Practice

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<1> Abstract
This chapter situates the practice turn in the broader IR landscape, presents its key contributions, addresses key challenges against it and suggests future research agendas. The practice turn aims to help us grasp how social practices co-produce, negotiate and unravel social orders. Practice approaches study people, materials and intersubjective, socially meaningful patterns of actions, understanding power as contextual and embedded. Theoretically, the practice turn rejects the idea that people are generally reflexive and articulate about their everyday actions and turns to logics of practicality. Methodologically, it champions empirical sensitivity by studying international politics as lived practices. This chapter distinguishes between scholarship on the maintenance of social order and scholarship more interested in acts of resistance and improvisation. Finally, critiques of the practice turn are addressed in relation to structural power and inequalities. I also address critiques from feminist and queer IR scholars, reiterating practice theory’s commitment to exposing power in non-reflexive social orders. The chapter calls for future research to continue to scrutinize hidden social orders as well as marginalized and non-Western experiences and practices more effectively. It also encourages practice-oriented explorations of bodies, emotions, materials, and technologies.

Keywords: international relations; practice theory; reflexivity; disordering; ordering; resistance; social order; power; performativity.

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Introduction

International relations look different once we reckon with the granularity of social practices. Our own study of those relations also begins to change. For example, when we focus on practices, we understand diplomacy less as a formal institution structured around the meeting of national interests and more as an anthill where bodies and materials come together to produce the social world. From coffee break gossip amid long multilateral negotiations, to early career diplomats struggling to deal with established knowledge hierarchies, to the staff from ‘conflict zones’ cleaning offices in Western foreign ministries: We must begin to ask what is at stake in such (diplomatic) performances. The key for practice scholars is that everyday practices are not just epiphenomena of deeper structures. Instead, practices are constitutive in and of themselves: These everyday sayings and doings establish diplomacy as a socially meaningful practice. Discovering these dynamics, I suggest, paves the way for practice theory’s critical potential. Practice theory’s vigor lies in its ability to uncover otherwise hidden power relations and hierarchies.

In this chapter, I introduce international practice theory and its fundamental assumptions. Most contributors to the practice turn are skeptical about the idea of a grand theory of international politics. Instead, they insist that the world is inherently messy, and that this should not be minimized for the sake of simplicity (see also Leander 2010).

The purpose of this chapter is to emphasize not just the analytical value of focusing on practices, but also how approaches within the practice turn differ in their understanding
and analysis of international practices. In addition, the chapter points to the critical potential of the practice turn. In the first section, I discuss the practice theory landscape within IR, including how it can be seen as both a pragmatic and critical endeavor. I then propose categorizing what I call the “ordering” (how practices stabilize the world) and the “disordering” (how practices destabilize the world) perspectives on practices. The ordering perspective is prominent in IR (represented by, e.g., communities of practice and social field theory). The disordering perspective focuses more on subordinate or ordinary people and their experiences of power relationships (analyzing performances and improvisations). I address critiques surrounding practice approaches; that they are “overly” empirical, “native,” and too preoccupied with the “micro” because they map and thereby conserve established social practices. I then address the critique that the practice turn is not invested enough in examining the repressive or disciplining structures of world politics (Epstein 2012). I end by discussing emerging debates within practice scholarship around emotions, identities, materiality, and technology.

<1> Everyday international politics

International practice scholarship is a body of literature within IR that is interested in social practices. It aims to “liberate the human bodily and practical experience and ability to act upon and change the world from the constrictions of structuralist and systemic models—while avoiding the trap of methodological individualism” (Adler-Nissen 2016b, 2). The key assumption is that everyday actions and relations are consequential in producing social life.
Ontologically, practice theory’s most important contribution is specifying the focus of analysis: practice, that is, socially meaningful patterns of action (Pouliot and Mérand 2012). By telling social scientists where to start from—practices—practice theory moves beyond the usual social-theoretical dichotomies that have hitherto led to a metaphysical dead-end. This means objecting to distinctions such as system and unit, micro, and macro, and local and global. Practices are not limited to a particular “level of analysis” and they are not simply micro or interactionist. As Christian Bueger and Frank Gadinger insist:

[…] it is equally appropriate to study a seemingly large scale, such as Foucault’s studies of modernity, or histories of practices of war, as it would be meaningful to study practices with a different zoom on a distinct policy, let’s say NATO’s military doctrine, or an everyday interaction, such as guarding a military camp (Bueger and Gadinger 2018, 107).

Taking my own research on international diplomacy as an example, this means moving away from treating global governance and international organizations as formal institutions centered on strategic events, such as summits, to the processes of enacting those organizations. It implies tracing the social activities that go into making the UN (MacKay and Levin 2015), ASEAN (Martel 2020; Nair 2019) the African Union (Glas 2018), or NATO (Pouliot 2010; Berling 2015) what they are. This can be done by focusing on the bodies and materials involved, for instance, the decoration of meeting rooms and the menu for the dinner of the Heads of the State and Government (see Neumann 2012 for an account of the diplomatic meal or McNamara 2015 for how the symbolic design of the euro coins and bills come to matter in everyday politics).
Such ordinary aspects of world politics are difficult to grasp because they often belong to the world of the unsaid and taken-for-granted. As French philosopher Maurice Blanchot puts it:

Nothing happens, this is the “everyday” [...] But what is the meaning of this stationary movement? At what level is this “nothing happens” situated? For whom does “nothing happen”, if, for me, something is necessarily always happening (Blanchot 1987, 15)?

