneity and indicate that the term "practice theory" does not have a definite meaning. Practice theories have family resemblance in the sense outlined by Ludwig Wittgenstein (Wennerberg 1967). Their commonality lies in the relation between them, the outlined commitments and other varieties of theory. If this is a challenge to conventional understandings of what a theory is, the heterogeneity of practice theory is their strength, not their weakness. It allows one to capture "practice" from different directions and put emphasis on a broad range of phenomena. Doing practice-driven analysis implies to appreciate multiplicity. Practice approaches not only differ in terms of the traditions they are rooted in—below, we distinguish between a critical and a pragmatist one. They also employ different conceptual vocabularies on top of the concept of practice and thereby interpret the aforementioned commitments differently.

Many IR scholars tend to equate the notion of practice theory with the thinking of Pierre Bourdieu. A vast majority of current practice theoretical work takes Bourdieu's approach as a starting point to a degree that "Bourdieusianism" dominates the discussion on practice in IR.[4] The attraction of Bourdieu's praxeology in IR lies not least in the fact that it is "at its core a theory of domination" (Pouliot and Mérand 2013:36). This makes the approach compatible to a discipline historically concerned about power relations, conflicts, and hierarchical structures. In addition, his conceptual vocabulary of habitus, field, and capital seemingly correspond to IR categories such as strategy, conflicts, and culture (Adler-Nissen 2013b). Equating practice theory with Bourdieu, however, is a peculiar development in IR, which might require an explanation in itself. In the wider practice turn debate in the social sciences Bourdieu rather appears as a footnote than as the guiding approach (Spiegel 2005). While Bourdieu's work should have a prominent place, this rather odd development reduces the spectrum and hence the potential of practice accounts for IR. It forgets that practice theories have been developed from different traditions. It leads to another problem Approaches that draw on a pragmatist tradition tend to be excluded from the practice theory debate in the field.

On top of Bourdieu's praxeology, a meaningful spectrum consists of at least four approaches that have started to thrive in IR: (i) studies of global governmentality following Foucault's later work (Walters 2012), (ii) the community of practice approach as outlined by Etienne Wenger and introduced to IR by Adler (2005), (iii) adoptions of actor-network theory following Bruno Latour and other advocates (Best and Walters 2013), and (iv) assemblage approaches following Gilles Deleuze's emphasis on practice and relations (Acuto and Curtis 2013). Other, less established, approaches draw, for instance, on the practice theories of Luc Boltanski (Gadinger 2015), Michel de Certeau (Neumann 2002), Karin Knorr Cetina (Bueger 2015), Theodore Schatzki (Navari 2010), or Ann Swidler (Sending and Neumann 2011).

Each of the approaches deserves to be discussed in their own right and situated within the practice theoretical debate. Here, we are interested in the relations between them and how they respond to a set of challenges that the practice perspective poses. Below, we discuss the spectrum of practice theories in the light of a set of challenges or points of contentions. This set is certainly not conclusive,[5] but these are core issues in the future agenda of international practice theory. We first relate the approaches to two different traditions: critical theory and pragmatism. Then, we show how they offer different responses to the problem of change and induce different positions on the regularity of practice. We address concerns over how to handle different scales of practice and to "containerize" practice. The next challenge concerns methodology. How can practices be studied in empirical research? The final challenge is how, in a thoroughly practice-oriented theoretical ontology, the relation between academic practice and the practices under study can be conceptualized and what positions and reflexive standards follow.

Two Traditions: Critical Theory and Pragmatism

The family of practice theory is rooted in at least two different traditions—a fact that has largely gone unnoticed in IR, but is widely established in sociology and social theory (Bénatouïl 1999; Celikates 2006; Bogusz 2014). A continental critical theory line of reasoning develops the understanding of practice from a Marxian tradition. Beginning with Marx, who suggested that societal life should be analyzed as human practice, theorists including Michel Foucault, but also, for instance, Judith Butler, started from textualist assumptions and subsequently integrated a focus on practice: Foucault's later work on governmentality and Butler's understanding of performativity are prime examples of the practice wave in critical theorizing. In a nutshell, practice approaches in a critical tradition are primarily driven by concerns over power, domination, and resistance. Foucault's technologies of governance as well as Bourdieu's praxeology are the most prominent frameworks in IR in this line. What this tradition shares is its genuine interest in questions of hierarchical reproduction and resistance and in elaborating larger historical trends and forces. This is, for instance, reflected in Bourdieu's emphasis on understanding distinct social spheres as fields of practices, being shaped by symbolic power struggles between different actors each aiming to improve their position. By drawing on Bourdieu's key concepts, "it is possible to map political units as spaces of practical knowledge on which diverse and often 'unconventional' agencies position themselves and therefore shape international politics" (Adler-Nissen 2013a:2).

