


How Can We Criticize International Practices?

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In this article, we elaborate two distinct ways of criticizing international practices: *social critique* and *pragmatic critique*. Our argument is that these two forms of critique are systematically opposed to each other: They are based on opposing epistemic premises, they are motivated by opposing political concerns, and they pursue opposing visions of social progress. Scholars of International Relations (IR) who want to work with the conceptual tools of practice theory are thus confronted with a consequential choice. Understanding the alternatives can help them to be more self-reflexive in their research practices and intervene more forcefully in contemporary political debates. We illustrate these advantages through a discussion of the scholarly debate on the practices of multilateral diplomacy through which the United Nations Security Council authorized a military intervention in Libya in 2011.

Introduction

When International Relations (IR) scholars engage with normativity, they usually do so in an analytical mode. They seek to understand how norms impact the behavior of international actors and under what conditions norms can change. Recently, however, a growing number of IR scholars have begun to think about these analytical questions in conjunction with normative ones. Constructivists have extensively debated how their analytical work on international norms can inform normative judgments and guide political decision-making (e.g., Price and Reus-Smit 1998; Price 2008; Ralph 2018; Wiener 2018). Similarly, scholarship in the tradition of the English School has placed a renewed emphasis on ethical questions (e.g., Cochran 2009; Navari 2017). In this article, we argue that practice theory offers a distinct vantage point on how the empirical analysis of normativity and the normative evaluation of political practices can inform each other. As some of the protagonists of the so-called “practice turn” in IR have pointed out, practice theory can help to bridge the divide between analytical and normative IR theory (Adler 2005, 26–27) and make IR scholarship more relevant for political practitioners and the general public alike (Bueger and Gadinger 2015, 457–58). In this article, we introduce two distinct ways in which practice theory can achieve these objectives.

We elaborate two ways of studying practices in a normative manner that we refer to as *social critique* and *pragmatic critique* respectively. Social and pragmatic forms of critique

do not merely involve normative statements about practices. Instead, they both combine empirical analysis and normative judgement, which is why we speak of “critique” in both cases.¹ Our central claim is that these two forms of critique are systematically opposed to each other. They are based on opposing epistemic premises, they are motivated by opposing political concerns, and they pursue opposing visions of social progress. A clear understanding of these differences can advance contemporary debates on how to reconcile empirical analysis and normative evaluation in the study of international politics. It highlights that there is an important choice involved in pursuing one or the other form of critique and clarifies what kind of choice this is.

In our elaboration of the two forms of critique, we draw upon two broad theoretical traditions on which the practice turn in IR builds (Leander 2011; Bueger and Gadinger 2015; Martin-Mazé 2017). On the one hand, IR scholars have adopted ideas from critical theory and especially from the works of the French sociologist Bourdieu.² Through an in-depth engagement with this first tradition, we reconstruct what we term social critique of practices. On the other hand, IR scholars also draw upon a second broad theoretical tradition, namely pragmatism.³ In our engagement with this tradition, we reconstruct a less well-known, yet equally important form of pragmatic critique of practices. Our reconstruction shows that the two kinds of critique relate in very different ways to the knowledge that practitioners have of their own situation. As a result, they arrive at very different conclusions about what is wrong with practices and what should be done to change things for the better.

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Authors' note: We would like to thank Bud Duvall, Frank Gadinger, Kristina Lepold, Vincent Pouliot, Hilmar Schäfer, Philip Wallmeier, the anonymous reviewers and the editors of *International Studies Quarterly* for their helpful comments on drafts of this article, as well as Ciaran Cronin for editing its final version. The research for this article has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation program under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement no. 792932. The authors of this article are listed alphabetically and have contributed equally.

¹“Critique” in our understanding is a mode of inquiry in which empirical analysis and normative evaluation are tightly interwoven (Anderl and Wallmeier 2018, 68–69; Cox 1981, 128–30; Jaeggi 2009, 71–73). As far as our proposed conceptual distinction is concerned, “social critique” is a widely used term; the notion of “pragmatic critique” is drawn from Cochran (1999, chap. 6).

²For example, Adler-Nissen (2014, 2014); Bigo (2011); Eagleton-Pierce (2012); Kuus (2015); Leander (2011); Mérand (2010); Pouliot (2010); Sending (2015); Villumsen Berling (2015); M.C. Williams (2007).

³For example, Adler (2008); Aradau and Huysmans (2019); Austin (2017); Best and Walters (2013); Bode (2018); Bueger (2018); Gadinger (2016); Hanrieder (2016); Niemann (2019); Schindler and Wille (2015).

The proposed distinction between two forms of critique can help to clarify contemporary debates about international practices. As an illustration, we engage in some depth with a recent debate among prominent practice theorists on the diplomatic negotiations surrounding the international intervention in Libya in 2011. In a much-debated piece, [Adler-Nissen and Pouliot \(2014\)](#) elaborate a Bourdieusian analysis of “power in practice.” They show how the socially recognized competence of diplomats from the three Western permanent member states in the United Nations (UN) Security Council (the “P3”: France, the United Kingdom, and the United States) helped them to gain authorization for a military intervention in Libya in 2011. However, in an equally well-received contribution, [Ralph and Gifkins \(2017, 630\)](#) object that Adler-Nissen and Pouliot reify a practice that “is not fit for purpose.” Ralph and Gifkins criticize that Adler-Nissen and Pouliot ignore the normative background constituted by the responsibility-to protect (R2P) against which the Security Council’s decision was made. In light of the R2P norm, Ralph and Gifkins maintain, the behavior of the P3 diplomats was not particularly competent. Our proposed distinction between social and pragmatic critique enables one to see with greater clarity what is at stake in this debate. In particular, it makes apparent that the problem is not a lack of normativity on one side or an excess of normativity on the other. Rather, the two approaches allow for two very different critiques of how the R2P norm is realized in the practices of multilateral diplomacy.