Blanchot raises important methodological questions concerning where we look for “the action”, for power, and for how we develop our explanations of world politics. Here practice theories diverge. One point of disagreement relates to questions of stability and change, as practices are inherently ambiguous. They are the very actions that sustain social order and those that subvert it. A focus on practices also raises questions of whether and how we can study intentionality and reflexivity, equally important issues for international political sociology (see also Drieschova and Bueger 2022 for an excellent overview of the “fault lines” of practice theory). In the rest of the chapter, I will discuss how practice theories have been conceptualized and applied and argue that there are different understandings of practice at play and that it matters how we use them.

<2> Conceptualising practices

Practice theories constitute a broad intellectual landscape with roots in pragmatism, phenomenology and critical theory. The seeds of the current practice turn (sometimes labelled
“cultural” or “practical” turn) in the social and human sciences were planted in the late 1960s, at the same time as some of the canonical texts of the linguistic turn emerged. Originating in philosophy, sociology, and anthropology, where it lives on, practice approaches have also had considerable success in organization and management studies, professional education and, more recently, in international relations (Polyakov 2012). Its main theoretical purpose is to resolve the tension between structure and agency in the moment of practice, to suggest a relational ontology and to rethink how power works (for a discussion of relationalism, see Jackson and Nexon 2019).

Today, international practice scholars are inspired by a range of thinkers, including, but certainly not limited to Pierre Bourdieu, Erving Goffman, Michel Foucault, Michel de Certeau, Donna Haraway, James C. Scott, George Robert Mead, Anthony Giddens, Annemarie Mol, Judith Butler, Luc Boltanski, and Karin Knorr-Cetina. While these scholars are very different, they share an inclination to pursue hidden political structures in the everyday, identifying contradictions in how people experience education, art, or war.

Social theorist Ted Schatzki defines practices as socially meaningful bundles of activities; they are “open-ended, spatially-temporally dispersed nexus of doings and sayings” (Schatzki 2012, 2). Practice scholars interpret human activity by parsing it into practices: stable and structured clusters of behaviors, communicative actions, and accompanying bodily movements. Practice theories emphasize situated understanding and seek to unmask the apparent stability of social systems as contingent and, at least partly, agent-driven productions.

Among IR scholars, Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot’s definition is crucial. Drawing on educational theorist Etienne Wenger’s work, they write:
Practices are competent performances. More precisely, practices are socially meaningful patterns of action, which, in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out, and possible reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 4).

Practices can thus be anything from multilateral negotiations to playing hockey or smuggling drugs. Such activities involve skills and techniques and can be performed better or worse in the eyes of other practitioners.3

Adler and Pouliot distinguish practices from two neighboring concepts: behavior and action. Behavior captures the material aspect of doing—for example, a person running down the street. The idea of action adds a layer of meaning at both the subjective (intentions and beliefs) and intersubjective (norms and identities) levels. A person running after another person, a thief, moves us from behavior to action. Finally, practice is when the person running after the thief is a police officer on duty; then the practice is catching a thief.

Adler and Pouliot delve less into how performativity shapes their definition, however, this is a central building block of practices. When repeated performances form a socially meaningful pattern, we arrive at practice.4 This does not mean that all performances add up to practice. Indeed, a performance is not necessarily repeated and not necessarily patterned and regulated by (tacit) knowledge. This is crucial because performances also hold the key to change or even overthrow a particular social order. Performances may involve a “radical improvisational” character (Goddard et al. 2019, 312) —a theme I will return to below.
second observation is that performance always involves an audience, one that is not necessarily present but is anticipated or assumed.\(^5\)

In sum, practices are not only behavioral, meaningful, and performative but also organized and patterned. In addition, because they are habitual forms of action within a given social context, practices tend to become internalized within communities of practitioners.

Methodologically, practice theories do not assume \textit{a priori} that actors or subjects have specific interests or preferences. Practice scholars insist on keeping such questions open to empirical investigation. No one articulates this better than one of the key inspirations for international practice theories, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu:

\begin{quote}
only by paying attention to the most trivial data, which other [approaches] willingly ignore in the name of abstraction and the scientific method, can we construct models that are empirically substantiated and amenable to formalization (Bourdieu 2002, quoted in Pouliot 2016, 50).
\end{quote}

Practice theory is deeply \textit{intersubjective}. The idea is not to read people’s minds. Instead, the aim is to see what goes on between them (Pouliot 2016). Practice theory is not interested in motivations or intentions when analyzing the social and political; the fundamental building blocks of social life are not individuals but social relations. These social relations are often not spectacular, but it is the unfolding of everyday practices that produces our world’s larger phenomena and social realities. As social theorist Henri Lefebvre asks:
Why should the study of the banal itself be banal? [...] Why wouldn’t the concept of everydayness reveal the extraordinary in the ordinary (Lefebvre 1987, 9)?