As the bulk of Bourdieu-inspired studies in IR demonstrate, his terms habitus, field, capital, and doxa provide a productive relational framework for studying international practices.[6] An advantage in these studies, for

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[3] See Ortner (1984), Rouse (2007), and Miettinen, Samra-Fredericks, and Yanow (2009) for overviews on the historical roots of practice thought.

[4] See Guzzini (2000), Pouliot (2008), Berling (2012), and Adler-Nissen (2013b) as evidence for this continuous development of Bourdieusian IR, coming close to a research program.

[5] Indeed, other points of contention exist which will require considerations as well. This is, for instance, the controversy over the implications of post-humanism, the importance of materiality, and the agency of non-humans (Reckwitz 2002b) or the relations of power in practice theory (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014).

[6] For a detailed examination of Bourdieu's conceptual vocabulary, see the contributions in Adler-Nissen (2013b).

instance, on European security (Berling 2012; Adler-Nissen 2014) or the emergence of private military companies (Leander 2005), is that actors are not studied in isolation, but through their practical relations to each other in dynamic configurations of fields. The concept of a "field" incorporates the objective component of a distinct hierarchal sphere such as art, economics, or even European security. The concept of habitus focuses on the experiences and strategies of individuals seeking to establish or achieve an advantageous position within it. The habitus is the origin of the practices that reproduce or change the existing structures of the field. These practices again shape the experiences of actors, form their habitus, and stabilize power structures in the field.

It is fair to say that the emphasis of Bourdieu's praxeology is on the stability, regularity, and reproduction of practices and less on subversion and renewal. A major strength of Bourdieu's framework therefore lies in its ability to dissect symbolic power struggles in politics. Studying these struggles reveals much more complexity and subtlety than the stories conventionally told in IR. As a result, studying power relations by drawing on Bourdieu moves IR research in new directions and contributes to the debate on different faces of power (Barnett and Duvall 2005). This analytical strength, however, can also be turned into a criticism, which is articulated by scholarship rooted in pragmatism. Due to the explicit focus on domination, power, and hierarchies, one could gain the impression that practice is always embedded in power struggles. Indeed, the focus of Bourdieu's vocabulary is on structures of power and domination and less on the vast amount of other sociocultural practices.

A pragmatist tradition, on the other hand, develops the concept of practice from its Aristotelian roots and its notion of practical reasoning (*phronesis*). Instead of structures and routines, concepts such as problems, uncertainty, creativity, and situated agency are key issues in the pragmatist tradition. Classical American pragmatist authors like John Dewey are main points of reference. In contrast to sociology, IR has not recognized recent pragmatist theorizing as part of the practice theoretical family. There has been some suspicion that the renaissance of pragmatism has something in common with practice theory, and one finds some cross-references. Kratochwil (2011:38), for instance, suggests that recent works in international practice theory share core elements of "a generative grammar for approaching action and meaning" that American pragmatism had initially articulated. Pragmatist theorists, notably contemporary ones, are rarely recognized for their role within practice theory and the interest in pragmatism is often understood as a separate project.

The reasons for this lack of recognition are manifold. Part of the explanation is certainly that IR scholars are primarily interested in *classical* pragmatism, that is, the work of Dewey, James, Mead, and Peirce, and understand pragmatism mainly as a philosophical program rather than a sociological or empirical one (Hellmann 2009). Secondly, it is part of the pragmatist habit to shy away from declarations of belonging to a certain turn, tradition, or perspective. Many contemporary pragmatists, like Latour or Boltanski, are not transparent in this regard, although the intellectual roots and resemblances are quite obvious (for example, Latour 2005:261; Boltanski 2011:27–29, 54–60). As observers from sociology point out, such authors are not only seen as pragmatists, but also as practice theorists (Blokker 2011; Nicolini 2013).