Our article is structured as follows. It begins with an account of the debate on IR practice theory in which the distinction between Bourdieusian and pragmatist approaches has recently gained increasing prominence. We then offer a systematic reconstruction of social critique and pragmatic critique, relying on scholarship from social theory and IR. Following this, we show that both forms of critique provide valuable normative orientation for analyzing the practices in the UN Security Council that led to its decision to authorize the intervention in Libya in 2011. In conclusion, we argue that realizing the critical potential of practice theory requires an awareness of the differences between the two forms of critique.

Two Approaches to the Study of International Practices

In recent years, scholars of IR have become increasingly interested in theories of practice from sociology and social theory, which they have adapted in various ways to the study of international politics. Initially, [Neumann \(2002\)](#) suggested that a focus on practices could complement the then-dominant preoccupation with language in postpositivist IR. A more comprehensive turn to practices for the whole discipline of IR was then advocated by [Adler and Pouliot \(2011a, 2011b\)](#). They frame practice theory neither as an addition to the repertoire of postpositivist IR nor as a new paradigm in its own right, but instead as an approach that allows for interparadigmatic exchange between all important camps in IR, among them realism, liberalism, constructivism, and poststructuralism. More recently, [McCourt \(2016\)](#) has identified practice theory as part of the “new constructivism” in IR, while [Solomon and Steele \(2017\)](#) have argued that it is one aspect of a broader move to the “micro” in the discipline. Our contribution to this general debate over what practice theory is and what it can contribute to our understanding of international politics is to highlight that it offers a distinct perspective on the relationship between empirical analysis and normative evaluation.

This focus on normative evaluation is timely because, despite the stated hope that the practice turn in IR will give rise to innovative studies that are both “analytically and normatively” progressive ([Adler and Pouliot 2011a, 31](#)), so far most IR practice theorists have steered clear of the field of normative analysis. Practice theory is widely understood to be an analytical and not a normative enterprise. When practice theorists (e.g., [Kratochwil 2011](#); [Gadinger 2016](#)) address the issue of normativity, they do so by analyzing the inherent normative expectations that structure international practices. These scholars focus on the role normativity plays in international politics without passing normative judgment themselves. This stance has been elaborated in a particularly pointed way by [Lechner and Frost \(2018\)](#) in their outline of a Wittgensteinian theory of international practice. While Lechner and Frost’s approach recognizes that norms constitute one analytical component of practice, it contents itself with describing practices from an internal point of view without passing judgment on them. In their own words, Lechner and Frost conceive of the task of their “philosophical” theory of practice as being “to describe and not to prescribe or explain” ([Lechner and Frost 2018, 211](#)). In this article, by contrast, we argue for a critical approach to the ubiquity of normativity in international politics, rather than a “descriptivist” one in Lechner and Frost’s sense.

In order to recover the potential of practice theory as a resource for critique, it is important to appreciate the heterogeneity of the literature in social theory on which the practice turn builds.⁴ In this article, we work with a distinction that has been highlighted by [Bueger and Gadinger \(2015, 2018\)](#) and also features prominently in other contributions to the debate (e.g., [Leander 2011](#); [Martin-Mazé 2017](#)): the distinction between “critical” and “pragmatist” approaches. As [Bueger and Gadinger \(2015\)](#) explain, the two traditions represent two prominent approaches to the study of practices in sociology and, more recently, in IR. They argue that the critical tradition is “primarily driven by concerns over power, domination, and resistance” ([Bueger and Gadinger 2015, 454](#)) and draws especially on the works of Bourdieu and Foucault. In contrast, the pragmatist tradition operates with “concepts such as problems, uncertainty, creativity, and situated agency,” and it draws heavily on Dewey and French pragmatists such as Boltanski and Latour ([Bueger and Gadinger 2015, 455](#)).

Our elaboration of two forms of critique can help to clarify the distinction between critical and pragmatist approaches. Bueger and Gadinger define the two traditions by listing authors and central concepts: Bourdieu and Foucault are critical and are particularly concerned about power, domination, and resistance, whereas Latour and Boltanski are pragmatists and are most concerned about uncertainty, creativity, and agency. This way of distinguishing between the two traditions of practice theory has the advantage of shedding light on two distinct approaches to studying practices. However, it obscures the fact that both traditions are motivated by (albeit quite different) critical concerns. Focusing on the question of critique enables us to clarify what distinguishes the two traditions of practice theory. As we will demonstrate below, both critical and pragmatist scholars blend empirical analysis and normative evaluation. Both camps articulate ideas about what is wrong with practices and what should be done about this. Therefore, we suggest somewhat different labels: when it comes to criticizing

⁴This heterogeneity has been identified by critics of the practice turn ([Kustermans 2016](#); [Ringmar 2014](#)) as an obstacle to the comprehensive theoretical synthesis envisioned by Adler and Pouliot.

Table 1. Two ways of criticizing practices

	<i>Social critique</i>	<i>Pragmatic critique</i>
Premise	Epistemic asymmetry	Epistemic symmetry
Concern	Naïve trust	Excessive mistrust
Objective	Unmasking power	Empowering practitioners

practices, the choice in our view is between social critique and pragmatic critique.

One possible objection that needs to be addressed upfront is that the distinction between social and pragmatic critique may appear less helpful, or even obsolete, in light of attempts to integrate critical theory and pragmatist social theory. It is true that some of the most prominent Frankfurt School theorists have worked toward such a synthesis.⁵ Habermas's (1987) theory of communicative action represents an attempt to reconcile Marxist social critique with a pragmatist concern for social life as experienced by participants in social practices. The younger generation of Frankfurt School theorists have followed Habermas's lead in this respect (e.g., Joas 1996; Jaeggi 2019). Yet, for the latter authors bridging the divide between critical and pragmatist theory begins with acknowledging it. This point is made particularly clear in a recent study by Celikates (2018) who emphasizes the differences between a theoretical approach rooted in Marxist thinking and one that builds on pragmatist ideas. Celikates contrasts Bourdieu's critical sociology with Boltanski's sociology of critique and searches for a way to bridge the two approaches. For Celikates as for other Frankfurt School theorists, however, integrating the two perspectives presupposes an appreciation of their differences. As we shall demonstrate in the following, appreciating these differences can also enable us to produce more forceful critiques of international practices.

