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# **The Practice Approach in Global Politics**

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## **Abstract**

Practices are capturing increased interest in international relations. Throughout this article, I demonstrate that the body of work under review contributes to a progressive research agenda in world politics. As such, the high quality of the books under review attests to the dynamism of the practice turn. This review puts forward two main arguments. First, I distinguish at least four different forms of a practice approach on display in the reviewed books. Second, I suggest that practice is an essentially contested concept. Overall, this review article highlights some trends flowing from these books as well as some questions that remain either underdeveloped or unanswered.

## The Practice Approach in Global Politics

- Autesserre, Séverine. 2014. *Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bueger, Christian, and Frank Gadinger. 2014. *International Practice Theory: New Perspectives*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McNamara, Kathleen R. 2015. *The Politics of Everyday Europe: Constructing Authority in the European Union*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pouliot, Vincent. 2016. *International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of Multilateral Diplomacy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sending, Ole Jacob, Vincent Pouliot, and Iver B. Neumann. 2015. *Diplomacy and the Making of World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Practices are capturing increased interest in international relations (IR). Even if the practice turn is still in its infancy, this subject has already become a battleground on which conflicts are waged over structural, cultural, methodological, and agential considerations. For some scholars, practices are the fundamental glue of our social world; for others, this is a trendy and empty concept that will, hopefully, soon fade away.

This review article proposes a twofold invitation. To those who see practices as ontological glue, I invite them to consider the limits of such a position. To those who see practices as a useless trend, I urge them to appreciate how a well-delimited practice approach can help us make sense of some aspects of contemporary world politics.

With this twin goal in mind, I put forward two main arguments. First, I distinguish at least four different forms of a practice approach on display in the reviewed books. I label these the *comprehensive*, *complementary*, *discursive*, and *relational* forms. Although these approaches were developed in reaction to the top-down, deductive, and structural inclinations of IR scholarship, and all seek to shed light on the role that practices play in socially constructing our political world, I show that they also depart from each other in substantive ways.

Second, I push back against the notion that a failure of definitional consensus means that practice has no future in IR and security studies; instead, I argue that debating the meaning of practices is a sign of health. Indeed, I suggest that practice is an *essentially contested* concept, inasmuch as it directly maps to the seven-fold framework that advocates of essentially contested concepts have proposed to better understand these concepts. Because practice is essentially contested, recent calls to reject a practice approach due to its lack of definitional consistency appear rather unconvincing.

By tracing how the literature on practices is currently organized, the article contends that this is an opportune moment to move IR's scattered scholarships on practices a step further and to better understand the relationship between practices and security studies. Studying security nowadays is exciting because the field comprises an eclectic mix of theories and approaches; an emphasis on practices contributes and encourages inter-perspectives and multidisciplinary dialogue on security (Bourbeau, 2015).

This essay is organized as follows. The first section distinguishes among four strands of a practice approach. The second section puts forward the idea that practice is an essentially contested concept. Finally, the third section briefly explores trends and challenges of a practice approach to world politics, including the importance of induction research, the issue of who is “allowed” to be called a practice scholar, and the question of whether the current focus on practice is guilty of Eurocentrism.

### **Forms of a Practice Approach**

One of the most obvious things gleaned from reading the insightful and highly stimulating books listed above is the need to distinguish among *forms* of a practice approach. I propose this distinction is best made on the basis of the place and role each author identifies for practice in world politics. First, the *comprehensive* form seeks to establish the priority of practice in all social actions. Few would disagree that Vincent Pouliot’s (2008) article has been highly instrumental in pushing this line of argument in IR scholarship. Pouliot argues that most of what people do in world politics is not the result of rational decisions (as realists and neoliberal institutionalists claim), nor of norm-following or Habermasian communicative action (as strands of constructivism contend), but of routinized and inarticulate know-how that makes the action to be done appear common-sense. In a bold statement, Pouliot (2008, 269-70) insists that he does not want to suggest that practices are an add-on to existing rationalities, norms, or discourses; rather, he intends to demonstrate and “establish the ontological priority of the logic of practicality over the logics of consequences, appropriateness, and arguing.”

Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot (2011) further fine-tune this argument in their edited book. While the authors argue that their goal is not to propose a “totalizing ontology of everything social,” they nonetheless state that practices are “the gluon of IR – the ontological entity that cuts across paradigms under different names but with a related substance” (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 10). For them, practices may not only be “considered the ontological core concept that amalgamates the constitutive parts of social international life,” but also a concept that permits scholars to “move beyond a number of entrenched dichotomies,” including the agent-structure and the material-meaningful (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 13). They present several derivative arguments in the introduction to their book, notably concerning the issue of change and continuity in world politics. Adler and Pouliot (2011, 16) contend that practices, as the “gluon” of world politics, are particularly well-placed to tackle these issues, since practices “partake in both *continuity and change* in social and political life.” Indeed, for these scholars, not only are practices the “vehicle[s] of reproduction,” but it is also from practices “that social change originates” since “change not stability is the ordinary condition of social life... Stability, in other words, is an illusion created by the recursive nature of practice” (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 16).

