The Play of International Practices

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Abstract: The core claims of the practice turn in International Relations remain ambiguous. What are the promises of international practice theory? How does such an account differ from existing perspectives? To what research agenda does it lead us? 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 and situate knowledge in practice rather than ‘mental frames’ or ‘discourse’. The intention is to transcend IR binaries, such as those of agency and structure, subject and object, or the ideational and material. Instead, practice approaches focus on how groups perform their practical activities in world politics to renew and reproduce social order. Practice theories are a heterogenous family, but, as we argue, share a range of core commitments which give it a degree of coherence. Realizing the promise of the practice turn requires considering the full spectrum of approaches. IR has however primarily drawn on approaches that emphasize reproduction and hierarchies. More attention is required to practice approaches rooted in pragmatism that emphasize contingency and change. We conclude with an outline of core challenges that the future agenda of international practice theory will have to tackle.

Keywords: Practice Theory, International Practices, Andreas Reckwitz, Pragmatism, Methodology

The Practice Turn in International Relations

The practice turn has arrived in International Relations (IR) theory. A growing number of contributions demonstrate that practice approaches increasingly find their place in IR.¹ The promises of this turn have yet to be elaborated on. What is distinctive about these approaches in contrast to established theoretical perspectives such as rationalism or constructivism? Is it accurate to suggest that practice approaches form a new paradigm and all IR scholars, independent from their ontological or epistemological stances, may

¹ See among others Pouliot (2008); Adler and Pouliot (2011b); Adler-Nissen (2013b); Bueger and Gadinger (2014); Acuto and Curtis (2013).
easily join in as Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot (2011a: 28) suggest? What does the practice turn imply in conceptual and methodological terms and what can we gain from it?

We argue in this article that doing practice theory is a distinctive way of studying the world. Practice approaches provide a different understanding of the international by taking practices as the core unit of analysis. They move away from models of interest calculating or norm evaluating actors. Yet, they agree on many of the assumptions and the interest in shared knowledge with perspectives in IR that have been described as cultural (Lapid and Kratochwil 1996), critical (Ashley 1987), cognitive (Adler 1991) or constructivist (Guzzini 2000). Instead of operating with concepts such as ‘ideas’, ‘frames’ or ‘discourse’, they see, however, ‘practices’ as the unit that drives the world and makes it ‘hang together’. Practice approaches study how collectives perform practical activities in world politics to renew and reproduce social and political order. Thus, the everyday practices of diplomats, terrorists, environmentalists or financial analysts become the object of investigation to unveil order and change.

Confusion about the practice turn and the idea of international practice theory, however, abounds. The main objective of this article is hence to lay out what the assumptions, promises and challenges of international practice theory are. To do so we adopt a multi-layered strategy. Our first layer clarifies how, in ideal-typical terms, practice theory differs from other social theoretical accounts. We show that practice theory is not only opposed to rationalism and norm-oriented theories, but also distinguishes itself from culturalist theories. In our second layer, we introduce and discuss six core commitments of practice theory on an ontological, epistemological and methodological level. Practice theory implies to engage with at least six themes and concerns: to emphasise process, to develop an account of knowledge as action, to appreciate the collectivity of knowledge, to recognize the materiality of practice, to embrace the multiplicity of orders, and to work with a performative understand of the world. To talk about commitments rather than principles or shared assumptions is to recognize that practice theory is heterogenous; it is a diverse ‘family’. Theorists interpret the commitments differently. Our third layer is hence to discuss the spectrum of practice approaches. We find the tendency to equate international practice theory with Bourdieu’s praxeology problematic. To capture a full spectrum of international phenomena, more attention for other practice approaches will be required. This includes centrally those approaches rooted in the tradition of pragmatism. Rather than discussing different practice theoretical approaches in their own right, we focus on the relations between them. We suggest that there are core points of contention within practice theory that are also challenges in furthering the 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. Working on these questions will determine the potential strength of the contribution international practice theory can make to the discipline.
(Mis)Understanding the Practice Turn