In the following, we will demonstrate in detail that social and pragmatic critiques each proceed in a distinct way. They start from opposing epistemic assumptions, they are motivated by opposing political concerns, and they are informed by opposing visions of social progress (for a schematic overview of our argument, see table 1). Social critique starts from the premise that the knowledge social scientists produce and the knowledge lay actors possess stand in an asymmetric relationship. The researcher can see dynamics that unfold behind the backs of the social actors that the actors themselves fail to grasp. Social critique is therefore motivated by a concern to break with the naïve trust that social actors place in the world; not only do social actors fail to understand what is really happening, they also naïvely believe that social conditions that in fact lack justification are justified. By unmasking the hidden workings of power, social critique aims to realize a particular vision of emancipation. While it is often skeptical about the possibility of overcoming power and domination once and for all, social critique nonetheless works ceaselessly toward liberating those dominated from their illusions.

Pragmatic critique, by contrast, regards social research as *a priori* privileged status to the knowledge produced by social

research. In other words, it assumes that there is an epistemic symmetry between researcher and practitioner. This assumption is bound up with the basic political concern that social research is informed by an excessive mistrust in the critical capacities of social actors, which, according to proponents of pragmatic critique, is a fundamental obstacle to emancipation. This is not only a problem of academic theories that proceed asymmetrically, they argue, but more generally a fundamental normative problem of practices. Pragmatic critique is therefore motivated by a distinct vision of social progress that consists in empowering people to act together.

In the following two sections, we will reconstruct these two kinds of critique in greater detail, engaging with the arguments of social theorists and IR scholars who have criticized practices in one or the other way. Our aim in this reconstruction is not to offer a comprehensive account of the work of specific theoretical schools or of specific theorists. Rather, our systematization of the two forms of critique should be read in light of our specific objective of clarifying an important analytical choice between two ways of criticizing international practices and its normative implications.

Social Critique of Practices

Social critique, as we use the term in this article, is a specific kind of critique that is prominent within the tradition of thought that Bueger and Gadinger have labelled critical practice theory. Such diverse thinkers as Marx, Durkheim, Althusser, Bourdieu, and Butler have put forth arguments that take the form of social critique (Geuss 1981; Celikates 2018), and Foucault and a number of postcolonial theorists can also be read as proponents of this kind of critique (Allen 2016). Bourdieu's theory of practice has been particularly influential among IR practice theorists (e.g., Pouliot 2010; Adler-Nissen 2014). Butler's work on practices of gender (1990) and her more recent writings on war and violence (2009) have also inspired a number of reflections on international politics (Weber 1998; Wilcox 2015; Abrahamsson and Dányi 2018), although not by scholars who identify themselves with the practice turn in IR (see Wilcox 2017). Rather than trying to provide a comprehensive historical account of the intellectual tradition of social critique, our main goal in this section will be to present a systematic account of how social critiques of practices typically proceed.

Premise: Asymmetry

Social critique privileges the knowledge of the researcher over that of social actors. Durkheim (2013, 39) famously demands of the sociologist in his *Rules of Sociological Method* that "he must free himself from those fallacious notions [that] hold sway over the mind of the ordinary person." Social scientists need to distance themselves from the practical understandings of social actors because the latter are invested in their activities in a way that systematically precludes them from understanding what is going on. For example, Bourdieu examines in his classic study on the Kabyle society how social actors misrecognize economic relations for gift exchanges (Bourdieu 1977, 1–15; see Celikates 2018, 28–32). Only the social scientist can see that seemingly innocent acts of generosity are embedded in an objective structure and in fact form part of a complex system of economic exchange. By mistaking an economic exchange for a question of honor, the Kabyle misrecognize what is really going on, and thereby unwittingly reproduce a social order that unequally distributes material resources and social

⁵ Similarly, some IR scholars have tried to find a middle way between critical sociology and pragmatism, either by emphasizing the more dynamic elements within Bourdieu's own theory of practice (Cornut 2018; Leander 2011) or by complementing Bourdieu's theory with ideas from pragmatist authors like Goffman (Adler-Nissen 2014; Nair 2019). In our view, these attempts to enrich Bourdieu's theory of practice with pragmatic elements tend to end up embracing a form of pragmatic critique.

recognition. Bourdieu (1977, 79) writes in the same study that “it is because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know.” As we will show in greater detail below, Adler-Nissen and Pouliot’s (2014) examination of the international intervention in Libya is based on the same premise. They tell us a story in which diplomats ascribe authority to each other because they believe that their counterparts are competent in the art of diplomacy. Only the theorist can see that the mutual ascriptions of authority disguise an underlying struggle over competence that reproduces the pecking order of a stratified international society (see also Pouliot 2016).

The methodological implication of this assumed epistemic asymmetry is that the common sense of the social actors is unreliable. The scientific observer must make a clear “break” with common sense, because “the social fact is won against the illusion of immediate knowledge” (Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron 1991, 13). However, not only are the commonsense conceptions of the social actors misguided, they are also very persistent. It takes hard work on the part of the social scientist to perform the break with common sense and achieve an objective perspective on the misguided subjective understandings of social actors. As Bourdieu and his coauthors (1991, 12) phrase it, “everyday notions are so tenacious that all the techniques of objectification have to be applied in order to achieve a break that is more often proclaimed than performed.” The idea that practitioners’ accounts cannot be taken at face value is a strong theme in the history of sociological thought that can be traced from Durkheim through Bachelard to Althusser and Bourdieu (Celikates 2018, 20–28). It is also a truism that many IR scholars have been taught as students in their social science methods classes.