The banal is as important to a practice lens as it was to Hannah Arendt. The political thinker famously identified “the banality of evil” as the best explanation for the atrocities committed by Adolph Eichmann, the Nazi operator responsible for organizing the transportation of millions of Jews and others to concentration camps during World War II. Arendt (1963) found Eichmann to be an ordinary, somewhat bland bureaucrat who, in her words, was “neither perverted nor sadistic”, but “terrifyingly normal”. He just wanted to advance his career in the Nazi bureaucracy.

Practice theories remind us that not just peace diplomacy and climate activism, but also crimes against humanity, are carried out by people for a range of reasons and are not just a matter of political ideology. Anna Leander’s (2010) work on private military companies and Jonathan Austin’s (2016) research on torture point to these darker social practices. As I have argued elsewhere (Adler-Nissen 2014), practice theories provide answers to how normality is socially constructed. Instead of interpreting interactions as a one-way disciplining process, practice theories explore the negotiation of social order as a complex interactive process. For instance, given that stigma involves an “asymmetric power relationship”, it may be resisted and coped with in various ways, leading to a complex interaction between the stigmatizer and the stigmatized. This interaction is crucial to “the success or failure of attempts to enforce discipline and define the ‘normal’” (Adler-Nissen 2014, 152). Of course, this does not mean that dominated or weak actors are
responsible for their own subordination. Still, it gives them agency and shows the productive outcomes of resistance and self-reflection in international relations.

In sum, practice theories are relational. They zoom in on the trans- and international everyday practices that make up the bigger picture of world politics. They reject dualisms, in particular agency-structure distinctions. In doing so, they insist that power is embedded, embodied, and socially situated.

<2> Identifying practices

Moving from theory to analysis: how do we know a practice when we see it? What empirical material can be studied? Practice researchers attempt to understand social phenomena by accessing the meanings participants assign to them, but where do they look for the meanings? Any place where practices are performed is a potential site of investigation. There has been a tendency to see fieldwork as the optimal way of applying practice theories because of the more immediate sense of practice provided by direct observations, followed by interviews as a second-best option (see Hopf 2022). However, this is a misunderstanding (see also Pouliot and Mérand 2012; Pouliot 2012). Practices can be read out of historical and contemporary visual, textual, oral, or sensual empirical materials. We can construe both explicit and tacit practices from draft documents (Adler-Nissen and Drieschova 2019), map-drawing (Branch 2017) buildings and architecture (Eggeling 2020), golf playing (Nair 2020b), social media posts (Adler-Nissen and Eggeling 2022), medieval coronation rituals (Drieschova 2022), or waltzing during the Congress of
Vienna (Rösch 2021). In all these instances, contextual knowledge is essential.

Methodologically, practice scholars tend to pose two questions: first, what aspect of international practices might my empirical material reveal (and which elements slide into the background)? And second, how can I, from my particular position, interpret and understand (or misunderstand) this material? (for an excellent methodological elaboration, see Eggeling 2021). As such, data collection and analysis are both pragmatic and critical; we work with what is possible to access while critically reflecting on the limits of both the material and ourselves as the interpreters.

<1> Situating the practice turn: Ordering and disordering perspectives

This is neither the time nor the place for a history of knowledge, but it is important to highlight that the practice turn has been promoted for theoretical, methodological, and normative reasons (see also Drieschova et al. 2022). These different motivations have resulted in different approaches. First, Iver B. Neumann’s 2002 agenda-setting piece argued that discourse, norms, and material resources limited our theories of world politics, heralding the turn towards practice. Or as Pouliot (2008) later put it, IR suffered from a “representational bias” making us forget that, generally, people go through most of their day without thinking too much about it, suggesting we should pay attention to the “logic of practicality.” Second, many have emphasized that the IR cannon lacks empirical sensitivity. As Neumann wrote:
This concern stems from an impatience with what could, perhaps unkindly, be called “armchair analysis”, by which I mean 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 (Neumann 2002, 628).

Third, many scholars have stressed the normative and ethical motivations for a practice turn. In the best-case scenario, practice-oriented research brings scholars closer to their research objects, enabling them to examine other people’s lived experiences and how they construct, perform, or resist particular aspects of world politics (Adler-Nissen 2016a, 99). As Maren Hofius explains, the practice turn “foregrounds humans’ experiential dimension as a source for the normative evaluation of practices” (Hofius 2021, 87; see also Ralph and Gifkins 2017).

These theoretical, empirical, and normative inclinations have long intellectual histories. Bueger and Gadinger (2015) as well as Schindler and Wille (2019) highlight pragmatism and critical theory as two key inspirations for the practice turn. However, a concern with everyday practices is also crucial for phenomenologists, poststructuralists, feminists, postcolonial thinkers, and political sociologists.