The declaration of a practice turn in IR has already led to substantial critique. Most directly Erik Ringmar (2014) has doubted the benefits of such a turn. As Ringmar (2014: 2) critically notes “practices of one kind or another are what scholars of international relations always have studied”. To a certain degree he is right. Practice has indeed gradually become a core category within constructivism, for instance as an intermediary of agents and structure (Wendt 1992). However, when Iver Neumann (2002) suggested that we should start to pay attention to practice theory, his argument was different. He argued that the concept of practice needs to be promoted from a supporting to a leading role. This has, as we show in this article, severe implications for ontology, epistemology and methodology in international relations. Since Neumann’s plea to turn to practice, the work of Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot (2011a, b) has particularly become associated with the label of practice theory. Cautiously, they do not claim that practice theory is a “universal grand theory” or a “totalizing ontology of everything social” (Adler and Pouliot 2011a: 2). Yet, they consider international practice theory to be a project anyone can subscribe to, regardless of their theoretical position. We disagree. We argue that it does not make sense to include all forms of IR theories such as realism, institutionalism or social constructivism. Not every IR theorist is a practice theorist, can be a practice theorist or is doing practice-theory-driven research. The reason is simple: although they may talk about practice, many IR scholars do not share the epistemological and ontological commitments that practice theories imply. This includes a rejection of methodological individualism, a thoroughly performative understanding of the world, the adoption of an interpretive methodology, and an understanding of science as one cultural domain among others. As we demonstrate in our first two layers, practice theory has to be differentiated from other theoretical families, doing practice theory implies a commitment to at least six concerns.

Adler and Pouliot need to be praised for opening up the discussion in IR and promoting the cause. However, rather than turning practice theory into an overcrowded circus, the ontological and epistemological commitments which give practice theory its distinct value need to 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 pre-condition 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 which 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 need for this position is particularly important given the history of earlier ‘turns’ in the discipline. The rise of constructivism is a well-known example of how difficult it is to develop a productive research program on weak conceptual grounds. After the euphoria surrounding the emergence of the constructivist approach had begun to wane, there was a growing sense of disillusionment as a result of the dominant position of Alexander Wendt’s constructivism and the increasing dilution of constructivism’s basic premises (Fierke 2002). Vast intellectual energy was spent 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. To blur, or even diffuse, the notion of practice, moreover, runs the risk of falling back into a trivial, simplistic understanding of practice as synonymous with political action or ‘what practitioners do’. Also, Ringmar’s critique (2014: 2) that “there is nothing truly new about this research” requires a response. Ringmar’s argument is all but a productive misunderstanding, since it forces practice turn advocates to specify their conceptual and methodological premises. This is the main objective of this article: To lay out what the assumptions, promises and challenges of international practice theory are.

**Sorting things out: The Foundations of International Practice Theory**

What is firstly required is an understanding of how, in ideal-typical terms, practice theory differs from other social theoretical accounts. How does practice theory differ from other theories? How is it situated in the landscape of social theory? Social theorist Andreas Reckwitz has developed a mapping of social theory which is very useful for identifying the uniqueness of international practice theory.² Reckwitz identifies streams of theoretical thought and situates practice theory within them. He conducts two central moves. The first is to argue that there are three major streams of social theory: rationalism, norm-oriented theorizing and cultural theory. In the second move he identifies three families within cultural theory: mentalism, textualism and practice theory. Below, we discuss these moves in greater detail.

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<th>Table 1: Three Classes of Contemporary Social Theory</th>
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<td><strong>Central elements of meaning</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Homo oeconomicus</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Homo sociologicus</strong></td>
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² See Reckwitz (2002a; 2004a, b; 2008; and 2010).
### Cultural theories

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<th>Collective orders of knowledge:</th>
<th>Repetitive patterns of action</th>
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<td>Symbolic-cognitive orders</td>
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(Reckwitz 2004a: 318, own translation)