With his outline of a “subjectivist”⁶ methodology, Pouliot (2007) has tried to translate the methodological imperative of the break with common sense into a recipe for research in IR. “Subjectivist” research moves from reconstructing the subjective knowledge of social actors toward contextualizing this knowledge and then toward tracing the trajectories of practices through time (Pouliot 2007, 372). Pouliot thus imagines the distancing from common sense more like a continuous process and less like an abrupt break. He also points out that the three steps should not be conceived as a “linear pathway,” but rather as an iterative process of moving back and forth (Pouliot 2007, 372). Nevertheless, his method is clearly premised on the assumption of an epistemic asymmetry that is characteristic of the tradition of social critique. The further the researcher moves away from the common sense of the social actors, the more objective becomes his or her knowledge of the social world.

Concern: Naïve Trust

The central concern of social critique is that social actors place a naïve trust in the world around them that enables the reproduction of unequal social relations. Traditionally, this concern has been expressed through the notion of ideology. When social critics speak of ideology, they do so as part of a research program that “is initiated by the observation that agents in the society are deluded about themselves, their position, their society, or their interests” (Geuss 1981, 12). To be caught in an ideology in this sense means to be confined to a “false form of consciousness”—a con-

sciousness that is both “objectively necessary and necessarily false” (Celikates 2012, 162). As Celikates (2012, 162) explains, this implies not only that social actors “do not know what they are doing,” but also that they “do not, and indeed cannot, understand how what they are doing and thinking contributes to the reproduction of the social order.”⁷ In Bourdieu’s work, the same intuition that false beliefs reproduce the social order is captured by the notion of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1984; see Celikates 2012, 164). As a set of dispositions that are formed through past experiences and incline social actors to behave in such a way that their conduct suits their social position, *habitus* is a self-fulfilling prophecy that tends to reproduce the social order. While Bourdieu introduced the concept of *habitus* not least to overcome an earlier ignorance of practices in theories of ideology, in an important sense this concept fulfills a similar theoretical function to the concept of ideology. For social critics, whether they use the term ideology or the concept of *habitus*, the central problem is the naïve trust social actors display vis-à-vis the world. It is this naïve trust that reproduces the social order and makes the social actors—or at least those among them who are held in subordinate social positions—accomplices of their own domination. The notion of ideology and the Bourdieusian concept of *habitus* both provide a theoretical explanation for the puzzling and politically concerning observation that the exploited and marginalized more often than not accept their positioning in the social order.

A strong concern with naïve belief in the legitimacy of the social order is also evident in some contributions to the IR literature that draw on Bourdieu, Butler, and Foucault.⁸ Hopf (2010, 555), for example, notes critical theory’s concern with “social structures that lay behind individuals unintentionally reproducing their own subordinate places in society.” He argues that a critical approach to IR should try to reveal how these structures “emerged, how they are maintained, and whose interests they serve” (Hopf 2010, 555). Hopf, for whom Bourdieu is an important theoretical resource, leaves no doubt that domination is an effect of social structures unknown to the dominated actors and that it is the task of theory to reveal precisely how these structures work. He also describes what he sees as the objective of such critical inquiry, namely, to unsettle the naïve trust placed by individuals in the world around them. As Hopf (2010, 555) notes, “breaking habits requires reflection,” yet “getting people to reflect, when they are comfortably situated in institutions that protect them from any dissonant voices, is difficult and rare.” Indeed, while the unmasking of domination is the central objective of social critique, many social critics view the prospects for emancipatory change in a rather dim light.

Objective: Unmask Power

The two claims that social scientists have privileged knowledge about the forces that really shape society and that social actors hold beliefs that are necessarily wrong imply that there is a pressing political problem. How can social actors be made aware of what is going on so that a more just society can be achieved? The problem can be illustrated with the work of Bourdieu (Schindler and Wille 2015, 334–38). For him, precisely because sociological reflection reveals what is

⁷ For a well-known example of this kind of analysis of ideology, see Althusser’s (2014) essay on “ideological state apparatuses.”

⁸ For example, Hopf (2010, 2018); Jabri (2016); Shapiro (2002); Wilcox (2017).

⁶ Pouliot’s notion of “subjectivism” refers to a methodology aimed at reconciling subjective and objective knowledge of the social world.

going on behind the back of social actors, it can play a positive role for social change. “If ‘there is no science but of the hidden,’ it is clear why sociology is allied with the historical forces, which, in every epoch, oblige the truth of power relations to come into the open, if only by forcing them to mask themselves yet further” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, xxi). At the same time, Bourdieu seems doubtful whether the problem of ideology can ever be fully overcome. Perhaps all we can achieve is that power relations get unsettled and then mask themselves even better. Bourdieu’s political activism clearly bears witness to the fact that he ultimately believed that positive change was achievable, but he was also clearly concerned that field dynamics are not easily overcome and certainly not by simply speaking out the truth.

For one social field, Bourdieu has explicitly spelled out how the false consciousness engrained in the habitus can be overcome: the field of academia. Here the political problem of emancipation becomes an acute methodological problem (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1989; see Swartz 1997, chap. 11). If the beliefs and convictions people hold are primarily determined by struggles for privileged positions in social fields, how then can the sociologist—himself or herself positioned in a field, the field of academia—ever gain objective knowledge of these struggles? For Bourdieu, the solution is a “sociology of sociology” (i.e., a reflection on the conditions under which sociological inquiry takes place). As a matter of fact, for Bourdieu, “the sociology of the social determinants of sociological practice is the only possible ground for a possible freedom from these determinations” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1989, 55).⁹ Bourdieu thus appears mildly optimistic that the prejudices of common sense can be overcome in the particular setting of academia.