In consequence, in the IR debate, many contemporary theorists have rarely been identified as either pragmatists or practice theorists. Recognizing the pragmatist tradition is an important reminder that the commitments of practice theory can be interpreted quite differently.

The pragmatist tradition aligns the concept of practice closer to action and, as a result, it loses its structural connotations. Practice is formed in a continuous stream of acts and has "neither a definite beginning nor a definite end" (Franke and Weber 2012:675). Thinking of practice in terms of change is at the core of the pragmatist tradition and reflects the aim of reconsidering "agency" in a more substantial manner. The originality of pragmatist approaches developed by Latour or Boltanski, and, also, albeit in a more communitarian fashion, in Wenger's community of practice approach, lies in their reinterpretation of the concept of action. Following the commitments of practice theory, action is seen as taking place in multiplicity, in a combination of "common worlds," and in hybrid relations between subjects and objects, and humans and non-humans. From this pragmatic point of view, the world of IR becomes one overflowing with a multitude of beings, things, objects, and artifacts. Stronger than the critical tradition, pragmatist vocabulary turns to fully relational, performative language and to describing the world as continuous process of ordering, translating, engaging, producing, assembling, enacting, working, or constructing. Thus, studies in IR inspired by Latour, Boltanski, or Deleuze focus on the practical work at the "construction" sites in which the social, the material, the factual, or the powerful is produced (for example, Walters 2002; Bueger and Bethke 2014).

From a pragmatist point of view, "practices cannot be understood from an objective standpoint alone, because they are internally related to the intepretations and self-images of their participants that can only be grasped if one takes their perspective as fundamental" (Celikates 2006:21). Thus, human action is deeply implicated in situations or controversies, which are always in need of interpretation by the involved agents (Blokker 2011:252). To do practice research in a pragmatist tradition means describing and elaborating on these controversies as well as identifying the underlying practices following ethnomethodological premises. In sum, the pragmatist tradition stresses situations, contingency, creativity, and change. Hence, it starts out from an almost opposite direction than the critical theory tradition's focus on routines and structures. These differences become clearer if we now turn to the question of transformations and change.

Change

One of the initial motives of developing practice theories was to enable a better grasp on social change and contingency (Neumann 2002; Spiegel 2005). The vocabulary of practice theory stresses cultural contingency and historicity much more than textualist or mentalist accounts. Structure, in practice theory terms, is largely formed by routinization, which refers to its temporality (Reckwitz 2002a:255). Yet, the conception of the transformative and regularized patterns of practical reconfigurations remains a major point of contention within practice theory. How fluid and ephemeral is the world? While for some approaches, change is a variation stemming from unexpected irritation and events in the reproduction process, for others change is constitutive of practice itself. For crit-

ical theorists like Bourdieu, repetition and reproduction is the norm. Shifts are therefore considered rare and require a revolutionary event. Those interested in larger formations of domination and historical processes tend to focus on regularity and tend to underplay the potential for transformation. In consequence, such perspectives have been criticized for not being capable of actually studying change (Joas and Knöbl 2009:395). Pragmatist perspectives, such as ANT, or the assemblage framework, in their emphasis on process and relations, occupy a very different position. They claim that stability, rather than change, requires explanation. The world is seen as constantly emerging and shifting; practices are taken as inherently innovative, experimental, and erratic. Other approaches, such as the community of practice approach, attempt to take a middle ground position to deal with the tension of order and change. Adler's (2005:15) adoption of the concept to study community building beyond IR's norm-oriented approaches is driven by the aim to project the agency as well as the structural side of practice to get a more comprehensive understanding of social change. The understanding of world politics through communities of practice, which are produced and reproduced in collective processes of learning, reinterprets the earlier promises of constructivism to provide adequate interpretations of change (Wendt 1992).