<2> The ordering perspective on practice: field, community, and network

In this section, I heuristically distinguish and grossly simplify “ordering” (how practices stabilize the world) and “disordering” (how practices destabilize the world) theories of
practices (for the first iteration of this distinction, see Adler-Nissen 2016a). The added value of this distinction is that it foregrounds how practices influence international relations and how power is performed. Studying the processes that produce and undermine social order is crucial to the practice turn. For practice theorists, social order is a collective achievement to which we all contribute. This means that there is always the possibility of a collapse of society if its norms and values are not constantly reaffirmed. The ordering and disordering perspectives are not mutually exclusive—one can look for disorder in an orderly community of practice. The difference lies in the starting point: Some scholars explore how power struggles and contestation help constitute a particular order. Others study how practices destabilize and change order.

The “ordering” perspective is interested in how people become recognized as, for example (but not only), competent through classifications, distinctions, and categories of understanding. This happens, for instance, in social “fields” (Bourdieu 1977) or “communities of practice” (Wenger 1998).

According to Bourdieu’s theory of practice, people take their own relative superior or subordinate position for granted. This manifests itself in bodily postures—ways of standing, sitting, looking, speaking, or walking (Bourdieu 1977, 15). The human body is crucial to people’s practical engagements with the world. As Turner puts it:

[…] the human body has to be constantly and systematically produced, sustained, and presented in everyday life and therefore the body is best regarded as a potentiality which is realized and actualized through a variety of social regulated activities or practices (Turner 1984, 24).
Bourdieu (1977) developed the notion of “habitus” to capture “the permanent internalization of the social order in the human body” (Eriksen and Nielsen 2001, 130), while recognizing “the agent’s practice as well as his or her capacity for invention and improvisation” (Bourdieu 1990, 13). These schemes of perception and thought are extremely general in their application, similar to dividing the world up into oppositions between male and female, east and west, past and future, top and bottom, left and right, etc., and also, at a deeper level, in the form of bodily postures, ways of standing, sitting, looking, speaking, or walking (Bourdieu 1977, 15).

Wenger is interested in how strong communities of practice “may foster interactions and relationships based on mutual respect and trust” (e.g., learning processes) (see also Bicchi 2022). Although Wenger stresses that “shared practices do not itself imply harmony or collaboration” (Wenger 1998, 85), he is less interested in exploring how communities of practice exclude ideas or groups of people (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 28). Exclusion, stigmatization, and discrimination was not part of his vocabulary. However, this does not mean it is absent from the ordering approach to practices. There has been a recent surge in research focusing on contestation within communities of practice (e.g. Bremberg and Danielson 2022).

As Pierre Bourdieu and Erving Goffman remind us, exclusion and stigmatization are just as crucial for the construction of international order as socialization and learning processes (Adler-Nissen 2014). The stigmatization of individuals, collectives, or states helps construct “the normal” and serves to demarcate and uphold identities. For example, Huju (2023) recently demonstrated how Indian diplomats try to live up to Western
standards, and in turn, stigmatise their own society. Besides enriching structural approaches in IR, practice theories provide a deeper understanding of the preconditions for global governance and how these institutional structures work and are challenged in practice.

In sum, within IR, this “ordering” approach focuses on the daily activities of people in world politics, artifacts populating institutional sites, and participation in various communities of practices, hierarchies, and social fields (see Svendsen 2021). Examples of this approach are Dan Nexon and Iver Neumann’s (2018) field-theoretical account of international hegemony and empire, Didier Bigo’s (2016) work on security practices and professionals, Vincent Pouliot’s analysis of NATO-Russia cooperation (2010), and my own political sociology of diplomacy within the European Union (Adler-Nissen 2014).

<2> The disordering approach to practices: performance, creativity, resistance

The “disordering” approach to practices differs from the “ordering” perspective as it does not focus on the recognition of competent behavior or social capital. The disordering perspective insists that practices may not be meaningful or recognized by other practitioners. Criticizing the tendency to over-intellectualize the social, they insist that some action, including political action, is more ordinary than we assume. This is what gives it its emancipatory potential. This approach often highlights subordinate and ordinary people and their experiences of broader power relationships (for an excellent overview, see Hobson and Seabrooke, 2009).

Disordering perspectives embody the “everyday life” concern with disciplinary logic.
In practice, this entails an examination of how everyday life manifests itself in bodies, urban landscapes, consumption, and even boredom (Lefebvre 2002). By identifying the contradictions and tensions in how life is experienced by everyone, Lefebvre points to possibilities of resistance and improvisation. Others, in the “everyday politics” tradition (see James C. Scott, 1985), are more interested in subtle forms of subaltern agency and defiance at the local level. “Everyday politics” are shaped by the subversive stories of ordinary people. In the field of IR, the disordering approach focuses on seemingly ordinary or subordinate people—non-elite groups, including the lower-middle and middle classes, migrant laborers, and diasporas whose lives are shaped by world politics. Meanwhile, the approach also explores how these groups simultaneously shape world politics ‘from below’ in terms of their own political, economic and social environment. McConnell’s work concerning diplomatic outsiders in the EU illustrates how resistance “provides glimpses of an alternative way through which polities can relate to one another” (McConnell 2018, 378).