Another example for social critique aimed at unmasking domination can be found in Butler’s (1990) work on the performativity of gender identities. Butler argues that to be recognized as a gendered individual is important for us because it is a precondition for being an intelligible subject. What the subjects, in particular those with heterosexual gender identities, cannot see, however, is that their practices contribute to the reproduction of a social order that excludes other identities, which are cast as unintelligible. Thus, “the recognition as female or male serves social functions behind the backs of those who participate in these exchanges of recognition” because “the recognition as female and male is . . . implicated in the reproduction of the binary gender order and the violent exclusion of alternative genders from the social realm” (Lepold 2018, 481).¹⁰ Butler’s work also directs our attention to the fact that epistemological asymmetry is only the starting point of social critique and ultimately something the critique seeks to overcome, however difficult this may be. For Butler (1990, 147), the ultimate task of feminist critique is not to establish a point of view outside practice, but to provide opportunities for intervention and change by “participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity.”

Discussing a range of texts from social theory and IR research, we have identified three elements of social critique: the premise of a break with common sense, the concern about naïve trust in the social order, and the goal of unmasking power. The procedure of social critique associated with these three elements is very common in critical social

theory. Indeed, it may almost seem as if any kind of critique always had to go through these three moves in order to count as proper “critique.” However, our objective in the next section will be to elaborate a form of critique that is systematically opposed to social critique and that nonetheless constitutes a way of criticizing practices. Our discussion of pragmatic critique will emphasize the differences from social critique in order to make clear that with regard to all three aspects—premise, concern, and objective—there is an important choice to be made.

Pragmatic Critique of Practices

The pragmatist tradition in social thought is varied and complex. As Cochran (1999, 174; quoting Bernstein 1995, 55) observes, pragmatism constitutes a “*plurality* of conflicting narratives,” a point that equally applies to the adaptations of pragmatist thought in IR. Our aim in this section is not to offer an authoritative account of pragmatism for IR, but instead to argue that one particular way of criticizing practices features prominently in the pragmatist tradition. A structured contrast of pragmatic critique with its social counterpart demonstrates that pragmatic critique is based on a different premise, is motivated by a different political concern, and has a different emancipatory objective from social critique. As will become clear, a wide range of authors, among them Boltanski, de Certeau, Dewey, and Latour, have formulated arguments of this pragmatic form.

In IR, pragmatist ideas have mostly been used to criticize the discipline’s dominant practices of theory (Friedrichs and Kratochwil 2009; Hanrieder 2016; Grimmel and Hellmann 2019). The main target of these pragmatic critiques thus has been IR (the discipline), not international relations (the subject matter). Specifically in Kratochwil’s (2011, 2018) work on practices, it often appears as though the concrete doings of practitioners needed to be defended against a misguided, Cartesian theory. Yet, a small number of IR scholars have also drawn on pragmatist authors to formulate incisive critiques of political practices. Cochran (1999) early on made an explicit case for a “pragmatic critique” of international politics based on the works of Dewey and Rorty. More recently, Gadinger (2016, 187) has highlighted Boltanski’s contribution to the “critical project of emancipation,” and Ralph (2018) has drawn on Dewey to address the question of what states should do in face of mass atrocity such as in the current Syrian civil war. In this section, we will build on these diverse attempts to bring pragmatic ideas to bear on IR to articulate an account of the distinct way in which pragmatic critics combine empirical analysis and normative evaluation in the study of international practices.

Premise: Symmetry

Pragmatic critique takes a different stance on the knowledge of practitioners from social critique. While social critics such as Bourdieu are skeptical about whether practitioners can fully know their own situation and see their task as being to unmask concealed domination, pragmatic critics are doubtful about the superiority of their own knowledge and stress the similarity of academic and lay knowledge. This initially more sympathetic perspective on what practitioners know does not imply that pragmatists have no standards for distinguishing better from worse knowledge—we will specify the pragmatic sense of this distinction below. However, it does imply that, at the outset of their inquiries, pragmatic critics have more confidence in practitioners’ capacities to know their own situation. Indeed, Bourdieu’s student Boltanski

⁹ Bourdieu’s reflexive sociology has served as a crucial resource for IR scholars who aspire to make the practices of IR scholarship more reflexive (Eagleton-Pierce 2011; Hamati-Ataya 2013; Leander 2002).

¹⁰ A similar argument can be made about the “white ignorance” that underpins a “refusal to recognize the long history of structural discrimination that has left whites with the differential resources they have today” (Mills 2017, 28).

broke with his mentor precisely because he realized that the subjects of Bourdieu's studies were capable of exercising the very kind of critique Bourdieu had reserved for the scientific observer. As Boltanski (2014, 21) stresses, "human beings are eminently critical, because they have been misled and lied to." Where Bourdieu treats human beings as victims of misinformation and lies, Boltanski treats them as critics who themselves worry about misinformation and lies. Boltanski thus identifies a symmetry between the view of the scholar-critic and the views of the subjects of research (Celikates 2018, 94–106; Gadinger 2016, 191).

A symmetric perspective on academic and lay practices of critique is also one of the main starting points of Boltanski's magnum opus *On Justification*, which he coauthored with Thévenot. As Boltanski and Thévenot (2006, 1) explain at the outset of their monumental study, in which they attempt to account for the main forms of justification and critique in Western societies, the same "operations of qualification" mark both scientific activity and social interaction. There is a "similarity between the way a person accounts for his behavior through associations with other persons he views as equivalent and the way a researcher assigns disparate individuals to a single category so as to explain their behavior by a single law" (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, 4). The ways in which a researcher qualifies the objects of his or her study thus resembles how these "objects" themselves qualify the world around them. The implication of this observation is that social actors are critics of their own situation. They are not, to quote a famous phrase from ethnomethodologist Garfinkel (1967, 67), "judgmental dope[s]." On the contrary, "like scientists, ordinary people never stop suspecting, wondering, and submitting the world to tests" (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, 37).