The *complementary* form of the practice approach shies away (both explicitly and implicitly) from the claims of ontological priority put forward by the comprehensive form, and instead considers the relationship among practices, norms, and discourses in a complementary way. Proponents of the

complementary practice approach argue that since norms, discourses, and practices are not necessarily competing logics, the interaction among them need not be mutually exclusive. For these scholars, practice is not *the* element constituting all aspects of our social world, but *an* element of it (albeit a particularly important one). This stipulation does not diminish the explanatory power of practices; it simply levels that explanatory power, bringing it on par with the explanatory power of other elements, like norms and discourses. While proponents of the complementary form accept that, on some occasions, one logic or concept might have priority, they consider this a contingent priority rather than a theoretical or ontological one. These scholars display a preference for contingent generalizations about the fundamental role of practices in world politics while remaining dubious about the feasibility of developing a comprehensive theory of practices. That is, they present a set of arguments about practices that they deem to be the best possible interpretation of the issue at hand. They yearn for a limited but powerful confidence, rather than comprehensiveness, in understanding practices on the global stage.

S  verine Autesserre's (2014) superb ethnographic study of international peace interventions adopts this complementarity approach to practices. Autesserre (2014, 8) underscores the importance of the "nuts and bolts of peacebuilding: the banal, everyday activities that actually make up the bulk of the work." She demonstrates convincingly that everyday practices and mundane elements produce and reproduce the strategies and policies of peacebuilding, thereby explaining "the existence and continued use of ways of working that interveners view as inefficient, ineffective, or even counterproductive" (2014, 9). At the same time, she makes it clear that she is "not suggesting that daily habits and practices explain everything about the effectiveness of international peace interventions. I simply argue that an investigation of such everyday elements sheds lights on several unexplored facets of this topic" (2014, 9).

In the same lineage, while some scholars argue that practices partake in the creation of the structure of the logic of anarchy (Wendt 1992), others have focused their attention on the relationship between norms and practices. For example, Richard Price and Nina Tannenwald (1996) hold that explaining chemical and nuclear taboos necessitates a complementary investigation into the practices that have constituted these norms. Sebastian Schmidt (2014) contends that a practice approach provides a novel and complementary explanation of norm change in the context of the foreign peacetime military presence of a state on the territory of another equally sovereign state.

In her insightful study of the European Union (EU) as a political authority in its own right (rather than an international institution created by states to induce and maintain cooperation in several issues area), Kathleen McNamara (2015) argues that a focus on practice nicely complements an emphasis on symbols in the cultural construction of meaning and identity. "Symbols represent the world around us and, in so doing, make it comprehensible," contends McNamara, "but meaning is not only created through our thinking, our cognitive engagement with the world, in images, words, and thoughts. It is also created through practice" (2015, 40). McNamara does not frame the relationship between symbols and practices in a competitive way, in which one element can possess ontological priority over the other. On the contrary, she theorises practices as

solidifying and making real the identity construction made possible through symbols. By arguing that “symbols are made ‘real’ by being embodied in objects that actually become part of people’s lives in a practical way,” she positions practice as a complementary mechanism for reinforcing symbols in the cultural infrastructure construction of the EU identity (2015, 42-43).

Departing from these articulations, the *discursive* form argues that our social world is a world of textual practices. Practices, particularly discursive practices, construct identity. James Der Derian and Ian Shapiro (1989) were among the first in IR to highlight the importance of language and text as a form of practice conveying particular knowledge and power, and many scholars have followed in their stead. In her take on the agent-structure debate, Roxanne Doty (1997) sought to “decenter” practices, emphasizing that discursive practices have an autonomy that cannot be reduced to either agents’ actions or social structures enabling and constraining power. Similarly, David Campbell (1998, 8) grounded his study on US foreign policy in an interrogation of discursive practices, contending that “United States foreign policy be understood as a political practice central to the constitution, production, and maintenance of American political identity.” In the same lineage, Lene Hansen (2006, 19) in her book *Security as Practice* contended that understanding foreign policy as a discursive practice implies that “policy and identity are seen as ontologically interlinked.”

In her contribution to Adler and Pouliot’s book, Hansen (2011) sharply distinguishes her position from the comprehensive form. The value of adopting a poststructuralist-attuned discursive practice approach, according to Hansen (2011, 280-81), is that it understands practices as “ambiguously situated between the sedimented and self-evident, on the one hand, and the contested and unstable, on the other.” This is in contrast to the comprehensive form, which takes for granted the routine, commonsensical, and accepted aspects of practices.

Finally, the *relational* form represents the latest iteration of the practice approach—and potentially the most dynamic, as well. The relational form posits, to paraphrase John Ruggie (1998), that relations are what make the “world hang together.” The works of Mustafa Emirbayer (1997) and Patrick T. Jackson and Daniel Nexon (1999) provide key influences on the relational practice approach.<sup>1</sup> These authors distinguish between substantialism, which postulates that entities (e.g., states) are the appropriate units of analysis and that their existence precedes interaction, and relationalism, which positions the (dynamic and ever-changing) relations among elements themselves as the units of analysis. Thus, for Ole Jacob Sending, Vincent Pouliot, and Iver Neumann (2015, 7) in *Diplomacy and the Making of World Politics*, “agents, objects, and structures emerge from transactions and connections, that is, relations.” By conceptualizing diplomacy not as a category of practice but as a category of analysis, Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann argue that their “concept of (diplomatic) practice becomes understandable: from a relational perspective, it does not make sense to say that an institution—such as international law or multilateralism or sovereignty—structures or secures a certain order. It is the continual use or performance of the material and symbolic resources that are recognised as being vested in these

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<sup>1</sup> See also Avant, Finnemore, and Sell (2010).

institutions that helps produce and reproduce certain orders” (2015, 7). As such, *Diplomacy and the Making of World Politics* is about “the constitution of world politics in and through diplomatic practice” (2015, 1). Pouliot, in *International Pecking Order*, pushes this line of argument by positing that practices are both structuring and structured: “practices are not only structuring, in that they indirectly produce an unlevelled playing ground; they are also structured, that is, they are enabled and constrained by a variety of situational, dispositional, relational and positional social forces” (2016, 9).