Theoretically, at the center of practice theories—whether ordering or disordering—is the problem of social order. Rather than seeing order as a product of hegemonic positions, the top-down, class, or other structures alone, social order must always be performed in practice. Performances reveal cracks in institutions and pave the way for studies of, for example, repertoires of statecraft (Goddard et al. 2019) or strategizing. This leaves space to study improvisation and social innovation, even in very established and formalized settings (Cornut 2018; Adler-Nissen and Eggeling 2021, 2022). Contrary to those linking instances of marginalization and discrimination to structural notions of “hegemony” or “empire” (Anghie 2005; Barkawi and Laffey 2002), practice theorists insist that “it takes two to
tango”. By foregrounding the relations and interactions between those who impose “normal” behavior and those perceived as transgressive, the weak or deviant may play a more critical role than hitherto acknowledged. This does not mean that they are responsible for their own subordination. Rather, as Zarakol (2014, 313) has pointed out in her critique of Finnemore and Sikkink’s norm diffusion, “norm-internalization does not always lead to socialization, instead stigmatization drives many instances of both norm-compliance and norm-rejection by non-Western states.”

<1> Practice theories for whom and for what?

So far, we have focused on the analytical value of the practice turn, but what about its ability to critique or point to ways of changing world politics? Practice theories, I believe, hold significant critical potential. To appreciate this critical dimension, it is important to acknowledge that practice theory does not resemble what we usually call critical theory within IR. Practice scholarship distances itself from many ideas that have inspired IR critical theory (e.g., Marxism, neo-Marxism, Gramscianism, neo-Gramscianism, and critical post-structuralism). As Austin, Bellanova, and Kauffman (2019) write, practice scholars aim to be agnostic and to search for symmetry in their approach to “allies” and “antagonists”:

When it comes to critique, this means to refuse the temptation to reduce critical action to the debunking of those we disagree with. Instead, we seek to stay with the deeply troubled present of the world, recognizing—in any case—that though
“the situation [today] is critical”, we ourselves still don’t know which protagonist’s cause to take up… This also means that it can be discomforting if companions lead us into fields outside our comfort zone and beyond our typical audiences (Austin, Bellanova, and Kauffman 2019, 9).

As such, in contrast with much critical theory, practice scholarship is situated in careful empirical analysis and offers inductively constructed and tangible ways of making the world different. Another reason why practice theory might appear “uncritical” has to do with its own self-presentation in the IR landscape (see also Ringmar 2014). According to Adler and Pouliot’s (2011) edited volume, the practice turn provides a broader ontology for IR theory that appeals to both realists, liberals, and constructivists (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 5). As Pouliot and Cornut later put it,

some scholars conceive of the practice approach as inherently critical, [f]or many scholars, though, practice theory is first and foremost an analytical framework that seeks to explain and understand the social world (Pouliot and Cornut 2015, 302).

These works, for strategic and pedagogical reasons, have downplayed critical currents in practice theory. I also summed up the practice turn for EU studies like this:

Practice theorists also disagree on the role of science in society […] While it appears significant in terms of principles, in actual analysis, the difference may be less important because of the shared interest in what happens “on the ground” in apparently trivial moves, that turn out to be crucial for European integration (Adler-Nissen 2016a, 99).
Yet, as I shall argue here, recalibrating my own thoughts a bit, this “shared interest in what happens ‘on the ground’”, has a critical potential.

To tease out this potential, I will address two interlinked objections that have been raised against the practice turn in IR. The first, which I call ontological, alleges that practice theory overlooks aspects of world politics despite its claim to a broader ontology. The second is epistemological-normative, which sees practice theory as failing to recognize that “theory is always for someone and for some purpose” (Cox 1981, 128), shying away from addressing power, justice, and structural domination.

<2> Ontological: The bigger picture and invisible subjects

The ontological objections against practice theory are perhaps the most prominent in IR scholarship. I will focus on two versions: the critical realist and the feminist. Critical realists Jonathan Joseph and Milja Kurki (2018) have argued that practice theory’s “flat ontology leads to misunderstandings of causes and processes which do not exist at ‘observable’ levels of reality” (Joseph and Kurki 2018, 83). By insisting on rich empirical data, practice theories overlook important and unobservable yet causally significant factors in world politics. As they conclude,

[…] while practice theorists are entitled to adopt pragmatism (where knowledge is defined as what works), this should be openly defended, considered for its philosophical implications, and the consequences reflected on, politically (Joseph and Kurki 2018, 84).
This ontological criticism, however, is based on a peculiar reading of practice theory. In fact, with its focus on embodied and unspoken performances, practice theory works against a representational view of science and fully accepts the idea that the world is layered and structured in ways that we, as scholars, may not always be able to access (see also Walter 2019 for an excellent and sophisticated argument). In an effort to divorce Pierre Bourdieu from the practice turn and argue that he was, in fact, a critical realist, Joseph and Kurki continue:

Bourdieu’s emphasis on limited understanding, unconscious reproduction, and misrecognition is consistent with the realist idea that social practices and habitus act as themes of mediation between structures and agents. It is through the unreflective practice or limited consciousness of agents in their routine activities that objective social structures are reproduced (Joseph and Kurki 2018, 88).