The symmetry of scientific and lay knowledge is a premise of pragmatic critique in the sense of a starting point, a point where the investigation begins (see Celikates 2012, 164). Pragmatists are not relativists (see Lechner and Frost 2018, 182–89; Cochran 1999, 194–95); they do not argue that all beliefs have the same epistemic status or that they are all equally adequate or true. However, they hold that critique must be directed at scientific and practitioner knowledge alike. Sometimes, pragmatists even invert the hierarchy that the tradition of social critique has established between scientific and nonscientific knowledge. Like de Certeau (1984, vi), they celebrate the "ordinary man" or woman on the street. Among IR practice theorists, Lechner and Frost place particular emphasis on the epistemic value of the practitioners' perspective. In their view, "a social scientist who attempts to understand a practice that is not yet understood must adopt the standpoint of a practice participant" (Lechner and Frost 2018, 182).¹¹

Concern: Excessive Mistrust

While social critics are particularly concerned about the naïve trust ordinary people place in the social order, pragmatic critics see an excessive mistrust in the judgments of those people as the larger problem. For pragmatic critics, this mistrust has its roots in a problematic theory of knowledge. Dewey (1930), for example, argued that a misguided notion of knowledge has plagued Western thinking

since Plato. In the Platonic tradition, knowledge is associated with the invariant and unchanging and is thus defined in opposition to the realm of practice, which is a realm of change. This theory of knowledge has "bequeathed the notion, which has ruled philosophy ever since the time of the Greeks, that the office of knowledge is to uncover the antecedently real, rather than, as is the case with our practical judgments, to gain the kind of understanding [that] is necessary to deal with problems as they arise" (Dewey 1930, 19–20). The idea that certain knowledge can be found only in the "antecedently real" is problematic from a pragmatic viewpoint, since it stands in opposition to how we actually solve problems and thus may hinder our capacity to do so. Many pragmatist IR scholars share this concern. Friedrichs and Kratochwil (2009, 702), for example, argue that common scientific methods "do a poor job when it comes to the decisive purpose of human cognition: the efficient and efficacious production of useful knowledge."

While Dewey as well as Friedrichs and Kratochwil cast their objection as a critique of academic practices, the political concern at the core of the pragmatic kind of critique is broader. In order to understand this political concern, it is useful to return once more to the point where Boltanski breaks with Bourdieu. As described above, Boltanski became concerned about Bourdieu's excessive mistrust in people's common sense. Boltanski, in contrast, found that practitioners themselves were capable of articulating precisely the same doubts as Bourdieu himself. Tracing the historical origins of the doubt that motivates social critique, Boltanski (2014, 39) shows that, "from the late nineteenth century to our own day, the very same type of anxiety has permeated a popular literary genre [the crime novel], led to the invention of a new mental illness [paranoia], invested a discipline with scientific pretensions [sociology], and penetrated countless—if not all—human minds." What is this anxiety? In Boltanski's (2014, xvi) own words, it is an anxiety about the "reality of reality," a doubt whether reality as we experience it is really real.¹² It is precisely this sort of doubt that Bourdieu entertained about the experiences of the people he studied.

Not all pragmatist IR scholars have restricted their critique to the academic practices of their own discipline. Just as Boltanski did in sociology, some of them have begun to articulate a more comprehensive pragmatic critique of practices outside academia. Ralph and Gifkins (2017), whose argument we will discuss in greater detail below, problematize the mistrust created through specific practices in the UN Security Council, a theme that also features prominently in a more recent article by Ralph (2018). Cochran's work on the governance of nuclear weapons also addresses mistrust as a problem that pragmatic critique seeks to overcome. As she writes, the outcome of inquiry in the spirit of Dewey is "action that resolves a doubt within a particular social practice" (Cochran 2013, 177). These pragmatic critics in IR seek to facilitate a productive engagement with doubt. Indeed, the vision of social progress expressed in their pragmatic critiques is the idea of a world in which people deal productively with the problems they face.

Objective: Empower Practitioners

As elaborated above, social critics aim at enlightening people about the role that their common sense plays in reproducing domination. In contrast, pragmatic critics seek to

¹¹ The celebration of practitioners' knowledge can go beyond the premise of symmetry. It then establishes an asymmetry that favors practical over academic knowledge. Our concern is that if taken to the extreme, such a perspective risks abandoning all leverage to criticize actual practices. In Bernard Williams' (2005, 35) words, radical internalism "involves an indiscriminating acceptance of whatever conceptual resources of the society actually exist."

¹² Latour (2004, 227) also argues that "excessive distrust" is a crucial political problem with which critical theory needs to engage.

enable people to improve the functioning of their common sense. In other words, while social critics assume that a free unfolding of common sense would lead not to less but to more domination, the goal of pragmatic critics is precisely to remove potential barriers to such a free unfolding of our practical capacities. In her discussion of Dewey's theory of valuation, Cochran highlights this goal. Dewey's criticism, she writes, "facilitates the self-realization of individuals" and fosters virtues that "enable processes of growth and learning"; it is "the means by which individuals actively engage the best in themselves, their capacities for self-development and autonomy" (Cochran 1999, 182–83). This particular emancipatory agenda is certainly specific to Dewey, who may perhaps be called a humanist pragmatist.¹³ Nonetheless, a focus on enabling the common sense of common people, on empowering them, systematically follows from the premise and the concern of pragmatic critique that we have elaborated so far.