Every practice approach struggles with the inherent tension that practices can "range from ephemeral doings to stable long-term patterns of activity" (Rouse 2007:639). Practices are repetitive patterns. But they are also permanently displacing and shifting. Practices are dispersed, dynamic, and continuously rearranging in ceaseless movement. But they are also reproducing, organized, and structured clusters (Schatzki 2002:101). This constellation forces practice theorists to be particularly aware of the continuous tension between the dynamic, continuously changing character of practice on the one side, and the identification of stable, regulated patterns, routines, and reproduction on the other. The dual nature of practices requires attention to the interaction between both the emergent, innovative *and* the repetitive, reproducing sides of practice. This leads to one of the most disputed questions posed by practice theories scholars: Can practice theory serve both analytical purposes and explain continuity as well as change? Yet, one should not expect an inevitable conceptual "solution." As Reckwitz (2004b:51) correctly points out, there is no theoretical reason why practice theorists should take either the reproductive or the erratic character of practice to be the norm. Indeed, as he suggests, this issue needs to be turned into the analytical question of which practices, under which conditions, take on an erratic or a reproductive nature. In this sense, the different approaches of practice theory provide different analytical starting points. However, it is only when seen together that they generate a major empirical–analytical question.

Scale and Structural Metaphors

Scholars have proposed a confusing array of structural metaphors and it appears that these are (intentionally or unintentionally) undertheorized. Bourdieu's "field" is certainly one of the most developed concepts that allows IR scholars to understand IR beyond national boundaries in transnational spaces (Peter Jackson 2008:178). Drawing on the concept assumes a distinct structure that relies on a unique doxa and distribution of resources.

Scholars hence argue that a fairly homogenous structure with boundary and identity practices can be identified. This offers particular promises, if the analyst wants to understand the distribution of power among different agents and their relative positionality (for example, Williams 2012). The logic of this structure then becomes an object of study. When compared to other concepts in practice theory, Bourdieu's structural metaphor assumes the most coherence. Significant similarities, in this sense, can be found in the community metaphor used by some, in particular Wenger's (1998) notion of communities of practice. Understanding practice as organized in community structures implies suggesting that a stable core (or repertoire in Wenger's words) and a significant amount of boundary work drive the collectives of practice. On the other side of the spectrum, we can identify notions of structure that draw on the pragmatist obsession with contingency, fluctuation, and situations. Schatzki's notions of "bundles" and "arrangements," the Latourian notion of "actor-networks," the Deleuzian concept of "rhizomatic assemblages" are almost chaotic notions of structure and order. They center on notions of multiplicity, overlap, complexity, incoherence, and contradictions between structural elements. As Marcus and Saka (2006:102) phrase it, such conceptualizations are employed "with a certain tension, balancing, and tentativeness where the contradictions between the ephemeral and the structural, and between the structural and the unstably heterogeneous create almost a nervous condition for analytic reason." The advantage of such metaphors is their genuine openness to the various possibilities of orderliness. They should not be understood as anti-structural notions, yet they foreground the ephemeral and stress that weight has to be put on empirical, situation-specific research in order to understand how ordered (or disordered) the world is. The price that has to be paid for such notions is that it becomes almost impossible to lay out grand histories of panoramic scale and the power dynamics they entail. Employing such notions also creates inherent contradictions for the presentation of academic research, given that academic research becomes only intelligible if phrased in relatively coherent narratives.

The question of structure needs to be addressed in light of the importance of scale. One of the benefits of practice theories is that they do not take constructions of scale, such as micro (face to face interactions, and what people do and say), meso (routines), macro (institutions), or even local (situations), regional (contexts), global (universals), as natural categories. Practice theories intend to keep ontology flat and conceptualize the ideas behind such constructions. Indeed, there is no thing such as micro, macro, local, or global. In reality, these are strategic constructs by social scientists. Practice theory hence aims at allowing "the transcendence of the division between such levels, such as that we are able to understand practice as taking place simultaneously both locally and globally, being both unique and culturally shared, 'here and now' as well as historically constituted and path-dependent" (Miettinen et al. 2009:1310). The question of scale has driven some substantial empirical research on how scales are made. Authors including Tsing (2005) or Latour (2005) have shown how actors combine heterogeneous elements to make the global and universal. They have foregrounded the work of bureaucrats, scientists, and activists in creating scale by framing things as universal and international. Other authors dem-

onstrate the hybridity of scale, like Knorr Cetina (2005) who argues for the prevalence of what she calls "complex global micro-structures". For Knorr Cetina, these structures are driven by micro-interactions but are global in reach; transnational phenomena such as terrorism or financial markets can be studied and understood in such a manner.