### Classes of Social Theory: Interests, Norms and Culture

For Reckwitz (2002a, 2004a), social theory can be categorized into three streams (see table one). The first consists of theories of action that are based on instrumental rationality. These rely on methodological individualism and concentrate on the acts of individuals. Individuals are considered to be self-interested and equipped with subjective rationality. From such a perspective the social sphere is essentially the product of individual actions (Reckwitz 2002a: 245). The second class is comprised of norm-oriented theories of action. They locate the social in rules that establish what kind of action is possible. Actors consent to normative rules. This enables them to distinguish between allowed, prohibited, worthwhile and worthless behaviour and social order is guaranteed by a normative consensus (Reckwitz 2002a: 245). The key question for norm-oriented theories of action is how the inter-subjective coordination of potentially contradicting actions of different actors is feasible. The answer is sought in the establishment of, and consent to, normative social expectations and roles, which prevent the endless confrontation of disparate interests. Given the understanding of the social as something larger than the individual, norm-based theories of action come close to the third, culturalist, class of theorizing. There is, however, a major difference. Unlike culturalist theories, *homo oeconomicus* and *homo sociologicus* share a common blind spot: 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 are interested in understanding what makes actors believe that the world is ordered in the first place, and, what makes them capable of acting. This capacity to grasp the world as ordered presupposes a layer of symbolic and meaningful rules, or of ‘culture’. Culture regulates the ascription of meaning to objects and provides procedures for understanding them (Reckwitz 2002a: 246). The advantage of a culturalist approach is that questions of social order that are often overlooked can be addressed. Theorizing based on instrumental rationality reduces the challenges of social order to the unequal distribution of resources and thereby omits collective patterns of action. Norm-based theories can claim to more fully explain collective actions and change by relying on norms. However, they struggle to explain the emergence and constitution of those norms. Culturalist approaches have an elaborate answer for this. They do not presuppose that acting subjects are guided by norms, but rather scrutinize the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of the prior ordering. The culturalist understanding is that
these ordering efforts, which structure the world of action, are based on collectively shared orders of knowledge, systems of symbols, meanings or cultural codes which operate as rules for action. It is in these collectively meaningful orders and their symbolic organization of reality, that culturalist theories locate the social (Reckwitz 2002a: 246-47). Culturalist approaches therefore differ from other approaches: They understand social order as a product of collectively shared knowledge.

**Three families of culturalist theorizing: Ideas, Discourse and Practice**

A point of divergence for culturalist approaches lies in how they conceptualize collectively shared orders of knowledge. To proceed by means of distinction, Reckwitz differentiates three families that present different conceptualizations: mentalist, textualist and practice-theoretical approaches. Theories of practice are, hence, one type of culturalist theorizing which offer a very distinct understanding of shared knowledge.

Mentalist accounts see shared orders of knowledge expressed in the human mind and its cognitions. Culture is understood as a mental and cognitive phenomenon and is hence located in the human mind, the mental structure, the “head” of human beings (Reckwitz 2002a: 247). Shared cognitive-mental schemes are treated as the smallest unit of the social and are the 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. The main representatives of this mode of theorizing are post-structuralism, radical hermeneutics, constructivist systems theory or semiotics associated with scholars such as Clifford Geertz, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Niklas Luhmann, Paul Ricoeur or Roland Barthes. Despite their divergences, these approaches are united by their focus on extra-subjective structures of meaning. These works tend to rely on discourse analysis to decipher cultural codes and rules of formation. Foucault’s (1972) early work *Archeology of Knowledge* or Geertz’s (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures* are paradigmatic in this regard.

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3 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 (e.g. 2010) showed in later articles, this differentiation can however be neglected due to the strong convergence between intersubjectivism and the concerns of practice theory.
The third family, practice theory, embraces the importance of mentalist and textualist ideas, yet suggests locating shared knowledge in practices. The focus is neither solely on the internal (inside the head of actors), nor on the external (in some form of structure). Instead, practice is seen as ontologically in-between the inside and the outside. The social can be identified in the mind (since individuals are carriers of practices), as well as 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 than their actual activities and practical enactments in concrete situations. 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 and cannot be reduced 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. In sociology it is everyday practices of consumption, work or family life that have been discussed as examplars (e.g. Shove et al. 2012). International practices such as diplomacy or war likewise are. Theorists of practice criticize the tendency of mentalists and textualists to over-intellectualize the social. Although such a criticism should not be overstated, action, including political action, is often more banal than assumed. In distancing themselves from practical activities, mentalists and textualists tend to over-emphasize intellectual constructs at the price of practical human competencies and evaluations.