Labelling and distinguishing these different forms can help us make sense of the variety and range of arguments and applications presented by practice scholars (as for just who should be called a “practice scholar,” I will address this issue in the third section). Just as one can distinguish among forms of realism (e.g., offensive, defensive, neo-classical), liberalism (e.g., institutionalist, republican), constructivism (e.g., conventional, critical, modernist), and the gender approach (e.g., liberal, critical, postcolonial), I suggest that we can distinguish among forms of the practice approach. By doing so, we provide an organizational structure that permits analysis of the relationships among these forms and we introduce a level of nuance that helps moving the field of research forward. Differentiating among comprehensive, complementary, discursive, and relational forms of the practice approach orients the debate away from broad sweeping statements and toward fine-grained, insightful, and stimulating dialogue.

### **Practice as an essentially contested concept**

In the past few years, IR scholars have proposed several definitions of practice. Some propose a rather generic definition of practice as “the act of doing something repeatedly” (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 35) or as “our day-to-day experiences and actions as humans” (McNamara 2015, 40), while others offer some degree of complexity by defining practices as “socially recognized forms of activity, done on the basis of what members learn from others, and capable of being done well or badly, correctly or incorrectly” (Neumann 2015, 160). Among the many definitions of practice, Adler and Pouliot’s (2011, 4) remains one of the most discussed: for these scholars, practices are “socially meaningful patterns of action, which, in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world.” In short, Adler and Pouliot posit that practices are patterned, competent performances.

In a recent article, however, Erik Ringmar (2014, 6) abrasively criticizes Adler and Pouliot’s (2011) definition for being “far too broad.” “By meaning everything,” he contends, “practices come to mean nothing.” His tone is harsh, and his judgment is final. But one might wonder whether Ringmar subjects his terminology to the same standards and scrutiny. Compare Adler and Pouliot’s aforementioned definition with Ringmar’s (2013, 22) in which “a practice is a certain well-established, taken-for-granted, way of doing something associated with a certain situation, circumstance, time, or place.”

Even though Ringmar (2013, 22-27) prefers performance because, echoing Hansen’s (2011) concern about contestation, a performance can account for “situations in which the practices are contested” and “ruptures” are observed, he argues that “when taken together, the practices in which the members of a

society engage come to define a certain shared way of life. The international system made up of European states provides an example. It was through practices of statecraft that the Euro-centric international system came to constitute itself as a society.”

Yet, in his 2014 article Ringmar raises the stakes by arguing that “there is no definition of practices that can command broad assent and yet retain sufficient explanatory power” (2014, 4). This is important: Ringmar’s argument is not that Adler and Pouliot’s particular interpretation of practices (what I call the *comprehensive* form) is wrong, but rather that the practice approach—as a whole—has no future. While Ringmar’s strategy of highlighting the dangers of a particular understanding of practice and using this understanding to damn the entire practices project makes for powerful polemic, it is risky scholarship, at best.

In fact, this is problematic for several reasons. First, the quality of an approach is not evaluated on the basis of the number of its followers. For example, one has only to think of anarchy: several scholars—especially critical security studies scholars—would most likely argue that even though the definition of anarchy does command broad assent across IR, its explanatory power is highly debatable.<sup>2</sup> Some prefer hierarchy (Lake 2009; Mattern and Zarakol 2016; Sharman 2012; Towns 2012; Zarakol forthcoming). Second, one wonders if practice is alone in (supposedly) having such a multiplicity of definitions. Is there a consensus in IR, for example, on the definition of security, global governance, power, or even critical theory? Should IR scholars abandon the concept of “power” because John Mearsheimer (2001), Christian Reus-Smit (2004), Joseph Nye (2003), Stefano Guzzini (2005), Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall (2005), and Michael Williams (2007) do not agree on a singular definition? To put this another way: is it not a strength of (for example) Reus-Smit’s (2004) conceptualization of power that it both challenges the realist understanding of power and offers a radically different but insightful perspective? In many ways, it is precisely *because* these scholars are working with different definitions that they are able to offer innovative and illuminating viewpoints. Although it might seem confusing at first glance, the eclectic polysemy of “practices” creates an opportunity for a cross-perspective dialogue that ultimately benefits and enriches the literature.

Third, the fact that contributors to Adler and Pouliot’s (2011) book differ on their understanding of practice might have more to do with the design of the book than with the usefulness of a practice approach. Adler and Pouliot invited scholars from several IR perspectives to contribute on the premise that practices are ontological entities that cut across paradigms under different names. Unsurprisingly, some scholars were more reluctant than others to fully adopt Adler and Pouliot’s definition, and so they offered their own definitional twist. Ringmar was right to highlight the contraventions by some of the contributors to the book, but he was wrong to condemn all practice approaches on that basis. What should be debated is the usefulness of these contraventions; the conceptual overstretch might be, for example, the idea of equating institutions

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to argue that enjoying wide acceptance is an obstacle to the explanatory power of a concept.



with practices (see Little 2011) and not necessarily the conceptualization of practices as competent performances.