The empiricist route of focusing on the making of scale and the emergence of scale hybridity as the main object of study promises interesting insights. Yet not every practice-driven investigation will focus primarily on scale-making. Even if analysis does not explicitly focus on scale, one needs to recognize that practice theorists not only challenge traditional understandings of scale. They also introduce their own politics of scale by creating structural concepts and situating practice in larger containers.

Methodology

Although scholars often perceive practice theory as the attempt to invent new vocabularies, it also implies a move to more empirical and descriptive work. Miettinen et al. (2009) provide a careful reminder that the practice turn was always primarily motivated by empirical concerns. Practice theorists across the spectrum stress that the theoretical vocabulary should be understood as offering "contingent systems of interpretation which enable us to make certain empirical statements" (Reckwitz 2002a:257). Practice theory has the status of "a heuristic device, a sensitizing 'framework' for empirical research in the social sciences. It thus opens up a certain way of seeing and analyzing social phenomena" (Reckwitz 2002a:257). It does not only provide a particular vocabulary, but also a search and find strategy. Since such an approach falls in the realm of interpretative methodology, practice theorists draw on a mix of established methods (usually participant observation, interviews as well as text analysis) and reinterpret these in light of practice theoretical concerns (see Nicolini 2009; Pouliot 2013; Bueger 2014). Understanding practice theory as a heuristic device that provides sensitizing concepts emphasizes the importance of integrating methodology and theory. Indeed, practice theory and methodology should be considered as a coherent package (Nicolini 2013).

The question of how practices can be studied empirically, however, has so far received the least attention from practice theorists. Methodological reflexivity is arguably weak. Many practice theorists have primarily come up with negative methodological guidelines that argue against "objectivist" accounts and suggest *how not* to conduct research. Bourdieu, for instance, has argued vividly against both objectivist and what he calls subjectivist accounts (Nicolini 2013:62). A pragmatist scholar like Latour equally lays out largely negative guidelines, and posits that his methodology tells you, in the first place, what not to do (for example, Latour 2005:142).

Participant observation as the tool that allows for the recording of bodily movements, speech, and the handling of artifacts in real time particularly relates to the concerns of practice scholars. Participant observation allows direct proximity to practice. The method finds its limitations under conditions of limited field access and resources, or else the material concerns of historical practices, in which case bodily movements are no longer observable. Understanding practices will often require deciphering them from texts such as manuals, ego-documents, or visual representations, or from interviews centered on descriptions of activities (Nicolini 2009). Interviews and texts, however, do not provide direct access to practices; they provide representations of practices that have to be carefully interpreted. The differences between critical and pragmatist versions of practice theory also play out in methodological choices concerning research strategies, data collection as well as writing styles. Critical scholars tend to focus their strategy on interpreting structures and fields. They therefore prioritize large-scale genealogies of practices reconstructed through textual analysis or the mapping of fields through survey methodology or positioning analysis. Given the concern with larger formations, writing styles adopted are more distant, objectifying, and offer less descriptive detail. Pragmatists by contrast tend to initiate research by zooming in on a distinct practice, a crisis situation, or an object (Bueger 2014) and hence place more emphasis on participant observation, acquiring descriptions of detailed situations, and immersion in the action. Corresponding to the erratic understanding of practice, writing follows a style that provides complex, often nonlinear and incoherent narratives that include multiple voices of practitioners with a high level of empirical detail. While critical narratives risk providing overly "clean" narratives of practice, the pragmatist faces the trap of producing incomprehensible cacophonies of voices. Given the status of empirical work for developing international practice theory, the question of which packages of theory and methodologies and which writing styles best enable the capturing of practice remains a vital concern.