*Reckwitz’s Mapping and International Theory*

Reckwitz’s mapping is a useful tool for situating practice theories. Social theory is, however, a moving target, much like international theory is. There is continual movement, mutation and hybridization of theories. Keeping this disclaimer in mind, projecting Reckwitz’s framework is helpful for ordering international theory. It allows for situating international practice theory in it, and making sense of the heterogeneity among IR theories. Since the 1990s, a controversy between rationalist and norm-oriented approaches drives theorizing in IR (e.g. 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 IR and often blur the lines between the two approaches or
creatively combine elements of both (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 (e.g. 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’ has in IR, moreover, often 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 labelling 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 research 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 that inherently entail thought 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 mentalism in their focus on shared knowledge and meaning structures that coexist in a groups mind. Yet, the distaince themselves from the rational actor models of methodological individualism (Goldstein and Keohane 1993: 7). Studies analyze the shared effects that ‘experience’ has on political actors in collective decision-making (e.g. Hafner-Burton et al. 2013) or draw on cognitive psychology to explain, for instance, 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. If authors rely on different theorists – including Derrida or Foucault –, their studies share the objective to understand world political phenomena through the investigation of extra-subjective structures of meaning by which agents achieve the capability to act. Shared knowledge, for instance, becomes important for establishing authority, and positioning claims are analyzed though the lense of the forms of knowledge in textual genres that are 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).

To summarize, while IR theories develop their own disciplinary understandings of the Reckwitzian categories, the major lines can be well captured through such a framework. 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 to 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 poststructuralism that emphasize practice (Wodak 2011). Carving out intellectual space through othering is a helpful, but also dangerous tool. We hence need to move to a positive approximation in our next layer of grasping what practice theory is and what can be done with it. We suggest that practice theories rely on a distinct set of commitments.

**Commitments of International Practice Theory**

In this section we develop a minimal definition of practice theory as a number of core commitments. What follows from this minimal definition is that what should count as practice theory is narrower than the range suggested by Adler and Pouliot, i.e. not everyone who studies practices is a practice theorist. However, it is broader than what is conventionally understood in IR, with the notable inclusion of different variations of pragmatist theorizing. 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, it submits that doing practice theoretical analysis involves engaging with a number

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of themes and concerns. These are commitments on what can be achieved with a practice-theoretical approach and clarify why analysis is centered 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).

First, practice theories emphasize process over stasis. Emphasis is on the procedural dimension of practice and that any process requires activity. Practice theorists hence prefer verbs like ‘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. As a consequence, scholars bypass essentialist and statist notions of the international and sideline distinctions which emphasize these, such as the one between agency and structure.

Second, practice theories offer a distinct perspective on knowledge which is understood as being situated in practice. ‘Knowing’ is developed as a unified account of knowing and doing. Terms such as ‘practice’, ‘acting’ and ‘knowing’ are seen as interconnected (Friedrichs and Kratochwil 2009). This implies understanding knowledge as ‘knowing from within’ (Shotter 1993: 7) which 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 spatio-temporally situated phenomenon.

Third, knowing and the acquisition of knowledge by learning are understood as inherently collective processes. Members of a distinct group (e.g. 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. This does not imply chaos, limitless plurality or an atomized understandings 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 agents who establish their own 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, re-enactment 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 Roxanne 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 helps to clarify some of the boundaries. Ringmar’s (2014) general attack on the promises of practice theory for instance targets two studies. He criticizes Rita Abrahamsen and Michael Williams’s Bourdieu-inspired contribution (2011) as being nothing more than rational choice theory (Ringmar 2014: 10). Abrahamsen 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’s (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 which 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, the commitments should not be read 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. To speak about practice theory in the singular is hence 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. Practices 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. Appreciating the multiplicity of approaches is a vital aspect of doing practice driven analysis. 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.

In IR there is a strong tendency to equate the notion of practice theory with the approach of Pierre Bourdieu. A vast majority of current practice-theoretical work takes Bourdieu’s approach as a starting point to a degree that ‘Bourdieuianism’ dominates the discussion on practice in IR. 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 Mèrand 2013: 36). This makes the approach compatible to a discipline historically concerned about

6 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.
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 is, however, 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 in the IR, 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 odd development, namely the exclusion of a range of approaches from the debate in IR, notably those developed from a pragmatist tradition.