What emerges from all this discussion is the idea that practice, as a concept, is one of the most fundamental and yet most elusive ideas in social sciences. The problem is that, while social scientists find it nearly impossible to study contemporary world politics without the term “practice,” scholars also struggle to define the term.

My main contention is to understand practice as an essentially contested concept. The notion of “essential contestation” has attracted wide attention since its first elaboration by W.B. Gallie in the 1950s (see Gallie 1956a; 1956b; Gray 1977). Concepts are said to be essentially contested when they “inevitably involve endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users” (Gallie 1956b, 169). Advocates of this notion propose a seven-fold framework to better understand essentially contested concepts. As I will show below, the concept of practice perfectly fits all these elements.

First, an essentially contested concept conveys both a description of the issue at hand and a valued achievement, which can have positive and negative overtones (Connolly 1983). As the books under review illustrate, practice provides a description of a given situation, decision, or course of action. Yet, as Friedrich Kratochwil (2011, 40) points out, what distinguishes a practice from a technique or event is its moral dimension, even though the moral dimension of a practice is often “overlooked.”

Second, the internal complexity of an essentially contested concept is such that it includes several components or features. Here again, practice fulfills this criterion. Scholars who focus on practice have indeed underscored its numerous facets. Andreas Reckwitz (2002) argues that bodily deeds, mental activities, and motivational knowledge are the main interconnected elements of practice, while Jacqueline Best and Alexandra Gheciu (2014) highlight its ideal and material components. McNamara (2015) focuses on lived experiences, performances, and interactions with the material world. Adler and Pouliot (2011) list process, competent performance, pattern, socially meaningful, ideal and material, and background knowledge, while Bueger and Gadinger (2014) talk of process, performativity, collectivity, materiality, multiplicity, and practical knowledge.

Third, alternative meanings of an essentially contested concept must be possible. This multiplicity of meanings—often provided by the internal complexity of a concept—permits scholars to understand the meaning of the concept in different ways, notably by emphasizing different components to various degrees. Debates among proponents of the comprehensive, complementary, discursive, and relational forms of the practice approach attest to the high level of describability of practices. However, this is not to say that all interpretations of the concept are equally valid. It is possible, as Christine Swanton (1985) argued, to judge some definitions as better than others. The essential point is exactly this: rejecting one interpretation of practice is not the same as rejecting the concept of practice as a whole. Accepting the complexity of our social world and the inherent limits that this complexity imposes on our knowledge is precisely what makes the practice approach a particularly stimulating approach to world politics. By admitting that every claim is necessarily a partial interpretation of a complex world (although

possibly the best interpretation at hand), we can foster a scholarly dialogue of alternative explanations and interpretations, thereby cultivating a crucial and much-needed vector in world politics.

Fourth, the meanings of an essentially contested concept are not fixed in time. Scholars must accept that “considerable modification” may be made “in the light of changing circumstances” (Gallie 1956b, 172), thereby producing contestability. Undoubtedly, practice meets this criterion. By pointing to the inherent instability “within the practice itself,” Hansen (2011, 281) underscores the unstable nature of practices, which in turn demonstrates that the meanings of practices are debatable and ever-changing. From a different angle, Jacqueline Best (2014) shows how practices that are usually associated with the public and the private spheres have been disaggregated and recombined in various ways, redefining “public” and “private” practices along the way. Additionally, Deborah Avant and Virginia Haufler (2014) demonstrate how the changing character of social practices across four historical moments—nineteenth-century imperial expansion, late nineteenth-century modernity, the Cold War, and contemporary global governance—produced different understandings of what counts as public and private in the management of violence.

Fifth, scholars must recognize that the meaning of an essentially contested concept *is* contested. As has been clearly shown in the preceding sections, scholars working on practice acknowledge its contested nature. Indeed, the four forms of a practice approach described earlier attest to the contested meaning of practice among scholars. To take a further example, Janice Bially Mattern (2011) explicitly disagreed with Adler and Pouliot’s conceptualization of practices as clustering around the intersection of agency, structure, materiality, and meaningfulness; she argued instead that practices unfold at the intersection itself.

Sixth, an exemplar must serve as the conceptual anchor for an essentially contested concept. The exemplar can be understood in its narrow sense as being fixed and unitary, or understood more broadly as taking different forms and referring to several “historically independent but sufficiently similar traditions” (Gallie 1956b, 186). As Theodore Schatzki (2001) pointed out, several intellectuals have constructed a number of exemplars of practice over time, including Ludwig Wittgenstein, Hubert Dreyfus, Charles Taylor, Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, and Michel Foucault. Kratochwil (2011) and Schmidt (2014) pointed to the works of American pragmatists in shaping their understanding of practices. Pouliot relies heavily on Bourdieu. Chris Brown (2012) adopted Aristotle’s concept of *phronesis* in his discussion of practices. These earlier scholars were all concerned with human activity, or *doing* (often in opposition with the Cartesian mode of thinking); some highlighted non-propositional knowledge, others focused on practice’s status as the foundation of social phenomena, and still others emphasized the considerable but intricate link between discourse and practice.