The problem is not their reading of Bourdieu, but how they interpret practice theory. Practice theories do not reject structures or systems that it cannot see but insist that the role of scholarship is to see how such structures or systems can be interpreted from practices. This is the phenomenological insistence on experience and sensing. The problem practice theory sometimes has with analyzing empirically unobservable causal or constitutive mechanisms is that it risks being academically imperialist: The scholar assumes these mechanisms are there, and because the scholar also assumes they are unobservable, she does not need to study them empirically (for a debate on internalist and externalist perceptions of practice, see Frost and Lechner 2016; Hofius 2020). Many practice theorists would insist that such
“hidden” mechanisms will often have an expression of some nature, either in people’s interactions, experiences, or material relations. Otherwise, they are not mechanisms, but thought constructions.

The second ontological critique comes from feminist scholars. They criticize practice theory primarily for two reasons. First, as pointed out by Vivienne Jabri (2012), feminists such as Ann Tickner, Cynthia Enloe, and Katherine Moon have long focused on lived experience. They have rewritten international relations in terms of everyday intimate relations that are structured by and reproduce gendered social relations. According to Wilcox (2017, 790), studying practices is nothing new.

This objection is merited. Much of the practice turn not only ignores relevant and important feminist and queer approaches, it also works with a narrow ontology. Queer and feminist scholars insist on broadening the ontology of IR to include the perspective of women, marginalized groups, and individuals more broadly. They often focus on everyday practices and the low politics of high politics. For example, Cynthia Enloe’s pioneering work on nuclear scientists and militaries could be labeled practice theory, although it does not self-identify as such. 7

The second objection by feminist IR scholars—a direct consequence of the first—is that practice theory could (and should) be more critical by focusing on “failed” practices rather than only focusing on competent practices. Much of the practice turn indeed makes the issue of “competence” central, even constitutive, of what a “practice” is. 8 That a focus on competence creates unnecessary limitations of the scope or ontology of practice theory was already pointed out in the powerful and critical conclusion in the edited volume
International Practices (Adler and Pouliot 2011) by Duvall and Chowdhury. They gave the example of Nikita Khrushchev famously banging his shoe at the United Nations: illustrative of a subject whose actions are deemed “out of place”. They, therefore, insist on giving incompetent practices a more prominent role (Duvall and Chowdhury 2011, 340). Relatedly, scholars have importantly paid attention to the racialized and gendered constructions of incompetence (Standfield 2022).

Yet, Wilcox rightly argues that the feminist objection goes beyond this insistence on including incompetence in the ontology:

But what then, of embodied performances that fail to meet these standards of competence in the first place? Are these irrelevant or simply not interesting enough to take seriously in International Relations theory? Or rather, as I suggest, are “unsuccessful” or “incompetent” practices being systematically marginalized and under-theorized? Feminist and queer theory has a distinctive contribution to make to theorising the stakes of success and failure in embodied practices. Butler’s work is crucially instructive, for it insists that the norms that constitute “success” in a practice necessarily also constitute failure. Certain practices—certain bodies—are excluded from ontologically “mattering” through the process of subject formation, though they haunt the subject by becoming its “constitutive outside” (Wilcox 2017, 793).

By excluding certain practices or bodies from ontologically “mattering”, practice theory in IR reproduces existing hierarchies of disciplinary “competence” (Wilcox 2017). However, Wilcox takes the problem of competence very literally; it is the very negotiation of
competence that is at the center of the analysis for most practice scholars. Thus, a growing number of practice-oriented scholars are interested in exploring the marginal or “incompetent practices” (e.g. McConnell; Loh and Heiskanen 2020; Standfield 2020).

In addition, only the ordering-focused approach is as invested in competence, whereas the dis-ordering approach, as we have seen, is less so.

<2> Epistemological-normative: The (political) nature of academic knowledge

The epistemological and normative objections against the practice turn have to do with its pragmatist roots and inductive approach. Palan’s critique of constructivism reflects this general objection to practice theory, namely that it “never enquires about the emergence of the subject-as-actor and shies away from questions of power, justice, distribution and so on” (Palan 2000, 585). By zooming in on practices, scholars forget to distance themselves from the knowledge they produce; they simply “go native”. Palan’s argument is that by focusing on the everyday, one is ignoring structure and thus sustaining it. Yet to claim that practice theory is not engaged with structure, problems of power, justice, and distribution is perhaps even odder than to say that it is individualistic. Practice theories are deeply involved with power, theoretically and empirically. Practice theorists insist that it is necessary to see various forms of dominance and structural inequalities as interactional processes, i.e., always co-constituted by the weak in some way or another. Forgetting their intellectual roots, constructivists have tended to bracket the processes through which the agent reacts and negotiates these norms (see Adler-Nissen 2016b).
More precisely, since practice theory is inclined to use induction, practice theory begins not with theoretically deducted hypotheses but with the stories that practitioners – or objects – of world politics tell. Only then does it make sense to formulate more general statements about the broader social patterns. In Pouliot’s words, the methodology is oriented toward “the mutually constitutive dialectics between the social construction of knowledge and the construction of social reality” (Pouliot 2007, 359), seeking to bridge agency and structure without bracketing them.