In addition to Bourdieu’s praxeology, a meaningful spectrum consists of at least four approaches that have started to thrive in IR: 1) studies of global governmentality following Foucault’s later work (Walters 2012), 2) the community of practice approach as outlined by Etienne Wenger and introduced to IR by Adler (2005), 3) adoptions of actor-network theory following Bruno Latour and other advocates (Best and Walters 2013), and 4) assemblage approaches following Gilles Deleuze’s emphasis on practice (Acuto and Curtis 2013). There are further approaches under development. These draw for instance on the practice theories of Luc Boltanski (Gadinger 2015), Michel de Certeau (Neumann 2002), Karin Knorr Cetina (Buenger 2015), Theodore Schatzki (Navari 2010), or Ann Swidler (Neumann and Sending 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,7 but these are core issues in the future agenda of international practice theory. We relate the approaches to two different traditions: critical theory and pragmatism. Then we show how approaches 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 in structural metaphors. 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.

7 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).
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.\(^8\) 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, or 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 power, hegemony and resistance and in elaborating larger historical trends and forces. This is, for instance, reflected in Bourdieu’s emphasis to understand 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.\(^9\) An advantage in these studies, for 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. While the concept of a ‘field’ incorporates the objective component of a distinct hierarchical 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, which are more complex and subtle than what is conventionally studied in IR. As a result, studying power relations by drawing on Bourdieu moves IR

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\(^8\) See among others, Béнатouil (1999), Celikates (2006) and Bogusz (2014).

\(^9\) For a detailed examination of Bourdieu’s conceptual vocabulary see the contributions in Adler-Nissen (2013b).
research in new directions and contributes to the debate on different faces of power. 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 such as 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 to belong to a certain turn, tradition or perspective. Many contemporary pragmatists, such as Latour or Boltanski, are not transparent in this regard, although the intellectual roots and resemblances are quite obvious (e.g. Latour 2005: 261; Boltanski 2011: 27-29, 54-60). As observers from sociology point out, such authors are not only as pragmatists, but also as practice theorists (Nicolini 2013; Blokker 2011). 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 2013: 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 international relations 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 (e.g. 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 interpretations 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 and hence start out from an almost opposite direction than the critical theory tradition’s focus on routines and structures. These difference 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 critical theorists such as 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 to actually study 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 in claiming 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. This 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.

Thinking about scale and structural metaphors

A confusing array of structural metaphors has been proposed and it appears that these are (intentionally or unintentionally) under-theorized. Bourdieu’s ‘field’ is certainly one of the most developed concepts that allows IR scholars (Peter Jackson 2008) to understand international relations beyond national boundaries in transnational spaces. Drawing on the concept assumes that a distinct structure exists, driven by a unique doxa and distribution of resources. It is to assume that a fairly homogenous structure with boundary and identity practices can be identified. Such an understanding is useful if one is interested in the distribution
of power among different agents and their relative positionality (e.g. 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. Most prominently featured in Wenger’s (1998) notion of communities of practice, is the idea that practice is organized in community structures. Such communities are then seen as being characterized by a stable core (or repertoire in Wenger’s words) and a significant amount of boundary work drives the community. On the other side of the spectrum, we can identify notions of structure which 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 George Marcus and Erkan Sakka (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, on the one hand, it becomes almost impossible to lay out grand histories of panoramic scale and the power dynamics they entail. On the other hand, employing such notions 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 requires to be addressed in the 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. The intention of practice theory is 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 Anna 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 demonstrate the hybridity of scale, such as Karin 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 is a promising one. Yet not every practice-driven investigation will focus primarily on scale-making. Even if this focus is not explicit, it is important 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 practice theory is often perceived as the attempt to invent new vocabularies, it is also a move to upscale empirical and descriptive work. Miettinen et al. (2009) provide a careful reminder that 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 is “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 is 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 re-interpret these in light of practice theoretical concerns (see Bueger 2014; Pouliot 2013; Nicolini 2009). 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 has, however, 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 as well as what he calls subjectivist accounts (Nicolini 2013: 62). A pragmatist scholar such as Latour equally lays out largely negative guidelines, and posits that his methodology is, in the first place, a framework that tells you what not to do (e.g. Latour 2005: 142).
Participant observation as the tool which allows for the recording of bodily movements, speech and the handling of artifacts in real time is to some degree the “corresponding method” of practice theory (Reckwitz 2008). While participant observation allows direct proximity to practice, the method has its limitations when access is problematic, resources are limited, or if the practice under scrutiny is historical, in which case bodily movements are no longer observable. There is therefore a need to decipher practices 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 which 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 either zooming in on a distinct practice, a crisis situation or an object (Bueger 2014). More emphasis is placed on participant observation and acquiring descriptions of detailed situations and actions. The core strategy is immersion in the action. Corresponding to the erratic understanding of practice, a writing style is adopted that provides complex, often non-linear and incoherent narratives in which various practitioner voices are represented, and the level of empirical detail is high. While critical narratives risk providing overly “clean” narratives of practice, pragmatist face 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 is a vital future 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 starting point here is the symmetrical perspective of practice theory which does not only consider the world studied as a practical configuration, but also understands (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 et al. 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 assumption is that 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 is contested. For those close to a critical tradition, reflexivity is 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 (Berling 2013). Practical reflexivity is, 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 is essentially a self-regulative policing device. In contrast, pragmatist scholars interpret practical reflexivity as a constructive device geared towards 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. Reflexivity on academic practices is therefore interpreted as a means of strengthening 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