Seventh, a progressive competition concerning the uses of an essentially contested concept should lead ultimately to a greater coherence of the concept. This is not to say that one particular understanding subsumes another (leading to loss of contestation); rather, the idea is that, when different understandings

engage each other, a better understanding of the concept is incrementally gained. Few would disagree that all the books included in this review article have provided IR scholars with an acute yet contested understanding of the meanings and contours of practices as applied to world politics.

Understanding practice as an essentially contested concept has several advantages. Essential contestation provides an axiomatic umbrella for structuring the conversation among the four forms of the practice approach identified in this review. It also moves the literature away from the goal of fixing the meaning of practice across time/space towards a debate on the usefulness (and not necessarily in positivist terms) of one form of practice approach over another, or of one form of practice over the logic of consequence or the logic of appropriateness, for example. In the end, this is exactly the sort of friendly disagreement that will enliven further research.

### **Challenges Ahead**

The high quality of the books under review attests to the dynamism of the practice turn. In addition to the theoretical or conceptual scholarship that it has provoked, the practice turn has also engendered a rich, insightful, and convincing empirical body of work. My intention in the next few pages is to highlight some trends flowing from these books as well as some questions that remain either underdeveloped or unanswered.

#### *Substantialism and Practices*

As Ann Swidler (2001, 99) remarked, “when we invoke the importance of social practices, it is worth asking whether all practices—how scientists in a laboratory turn the lights on and off, how men shave in the morning or how women put on their makeup...are of equal importance in shaping or constraining other social arrangements.” When applied to security studies, Swidler’s comment is even more incisive. One of the key challenges when discussing practices is, of course, not to rely on a circular argument: a project on security practices focuses on practices that relate to security. How do we know whether the particular practices a scholar decided to ignore (due to constraints of feasibility) did not influence the issue at hand? In short, advocates of a practice approach in the study of global politics must either decide to curtail the admission of all practices or accept that there is a need to judge and select certain practices. There is, therefore, a need to justify and inform the reader of the basis on which a selection is made and why certain practices are linked to the issue under study and not others.

This need relates to the main distinction established in IR by Jackson and Nexon (1999): the substantialism/relationalism divide. A key danger, in this context, is to treat practice as an already existing entity: to take practice (perhaps ironically) more or less for granted, and to fall back incidentally into a substantialist position. Does understanding practice as the “gluon of IR,” as the comprehensive form does, make practice the *de facto* unit of analysis of world

politics, thereby treating practices as a substance?<sup>3</sup> Similarly, if practices are patterned and repetitive competent performances, then what took place in their stead before they were patterned and repetitive? If Pouliot is right—and I think he is—that there is a need to study *from* what diplomats think, then one could equally wonder *from* what practices emerge. Unless we want to argue that routine can be created instantaneously, there is a need to know how an action or a collection of actions, presumably, becomes a practice; that is, how these actions became patterned and repetitive. Is a historical analysis needed to sort out these questions, as Sending (2015) alludes in his study of how authoritative institutional practices profoundly influence the substance of international knowledge and expertise? Could the relational perspective be pushed a step “deeper” to study the relations of which practices are the result?

The tension is most evident in McNamara’s (2015) book. She focuses on how EU political authority was socially constructed, through symbols and practices, to create cultural foundations and legitimacy for rulers to govern. The emphasis is on the role of symbols and practices (as units of analysis) in the creation of an imagined EU community, not on the relations among elements. McNamara’s research strategy in her chapter on European foreign policy is to “empirically catalog some of the symbols and practices that label, map, and narrate European foreign policy” (2015, 137). In her chapter on citizenship and mobility, her objective is to examine the “symbolic and practical implications of European citizenship as a legal category with its own European passport” (2015, 92). Indirectly, the idea that some practices scholars treat practices as a substance should enliven debates both within the discipline and beyond.

#### *A Eurocentric Approach?*

It would be silly to criticize McNamara’s book for being Eurocentric since the book is about the cultural construction of European identities. Yet, it seems justified to ask whether recent scholarship on practices is too Eurocentric, Western, and rich-society-oriented. Take *Diplomacy and the Making of World Politics*, for example. Diplomacy is certainly present (although undifferentiated), and practices and politics are also found throughout the book, but *world politics* itself seems to be somewhat overlooked. To be fair, some of the book’s chapters are conceptually or meta-theoretically oriented and do not necessarily seek to demonstrate or illustrate their main arguments with evidence, findings, or cases—yet, when empirical material *is* brought on board, it is mainly from European/Western settings or contexts. Mitzen (2015) discusses the long peace of the nineteenth century among the European great powers, while Lynch (2015) is mainly concerned with the United States, as are Krieger, Souma, and Nexon (2015). Sending (2015) explores the relationship between diplomacy and humanitarian action largely within the Norwegian context and all but one of the diplomats interviewed are Norwegian (state and non-state actors combined). Of the two diplomatic anecdotes that Adler-Nissen (2015) uses as launch pads for her concluding remarks, one is from a Danish diplomat and the other a former

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<sup>3</sup> This is particularly interesting since Pouliot seems to have slightly modified his position over time—from his article in 2008 to his single-authored book in 2010, to his collaboration with Adler in 2011, and finally to his book under review in 2016.