As Hopf explains, “[t]he backbone of an interpretivist epistemology is phenomenology and induction” (Hopf 2002, quoted in Pouliot 2007, 368). It is precisely this epistemology that helped us explore everyday moves by ambassadors in the UN Security Council. They described how the negotiations that led to the contentious international intervention in Libya in 2011 resulted from an intuitive sense of understanding among the NATO members., Notably, as one NATO ambassador explains, “[a]t some point you just know where the wind blows” (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014, 18).

If so many things happen without anyone having a clearly designed plan from the beginning, how does intentional change happen? Recent scholarship specifies how change may be conceptualized in both evolutionary terms (Pouliot 2022) and in terms of repetition (Schäfer 2022). For many practice scholars, however, the answer is reflexivity. Reflection on knowledge production comes with a promise of insight and even emancipation for some of the key figures in practice theory (e.g. Bourdieu). Exploring conditions of change in and through practice is not the same as revealing a “false consciousness”. Rather it is a way of uncovering the practical knowledge and making it available not just for the scholar but for
the world more broadly. Looking back on his use of interviews, Bourdieu notes:

Ideas like those of habitus, practice and so on, were intended, among other things, to point out that there is a practical knowledge that has its own logic, which cannot be reduced to that of theoretical knowledge; that, in a sense, agents know the social world better than the theoreticians. And at the same time, I was also saying that, of course, they do not really know it and the scientist’s work consists in making explicit this practical knowledge, in accordance with its own articulations (Bourdieu, Chamboredon and Passeron 1991, 252).

One example of how the idea of habit has been used in critical interventions in IR scholarship is Séverinne Autesserre's book Peaceland (2014). Drawing on fieldwork and interviews from Congo, she points to how, despite good intentions, peace interventions fail to reach their full potential. The problem partly lies with the habitus, everyday practices and narratives of the expatriates who make up these missions–the inhabitants of “Peaceland.”

Recruitment practices favor thematic expertise over knowledge of local contexts and languages. Expatriates, not locals, fill peacebuilding organizations’ managerial positions. Foreign peacebuilders are generally based in provincial capitals and socialize primarily with other expats; they follow strict security procedures and live in bunkerized quarters. Their analyses reflect simple narratives on the causes, consequences, and solutions to violence, and their focus is on short-term solutions and quantifiable results. Autesserre shows that these ways of acting and thinking prevent local authorship and ownership and encourage one-size-fits-all models over a nuanced understanding of what drives local
violence. The book is not only an excellent example of an ordering approach to practices, where a myriad of practices form a larger order; it also demonstrates the critical potential of practice theory. Reflexivity is, therefore, also an important additional stage in scientific epistemology (see Leander 2011, 306–307).

Others are more skeptical concerning the potential of people making their own history by becoming self-reflexive (Hopf 2018). The practice turn has so-far stressed the non-reflective side of social order. Still, according to Hopf, it has not yet appreciated habit’s role as a structural obstacle to social change (for a discussion of change, see Schindler and Wille 2015). In particular, it has not fully explored the relationship between habit, agency, rationality, and uncertainty in international relations. Hopf explains how studying the logic of habit can reveal the social structures behind individuals unintentionally reproducing their own subordinate places in society—which is the aim of critical theory. Practice theory should study how these habits emerge, how they are maintained, and whose interests they serve.

<1> Conclusion and perspectives

International practice scholarship expands our view of world politics. Practice theory offers an ontology beginning with practice as a unit of analysis. Three aspects of practice theory are worth highlighting: First, international practice scholarship is a relational approach that zooms in on everyday practices of the people and materials that make up the trans- and international arena (Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann 2015). Second, the practice turn seeks
to overcome dualisms, including distinctions between structure and agency. Finally, practice scholarship insists that power has many different expressions. Power is contextual and embedded in particular practices.

Critiques of practice scholarship within IR have been too quickly subsumed under a focus on competence or elites. This has led to criticisms based on oversimplified conceptions of practice theory, overlooking its critical potential and the disordering approaches to practices. The focus on political or international (and Western) elites is not a theoretical necessity, but it has dominated recent scholarship. Now is the time for practice scholarship to uncover more of the unspoken rules guiding social interaction outside the West and at the margins of established circles of world politics (see Constantinou et al. 2021). To reveal the work that goes into taken-for-granted phenomena in world politics is to show that even decisions to go to war involve mundane situations of embarrassment and professional insecurities (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014). Thereby practice theory pulls the “high politics” of international relations down from its pedestal, making it trivial, thus accessible for investigation and powerful critique. This is one of the significant gains of practice theory.

What makes practice theory apt for studying power relations is not an overarching normative agenda or one particular theoretical concept (e.g., gender, hegemony, discourse) but rather its ontology and methodology. By insisting that power is performed everywhere, it inevitably engages in an exploratory exercise that often demasks and reveals power where we did not assume it to be. Moreover, because it zooms in on the everyday, it makes change feasible. For some, this might not seem radical enough. For example, due to its emphasis on the conditions of international politics and knowledge, it has been argued that
the reflexive dimension of practice theory “tends to subordinate ‘theory’ to ‘epistemology’” and, therefore, hinders’ the scholar “from imagining a different society” (Karakayal 2004, 351). However, as a research program, practice theory stands solidly in its insistence on taking experiences and identities as they are produced in everyday international relations seriously; they are embodied, yet interactional experiences.