Pragmatic critique seeks to empower practitioners to solve the problems with which they are confronted. However, this does not mean that it aims at the permanent resolution of all problems. Cochran (1999, 201) writes that the impetus for pragmatic critique is rooted in the fact that "contradictions arise, unleashing doubts that need to be transformed and settled." Social progress means to develop the virtues and capacities that allow us to deal productively with these contradictions and the resulting doubts. As Boltanski (2011, 160) asserts, the emancipatory role of the social sciences consists in helping "society—that is, people, the people who are called 'ordinary'—deliberately maintain themselves in the state of constant imbalance in the absence of which, as the direst prophecies announce, domination would in fact seize hold of everything." From a pragmatist viewpoint, a state of constant imbalance is a state of emancipation, because without imbalances there is no creativity, no productive unfolding of our practical capacities. Consequently, it is an important task for the pragmatic critic to work toward maintaining such a state.¹⁴ The pragmatic critic plays a double role as both analyst and participant. As an analyst, he or she helps practitioners to see the problems they are confronted with more clearly, elaborating, among others, the norms and rules that are at stake in a specific situation. Yet, at the same time, and indeed through the same work, the pragmatic critic also brings about a new reality. He or she changes the world through his or her intervention by creating a situation in which practitioners are empowered to see their own situation more clearly and act more adequately.

It is important to stress that pragmatist thought is not "problem-solving theory" that "takes the world as it finds it" and merely seeks to make its arrangements "work smoothly by dealing with particular sources of trouble" (Cox 1981, 128–29). Even though pragmatist thinkers deliberately and frequently speak of attempts to solve problems, they do not think of these attempts as instrumental interventions by social technicians. Instead, what is at stake is reflexive change effected in political life by the participants themselves. Dewey (1927, 166) was convinced that "the prime condition of a democratically organized public is a kind of knowledge and insight [that] does not yet exist." He strove to further the emergence of this peculiar kind of knowledge and insight through experimental pedagogy, among others

by founding a much-celebrated laboratory school. Dewey's foremost goal was to encourage people to trust their own capacities of judgment. There is thus a fundamentally democratic ethos built into pragmatic critique, an ethos evident in Dewey's emphases on pedagogy, deliberation, and participatory democracy. Pragmatic critique is critical in that it problematizes the world as it is and aims at realizing a world not yet in existence.

In the last two sections of this article, we have discussed the respective premises, concerns, and emancipatory objectives of two distinct ways of criticizing international practices. We do not claim that these are the only two ways of practicing critique, and we readily acknowledge that an account that can be represented by a two-by-three matrix will hardly do justice to the diverse and complex ideas of the various authors we have discussed. But we hope to show in the remainder of the article that the heuristic we have developed can facilitate a better understanding of what is at stake in contemporary debates on normative questions in IR.

Two Ways of Criticizing Practices of International Intervention

A range of publications could be discussed to highlight the opposed logics of social and pragmatic critique as they bear on current debates in IR, among them Pouliot's (2016) Bourdieu-inspired work on international pecking orders and the pragmatic critique of international nuclear governance formulated by Cochran (2013). In the following, however, we will focus on one particular academic debate, namely that on the practices of multilateral diplomacy in the UN Security Council that made possible the authorization of the Libya intervention in 2011. We focus on this debate because its participants—Adler-Nissen and Pouliot (2014), on the one hand, and Ralph and Gifkins (2017), on the other—each stand in one of the two traditions we have discussed in the previous sections. Adler-Nissen and Pouliot rely on Bourdieusian ideas to study the workings of power in practice, while Ralph and Gifkins draw on pragmatic thinkers such as Dewey to study practical competence from a normative angle. Contrasting their arguments will allow us to further clarify what it means to criticize international practices in one or the other way.

Ralph and Gifkins (2017, 630) charge that Adler-Nissen and Pouliot's account reifies practices that are "not fit for purpose." In their critique, they focus in particular on the practice of pen-holding, which enables one Council member to steer the drafting of a resolution—metaphorically speaking, its diplomats hold the pen with which the resolution is written. In Adler-Nissen and Pouliot's account, this practice helped the P3 in the negotiations to achieve the outcome they desired: the authorization of a military intervention in Libya through Resolution 1970. Specifically, the British delegation, which acted as the penholder on this resolution, was widely recognized "for its superior skills in the many legal technicalities that often bog down the Council" (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014, 898). Together with their French colleagues, the UK diplomats relied on these skills to influence the negotiation process: "British and French negotiators basically took control of the pace of the diplomatic process" (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014, 898). Less experienced delegations were overwhelmed by the speed with which the two Western allies proceeded. The accelerated pace of the negotiations prompted these delegations to make moves "they might otherwise not have done" (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014, 898). Through the skillful use of

¹³ Cochran (1999, 182) is skeptical about the possible foundationalism inherent in Dewey's thinking.

¹⁴ For Hegel (1977, 51; quoted in Cochran 1999, 201), critical thinking also involves a constant unsettling of "unthinking inertia."

the practice of pen-holding, “reputation for competence was cashed out in concrete influence” (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014, 898). This figure of argument is at the core of the understanding of how power works in the practice that Adler-Nissen and Pouliot propose. The social recognition of practical competence allows some actors to assert their will against the will of others.

Ralph and Gifkins argue that Adler-Nissen and Pouliot’s analytical account of “power in practice” obscures the distinct normative commitments of the negotiators in the Security Council. As they emphasize, the negotiations about the Libya intervention took place against a specific normative background, that of the R2P. Ralph and Gifkins (2017, 632) explain that they want to reintroduce the “normative purpose articulated in R2P to the study of the Libyan intervention.” In doing so, they find that the skillful use of pen-holding weakened rather than strengthened the R2P norm, since it threatened the normative consensus in the Security Council. As Ralph and Gifkins (2017, 633) summarize, P3 diplomats may have “demonstrated competency as ‘pen-holders’ and through their ability to control the international response, but their practices also made the hard task of constructing and sustaining a consensus underpinning R2P even harder.” The reckless use of diplomatic competence to achieve certain political ends undermined other Council members’ trust in the P3’s genuine commitment to the R2P. It threatened a core aspect of the R2P agenda, namely the cultivation of a collective responsibility among international decision-makers. The loss of trust became evident when the Council began debating a possible intervention in Syria later in 2011. In the “context of mistrust created by its Libya intervention,” the P3 were no longer able to transform competence into power (Ralph and Gifkins 2017, 643). This is why, according to Ralph and Gifkins (2017, 647), Adler-Nissen and Pouliot are wrong when in their account “competence is equated with ‘victory’ in the struggle to determine the agenda.”