US ambassador to France. The only, even partial, exceptions are Neumann's (2015) critical review of Evans-Pritchard's study of the Nuer and Leonard Seabrooke's (2015) study of two non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

My point here is that the practice approach needs more work of the Autesserre type. This is a broad invitation to scholars with the language, networks, and knowledge of non-European/Western contexts to jump in and study, for example: How is politics constituted in and through diplomatic practices in the African Union (AU) or in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)? How does the pecking order play out in the Organization of American States (OAS), and what does it tell us about the constitution of the pecking orders of the United Nations (UN) or North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)? This "world" exploration could also seek to expand and broaden the applications of the practice approach, which have so far mostly remained in the domain of diplomacy (largely defined). A crucial—indeed necessary—next step for the development of a practice approach is to explore how processual and patterned practices coincide, collide, and interact in different contexts. This should provide fertile ground for debates and advancement.

### *The Importance of Induction*

In the concluding remarks to his 2008 article, Pouliot acknowledged that a focus on practices raises thorny methodological challenges. Since then, scholars have risen to the challenge. *Peaceland* and *International Pecking Order* are outstanding books in this regard, as they both clearly lay out the details of their research in a chapter-long appendix.<sup>4</sup> Autesserre's defense of ethnography is particularly thought-provoking. She makes the case that those scholars interested in studying practice cannot rely only on traditional methodological tools such as interviews or content analysis, but "must experience those [everyday] elements and learn them through practice"—although she acknowledges that doing so may be quite difficult for some research projects (2014, 275). Similarly, Pouliot's mixed-methods strategy and methodological transparency is highly commendable and shows how well researched and penetrating this book is. Undoubtedly, the book will soon become a model for PhD students as well as more seasoned scholars. Nevertheless, a few quibbles remain. For instance, the connection between Pouliot's chapter on multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) and the rest of the book is not as clear as he might wish it to be; readers will most likely be puzzled trying to figure out how Figure 8.1 conveys the idea that "within NATO there is an intriguing opposition between the top and upper tiers in terms of the roles that countries play (initiators vs. vetoers)" (Pouliot 2016, 238).

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<sup>4</sup> Bueger and Gadinger's (2014) objectives in Chapter 5 are different. They seek to teach IR scholars on how to research practices on the basis that "many practice theorists have primarily given negative advice" (77); hence, the need to provide methodological advice. Yet, several pieces of advice are in fact re-labeling efforts; it is not clear what is gained here. For example, the reader is told that even though there is no need "to re-invent the methodological wheel," it is nonetheless essential that scholars no longer use "participant observation," "interviews," and "text analysis," but instead speak of, respectively, "observing practices," "talking about practices," and "reading practices" (84).

The consideration given to methods in these monographs (and several chapters of the edited book) signals a larger trend towards acknowledging the unquestionable importance of induction. A consensus exists that studying practices requires a high degree of immersion into the multifaceted context of the question at hand. In other words, induction and “thick description” are paramount. In doing so, scholars also position process—and, one might add, processual relationalism (following Jackson and Nexon) or practice tracing (following Pouliot)—at the forefront of practice research design.

The need for meticulous methodological analysis is illustrated to some extent in the concluding chapter of *Diplomacy and the Making of World Politics* (Adler-Nissen 2015). One of the main arguments is that diplomats do not think in terms of “win-sets” à la Robert Putnam (1988); indeed, where Putnam’s model postulates the existence of win-sets, says Adler-Nissen (2015, 288), diplomats think in terms of relations and “being within the target.” To support her contention, Adler-Nissen relies on two anecdotes—i.e., a brief chat over coffee with one diplomat and one personal observation from a diplomat who worked in the early twentieth century. It might be true that diplomats (in general) do not think in terms of win-sets, but two anecdotes do not allow us to reach this conclusion. In addition, Adler-Nissen (2015, 288, emphasis added) recalls from her time working for the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs that being within the target “was *not always* based on a calculation of interest”—which only serves to suggest that being within the target *was* based on such a calculation at least part of the time. Contrasting occasions in which the “target” is based on a calculation of interest with occasions in which the “target” is based on other vectors seem a relevant research project in this context.

The above considerations also relate to the lack of differentiation among diplomats. If we cannot (and indeed, I *would* argue that we cannot) speak of Canada, Iraq, or Vietnam as unitary actors—as several authors/contributors to the volumes under review suggest—what makes us think we can reasonably talk about diplomats in such a way? Are diplomats all the same?<sup>5</sup> Do all diplomats around the world—from Bhutanese diplomats to Chinese diplomats to Peruvian diplomats—definitely not think in terms of Putnam’s win-sets? To put this question a different way, do all diplomats around the world think relationally? Have they always thought relationally? Could we distinguish the philosophies of diplomats of the twenty-first century from those of the Cold-War era, or those of the Qing dynasty? Could we separate these philosophies along the substantialism/relationalism divide? Surely, we would need more than a few pieces of anecdotal evidence and of Eurocentric analyses (path-breaking these studies are) to know whether we can substantiate these claims. Furthermore, should we distinguish between diplomats and bureaucrats? At first sight, the number of diplomats in the world is relatively limited, but vast teams of bureaucrats support their work. Is a policy advisor working in a Department of

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<sup>5</sup> Studying, as Pouliot (2016) does in *International Pecking Orders*, how multilateral diplomacy creates inequality is an important step in that direction. Yet, the differentiation is theorized at the systemic level and social stratification is hypothesized as an outcome that can be explained by practices.