<2> Emerging themes: Bodies, emotions, materials and technologies

International practice scholarship will inevitably branch out and develop its own niche discussions. However, the practice turn is now at a stage where it can, and should, also embark on new intellectual adventures benefiting IR as a whole. I see at least two themes emerging: (1) bodies and emotions and (2) materials and technologies.

(1) Recently, performative and dramaturgy-inspired practice theory has contributed to debates within IR theory about emotions, the self, and the body. Practice theory’s fundamental insight is that everyday interactions generate emotions, such as embarrassment, pride, and anger. George Hebert Mead’s fundamental insight (picked up by Goffman) was that the self is social, not biological (Goffman 1967) and that the “looking glass self” generates emotions, such as embarrassment, pride, and anger. As Erving Goffman puts it,

[t]he self as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the
characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited (Goffman 1967, 9).

From this perspective, emotions in world politics are not just psychologically or discursively constituted as affect or trauma; they emerge and are performed through everyday interaction. Within IR, research on emotions (Mattern 2011), emotional labor (Nair 2020a), misrecognition (Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021; Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi 2019) and affect (Solomon and Steele 2017) have led to interesting new debates among practice scholars on how to locate and analyze emotions and what role they play in world politics. One fruitful avenue for this debate would be to further explore the many links with poststructuralist, gender, and feminist approaches in IR (e.g., Towns 2020; Standfield 2020; 2022; Jabri 2012). Relatedly, practice theory would also benefit from cross-fertilization with studies of culture, including popular and military culture (Mälksoo 2021), rituals (Kustermans et al. 2022), and memory politics (Aalberts et al. 2022).

(2) Materiality and technology: Practice theory is now in close conversation with debates about materiality and technology in world politics. Materiality has always been an integrated aspect of definitions of practices, but within IR scholarship, it has been somewhat neglected. Recently, however, practice approaches have been in closer conversations with Sociology of Science and Technology Studies (STS) and Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (e.g. Beueger 2013; Nexon and Pouliot 2013). Pioneering work by Jacqueline Best and William Walters (2013) showed the analytical value of “inscriptions” the various pieces of paper, devices, graphs, and computer programs through which actors seek to translate the messiness of the world—the laboratory, the battlefield, or the market—
into usable, mobile knowledge. Today most would argue that the practice theory landscape naturally includes material aspects, working, as some would say, with a “flat ontology” (Bueger and Gadinger 2015). We now see a rising focus on technologies shaping everyday practices and their “affordances” (Adler-Nissen and Drieschova 2019). How do technological revolutions play out in practice? Are they even revolutions? IR needs in-depth studies of emerging and institutionalized practices across the online/offline divide whether through social media platforms, algorithm constructions, or big tech regulation (Adler-Nissen and Eggeling 2022).

To sum up, practice theory helps move IR scholars move toward a theoretically informed but deeply empirical international political sociology. In particular, its metaphoric models of social space, such as fields, communities, or networks, in which human beings embody different capitals can pave the way for new analyses of otherwise understudied aspects of international relations. Moreover, by vigorously examining the cracks in social order and the co-production of power, IR scholars are enabled to critically study the positions from which they and their colleagues speak.

<1> References


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1 I will use “practices” to describe “social practices” in this chapter. All practices are social in some form or another. Kustermans distinguishes between “practice”– as “all of our doings, the myriad of human behaviours, which is forever going on all at once. A second – practical knowledge – I define as my and your, and his and her skill at doing what we do. A third – practices – I define as the things that we do, the organized activities that we encounter and participate in.” (Kustermans 2016, 77).

2 Not unlike the struggles of young career scholars, see Holthaus (2020).

3 We may also reflect more on the *international* in the definition. International practices indicate that these practices occupy a space of political and social relations that trespass the boundaries of particular actors on the world stage (see Epstein and Jackson, this volume).

4 A performance is distinct from action as it requires an audience, real or imagined.

5 This is what distinguishes a performance from a habit (Hopf 2010). If a particular performance is repeated many times, it may become a habit. Yet, and this is crucial, not all repeated performances become habits, even if repeated thousands of times. The performance of rituals involving sacralization of weapons is crucial to building credible deterrence practices in the NATO alliance, as Maria Mälksoo (2021) has shown.

6 Marginalization, exclusion, domination, and resistance–have always been central concerns of symbolic interactionism, which is one of the sources of inspiration for practice theory (see Adler-Nissen 2016b).
7 Practice theory is beginning to recognize the pioneering work of feminists and queer scholars, including my book, which draws heavily on Cynthia Enloe’s Feminists approach and Cynthia Weber’s work on simulating sovereignty (Adler-Nissen 2014).

8 Adler and Pouliot (2011) insist that “practices are competent performances” and that “practice is more or less competent in a socially meaningful and recognizable way.” This is essential to how they understand practice because of the need for an audience to appraise the performance and its (in)competence.