Whether it is meaningful (or even necessary) to speak of a ‘practice turn’, or not, the attention given to the ‘family of practice theories’ has prompted important IR research. The development of international practice theory as a distinct perspective for the study of global politics and international relations is, however, still in its early stages. In order to progress and direct the development of this research perspective, we have provided an outline of the contours of international practice theory that recognizes both the convergence around a number of core commitments as well as the plurality of approaches within it. We began our investigation by arguing for the importance of clarifying what practice theory is and what
kind of promises it holds. This is a response to the confusion that there is nothing new about practice theory. It is, however, also a call for resisting the temptation to declare international practice theory the new grand IR theory, which integrates IR’s diverse paradigms and methodological approaches. If anything, international practice theory adds an additional vocabulary and a methodological perspective to the discipline and as such, increases the plurality in IR. There is nothing wrong, in principle, with IR being a pluralistic discipline, as long as it is clear what each perspective brings to the table and as long as each perspective is ready to contribute to a dialogue which leads to a holistic understanding of the problems and phenomena of world politics. Instead of conflating and blurring what international practice theory is and what can be done with it, clarification of its core commitments and what it contributes to the study of world politics is required.

In this article we have offered three layers in order to provide such a clarification. We started with a discussion of what practice theory is not. Practice theory is not rational choice, it is not norm constructivism, and it is neither the study of belief systems nor discourse. In social theoretical terms, practice theory moves away from the study of inter-subjective coordination. It is distinct in the way it takes patterns of activity as the smallest unit of analysis. But also in the way it centers on the study of bodily movements, the handling of artifacts and practical knowledge. It focuses on the structures and situations where actors perform shared practices and produce social order. We laid out what the core commitments of practice theory are. These are minimal ontological and epistemological commitments. Our intention was not to confine practice theory to a set of dogmatic principles. Instead, our discussion of these ‘thin’ commitments intended to contribute to a mutual understanding both within as well as outside international practice theory. In doing so, we acknowledge the specific character of practice theory, which is, as Reckwitz (2004b: 52) suggests, the strongest if it is as thin as possible in its general conceptual requirements. Our next move was to discuss the spectrum of approaches. By criticizing the tendency to equate international practice theory with Bourdieu, we pointed to the broader spectrum of approaches which already started to thrive in IR. Bourdieu offers a very distinct version of practice theory and needs to be situated in the landscape of practice theory. Other versions of practice theory offer quite different understandings of the minimal commitments. These differences should not, however, be overstated. On the contrary, as we have seen in the discussion of the relations of the perspectives, the points of contention generate a number of debates which will be at the core of the future agenda of practice theory in IR. We sketched out four such ongoing concerns. These include how to cope with tensions between the regulative and erratic character of practice, the politics of scale, what methodologies allow capturing and writing about practice, and how to reflexively situate practice researchers within the world they study. International practice theory promises to reconfigure our understanding of international relations and
world politics. To ensure that this promise is realized, further debate is required on what practice theory is and what it is not, how it can be applied, and what is controversial within it.

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