Foreign Affairs a diplomat or a bureaucrat? Is the distinction important and consequential?

My intention here is not to single out Adler-Nissen's contribution or to defend Putnam's model. Rather, I wish simply to use Alder-Nissen's concluding remarks as a launching pad to highlight the necessity of thinking about the limits of one's methodological choice and to underscore the uncomfortable tension between induction and generalization found in some of the books under review.

### *Disciplining scholars?*

One of the main arguments of Christian Bueger and Frank Gadinger's (2014) small book is that scholars should not be allowed to call themselves "practice scholars" unless they fulfill specific criteria. In their own words, "rather than turning practice theory into an overcrowded *circus*, the ontological and epistemological *purity* which gives practice theory its distinct value has to be safeguarded" (2014, 13, emphasis added). Leaving aside what "ontological purity" could possibly mean, the reader is told that, to consider oneself a practice scholar, one has to accept practice theory's "core commitments," which (according to the authors) are "to emphasize process, practical knowledge, collectivity, materiality, multiplicity, and performativity" (2014, 19).

Three points are worth underscoring here. First, instead of presenting a fully-fledged discussion of each of these "core" commitments ("core" is a word used profusely throughout the book), the authors summarize each commitment within a few brief lines. The whole section on core commitments covers only a page and a half and is quite thin analytically. A sense of incompleteness is palpable. Consequently, some of these commitments—the collectivity commitment, for instance—would require further clarification to be convincing.

Second, the majority of these commitments have already been presented and identified by other practice scholars, most notably Adler and Pouliot (2011). Rather than situating their commitments within the existing literature, Bueger and Gadinger suggest that their effort to identify practice's commitments within IR is original. Yet the reader quickly realizes that what distinguishes Bueger and Gadinger's list from Adler and Pouliot's is the inclusion of a single commitment: "multiplicity." I would argue, however, that very few scholars (including probably Alder and Pouliot) would disagree with Bueger and Gadinger's (2014, 20) definition of "multiplicity"—that is, the notion that "there are no single, universal, or essential wholes."

Third, while Bueger and Gadinger claim that "safeguarding" practice's ontological "purity" is not a call for closure, it is hard not to see it this way. In fact, their argument bears a striking similarity to the response of many IR realists in the late 1980s and early 1990s to efforts made to broaden and deepen the purview of security studies. At the time, some realists bemoaned the proliferation of meanings of "security" and sought to restrict the application of security to war (see Walt 1991). I would be tempted to say (admittedly, rather simplistically) that if a scholar seeks to combine a neo-classical realist perspective with a practice approach for a given research project, that effort should be welcomed. If nothing else, their research might force (or help) other scholars to rethink neo-classical realism, our understanding of practices, or both.

This might well be an unconvincing combination—but leaving open the opportunity (conceptually and empirically) to challenge, deconstruct, and shed new light on the convenient analytical organization of the field of IR, that constitutes the “isms” and “schools,” seems a move of considerable importance.

Much as Bueger and Gadinger desire to restrict who should be allowed to call themselves practice scholars, David McCourt (2016) recently argued that a focus on practice cannot be separated from constructivism; he contends that practices belong strictly to constructivism and no other approach. However, I fail to see the added value in these “isms-disciplining” calls. Labelling, for example, a postcolonial scholar who employs a practice approach “constructivist” sounds counter-productive and problematic, regardless of whether this scholar would agree with or appreciate the pigeonholing. Celebrating the growing diversity in how the multifaceted aspects of world politics are studied seems more stimulating than forcefully boxing scholars into IR “isms” (Bourbeau 2015). My contention is that practice approaches allow, among other things, the re-energization and the rejuvenation of constructivism. In other words, practice permits and leads to neo-constructivism. But it might as well lead to a neo-postcolonial approach and strengthen other schools of thoughts/“isms” in IR.

### *The Missing Dimensions*

Three dimensions of a broader discussion on practices are clearly missing in the literature under review. First, it is surprising—given the momentum gained by the gender approach in IR in recent years—that we still do not know whether gender matters when it comes to practices. Are practices routinized and patterned, but not gendered? In a culture, context, country, or field where gender discriminations of all sorts are highly pervasive, does gender influence the creation and reproduction of some practices and not others? If so, what are the effects of gendered practices on world politics? Is the fact that gender seems politely neglected in the literature in-and-of-itself illustrative of the gendered aspect of the practice of academia? Is neglecting gender a patterned and repetitive competent performance of security studies scholars? To be fair, not all scholars ignore the gender dimension. For example, Pouliot acknowledges this limit in *International Pecking Orders* and points out, rightly so, that one cannot problematize everything in one research project. Yet, there seems to be tension between his argument that “social stratification emerges in and through practice” (2016, 48) and his strategy of “bracketing out domination structure that are primarily produced outside of diplomacy” (20). Indeed, this contention raises a series of questions. Chiefly, how is the inequality produced by multilateral diplomacy different than the inequality produced by gender representation? Connecting gendered practices with diplomatic practices sounds like a timely and relevant follow-up project.