Positionality and Reflexivity

What is the relationship between academic practices and the practices under study? Methodology is one way to contemplate this relationship, yet practice theories also consider the broader set of relationships that academic practices have to other practices. The symmetrical perspective of practice theory implies not only considering the world studied as a practical configuration, but also conceiving of (academic) knowledge generation as practice. Practice theory, then, provides a tool for studying scientific disciplines (such as IR), for understanding the multiple relations between scientific and other social and political practices, and for examining the practical activities involved in generating knowledge (Bueger and Gadinger 2007). The study of scientific practices has been crucial to developing practice theory. It is therefore no coincidence that the majority of authors in the seminal edited volume introducing the practice turn (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina and von Savigny 2001) are science studies scholars. The symmetrical perspective of practice theory enables not only an understanding of what relations contribute to the construction of academic knowledge, but also the identification of the practical (performative) effects that academia has. The representations of practice generated by scholars have various effects for the practitioners and practices themselves. While practice theorists are united in recognizing the importance of such a form of practical reflexivity, its status in directing knowledge generation remains contested. Those close to a critical tradition use reflexivity as a device for ensuring the quality of knowledge, preserving the autonomy of the academic field, and maintaining a notion of academic superiority. For instance, Bourdieu stresses collective reflexivity, that is, the constant investigation of the conditions under which knowledge has been produced (Ber-

ling 2013). Practical reflexivity provides, then, the basis for intervening in societal concerns, debunking games of domination, and contributing to the emancipation of the subjects of domination. Thus, reflexivity and the study of academic practice exert power as an essential form of self-regulation and policing device. In contrast, pragmatist scholars interpret practical reflexivity as a constructive mode geared toward ensuring that academic knowledge production addresses societal concerns. Arguing against autonomy, this position draws on the classical pragmatist understanding of academia as part of a broader community of inquiry which constructs matters of concern, develops problematizations, and cultivates methods for mastering problems. To practice reflexivity on academic practices strengthens the ways that analysis can contribute to problematization and problem solving (Hellmann 2009). One of the expectations of turning to practice vocabulary is that it places scholars in a better position to contribute to real-world problems and to produce statements of relevance beyond a community of peers (Latour 2005:261). What such contributions will look like, what positions the academic will have to take, and what the status of reflexivity will be in maintaining this position are ongoing concerns for practice theory.

Conclusion: The Future of International Practice Theory

Is it meaningful, or even necessary, to speak of a "practice turn"? Regardless of how we answer that question, attention practice theories now drives important research on international relations. Still, the development of international practice theory remains in its early stages. In this article, we sought to clarify the character and promise of practice theory. We rejected overly vague conceptualizations of the "practice turn," as well as claims that practice theory offers nothing new to the field. Of particular importance, we argued against attempts to cast international practice theory as the new grand theory of international relations. It is not. Nor is it capable of integrating the discipline's diverse paradigms and methodologies. Indeed, international practice theory adds additional vocabulary and methodological perspectives. It increases, rather than decreases, the pluralism of the field. This facilitates productive debate–as long as we remain clear about what different theories and approaches bring to the table.

Moreover, we offered three layers of approximation concerning international practice theory. We started with a discussion of what belongs outside of practice theory: rational choice, norm-oriented constructivism, or the study of belief systems or of discourse. In social-theoretic terms, practice theory moves away from the study of intersubjective coordination. Its distinctiveness resides in taking patterns of activity as the smallest unit of analysis. This entails focusing on the study of bodily movements, the handling of artifacts, and practical knowledge. It concerns itself with the structures and situations where actors perform shared practices and produce social order. We also laid out the core commitments of practice theory: its minimal ontological and epistemological wagers. These "thin" commitments provide the basis for mutual understanding both within and outside of international practice theory. As Reckwitz (2004b:52) suggests, practice theory is at its strongest when it remains as thin as possible with respect to its general conceptual requirements. We then surveyed the broader approaches that fit within this 'thin'

understanding of the practice turn. In particular, we emphasized the need to avoid conflating Bourdieusian approaches with international practice theory writ large. Rather, such approaches constitute part of an ongoing debate within practice theory.

The future of international practice theory depends on the vibrancy of that ongoing debate. Its particular stakes involve unresolved problems for the practice turn: how to cope with tensions between the regulative and erratic character of practice, how to handle the politics of scale, what methodologies best allow for capturing and writing about practice, and how to reflexively situate practice researchers within the world they study. But these questions cannot be resolved simply through theoretical debates; they must be worked out in the context of empirical investigation.

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