Second, the absence of the resistance dimension in the discussion of practices is readily apparent. It seems rather important to examine the mechanisms involved in resisting practices that are deemed unacceptable or disagreeable. Should an individual seek first to deconstruct an existing practice before trying to replace it with a new one? Can resistance and resilience mutually assist each other in this regard? As resistance is a process paved with disturbances and setbacks, in situations that necessitate that you “get on” with daily life and adapt to shocks



(e.g., in contexts of protracted conflict or structural upheaval), communities or individuals may engage in resistance that is assisted by resilience (Bourbeau, 2015, Ryan 2015). Presumably, studying this issue would require going beyond the distinction between dominant and dominated practices to explore new questions, including: How do practices collide with one another? Is the collision cyclical? Are the practice struggles contextually/culturally dependent?

Third, there is a clear absence of analysis of the relations among norms, discourse, and practices in the latest phase of practice scholarship (i.e., the relational form). The relational form has certainly provided us with a cogent and stimulating analytical framework to think about how practices shape and are shaped by world politics. While the comprehensive form proposes a bold hypothesis, and the complementary form accepts the interrelationship among norms, discourses, and practices, the relational form has remained relatively silent on this question. Take for example the issue of hierarchy and social stratification. On one hand, Ann Towns (2012, 180) argues that “in setting out standards of behavior, norms also draw on and generate social hierarchies.” On the other hand, Pouliot (2016, 56)—while recognizing that Towns presents a similar argument concerning norms—contends that social “stratification is an indirect by-product of practice.” Yet, a closer discussion of the relationship between norms and practices seems warranted, precisely because of the similarity of the argument. Are practices and norms explaining the same phenomenon to the same effects? Can a focus on practices and norms both be “right”? If so, what are the consequences for the practice approach in IR?

## **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that the books reviewed in this essay will drive the scholarship on practice and world politics for some years to come. Scholars will find plenty of room to agree and disagree with the main arguments put forward in these books. Autesserre’s (2014, 8) argument that international peace interventions often fail to reach their full potential because of the “nuts and bolts” of peacebuilding—expatriates’ social habits, standard security procedures and practices, habitual approaches to collecting information on violence—is too often neglected. Her contention that “everyday practices shape overall interventions from the bottom up” (2014, 9), and that scholars ignore these elements at great cost, should spark interesting reactions in the field of peacebuilding and beyond.

Bueger and Gadinger (2014) situate the emergence of IR’s focus on practices in the broader social theory landscape and offer numerous engaging ideas and hypotheses. McNamara’s (2015) contention that labels, symbols, practices, and narratives have forged the European Union as an emergent political authority in its own right (rather than, for example, as an intergovernmental solution to security concerns or conflicting material interest between member states) should enliven debates among Europeanists and scholars of regional integration alike.

Pouliot’s (2016) invitation to cut through the agency-structure debate and emphasize practices in explaining the hierarchical dynamics in multilateral diplomacy is both insightful and challenging. His claim that social stratification emerges as an ordinary condition from the patterned ways in which international diplomacy is performed will surely constitute a main line of

investigation in the increasing interest on hierarchy in IR scholarship. Finally, Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann's (2015) attempt to theorize the constitutive capability of diplomacy will be of interest to scholars specializing in diplomatic studies, the practice approach, international relations theory, or all of the above. Their main argument that diplomacy—i.e., the relational and political process of claiming authority and jurisdiction that is made and remade through practices—produces its own effects on world politics should prompt scholars to revisit how they study and think about diplomacy and world politics.

All in all, a focus on practices will not solve all the problems found in IR literature, but security studies scholarship would be worse off if the “practice turn” had not percolated into this field of research.

This review centered around two questions: (a) What are practices? (b) How is the literature on practices currently organized and with what consequences? In answering the first question, I have proposed to see practice as an essentially contested concept. Regarding the second question, I have suggested distinguishing between four forms of a practice approach: comprehensive, complementary, discursive, and relational. Useful as these forms might be to introduce students to the practice turn in IR or to advance further research on practices in world politics, they should not be treated as rigid categories. Whether these forms can be combined and how the forms relate to one another are important questions. These questions are, however, beyond the scope of this review. I thought it was essential first to identify and debate the various forms of the practice approach that the literature embraces before embarking on an analysis of the particular relationships (if any) that these forms might initiate or consolidate.

Equally, my primary focus was not on the particular issues dealt with by the many authors or editors of these books, but on the more general state-of-the-art conclusions to be drawn from examining all of these works in (mutual) context. As a result, over the course of this discussion, I have painted the reviewed books in very broad strokes, perhaps at the risk of over-synthesizing them.

Yet, there is certainly a frustration that arises in writing this sort of review—for myself, as the reviewer, and perhaps for the authors of the reviewed works—in that my discussion cannot come close to conveying the richness and breadth of these books. Of necessity, some high-quality and stimulating contributions were relatively silenced; it is therefore worth inviting scholars to read Ian Hurd's (2015) challenging contribution on reconciling state behavior with international law through diplomacy, Tarak Barkawi's (2015) provocative take on diplomacy and war through a post-colonial perspective, or Jennifer Mitzen's (2015) thought-provoking chapter on distinguishing between diplomacy as representation and diplomacy as governing to suggest that diplomacy functions as a system of social value—to name just a few. The reader should not see my relative silence on these works as a judgment on the quality or the importance of their arguments, but merely as a constraint of the framework of this review.

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