However, this charge to a certain extent misconstrues the argument Adler and Pouliot make. In their analysis, the kind of competence that the P3 diplomats possess and that they use to achieve their political ends is not simply taken for granted. Adler-Nissen and Pouliot (2014, 896) demonstrate in detail how socially recognized skills allow actors to place themselves above others and be “masters” in the game that is played. This is how, in their view, power works in practice. Ralph and Gifkins are right when they point out that such a conceptualization of practice has the consequence of depicting strategies of domination as “competent,” but they are wrong when they imply that Adler-Nissen and Pouliot’s analysis yields no resources for criticizing this kind of behavior and the standards of competence that legitimize it. After all, Adler-Nissen and Pouliot show in great detail that the arguments powerful actors use to justify their privileged position and preferred course of action are in fact cynical power moves. However, precisely because they do not render the normative implications of their approach explicit, they invite the criticism articulated by Ralph and Gifkins. Nonetheless, Adler-Nissen and Pouliot’s analysis to a certain extent already formulates a critique. It does not reify standards of competence in the sense that it treats these standards as natural and inevitable. Rather, even though they do not make this explicit in their article, Adler-Nissen and Pouliot’s argument can serve as a resource for those who want to challenge the standards of competence recognized at the Security Council.

Adler-Nissen and Pouliot’s analysis of “power in practice” builds on the critical insight that the social recognition of

competence disguises a situation that is in reality marked by profound power inequalities. The P3 diplomats use their socially recognized competence to achieve certain outcomes that are in their particularistic interest. However, taking into account Ralph and Gifkins’ own empirical findings, it becomes apparent that the P3 representatives may have miscalculated the consequences of their actions. In fact, as Ralph and Gifkins show, their reputation as savvy diplomats has suffered due to the Libya intervention. There is a growing mistrust in the Council about the motives of the P3: Is “regime change” in Libya not what they had been aiming for all along? And is it not also what they want to achieve in Syria? In other words: Is it not geopolitical power that the P3 are striving for, rather than protecting people from atrocities, as they claim? Interestingly, this is exactly what some of Ralph and Gifkins’ interviewees suspect. Referencing six interviews with practitioners, the two authors observe that “there are grounds for arguing, with some qualification, that P3 diplomats were more interested in claiming the moral high ground than in negotiating a collective response” (2017, 645). At least six interviewees of Ralph and Gifkins thus level precisely the charge against the P3 that is implicitly also raised in Adler-Nissen and Pouliot’s scholarly analysis, namely that the P3 used their “ability to display the moral high ground” for strategic purposes (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014, 902). Thus, practitioners at the Council themselves articulate a Bourdieusian critique of competence as a disguise of power.

The results of our discussion of the practice-theoretical debate on the Libya intervention can be summarized as follows:

- 1) Adler-Nissen and Pouliot base their analysis on the assumption of asymmetry. They know what at least some actors in the Council are unaware of, namely that socially recognized skills serve as a tool of domination. Ralph and Gifkins, in contrast, draw on interviews with practitioners to show that the P3’s use of their diplomatic skills was seen as controversial even within the Council itself and that this contestation later had grave consequences for decision-making in the deliberations on Syria. As far as this aspect of their argument is concerned, one can thus say that Ralph and Gifkins establish epistemic symmetry: they weigh the judgments of practitioners against scholarly arguments made by Adler-Nissen and Pouliot. These statements show (a point that is not made explicit by Ralph and Gifkins) that practitioners articulate the same kind of critique of competence that can also be found in Adler-Nissen and Pouliot’s Bourdieusian analysis.
- 2) Adler-Nissen and Pouliot’s analysis is concerned with “power in practice.” They argue that socially recognized competence is a tool used by international actors to influence political outcomes. Unless one equates socially recognized competence with influence on outcomes (an assumption that would render the argument tautological), this implies that there is a form of misrecognition: the Council members recognize something as competent in the behavior of the P3 diplomats that in fact serves as a tool of domination. The explicit concern of Adler-Nissen and Pouliot’s analysis is to demonstrate that competence can be a resource of power, but there is clearly also an implicit concern with how competence is merely recognized for what it appears to be and not for what it really is. Unlike Adler-Nissen and Pouliot, Ralph and Gifkins emphasize the normative commitments of the Security Council

and how they can be realized. In their argument, one can recognize a deeper, pragmatic concern about mistrust that arises from the suspicion that claims to “competence” are really only a tool of domination. This mistrust is built into Adler-Nissen and Pouliot’s Bourdieusian argument, but it is also a political problem the Council has to face when some of its members no longer trust the P3 after they have used their diplomatic skills to manipulate the Council in a way that in retrospect appears to many to be illegitimate.

- 3) This leaves us with the question of the objective of critique—in this case, of how Security Council practices should be transformed. Ralph and Gifkins are more explicit on this point than Adler-Nissen and Pouliot. In fact, Adler-Nissen and Pouliot’s article lacks any explicit argument about how things could be different at the Council. Elsewhere, however, [Adler-Nissen \(2015, 135\)](#) makes clear that in her view, if analyzed properly, “diplomacy cannot keep the innocence or detachment that some of its practitioners (and theorists) would want it to keep.” Once the workings of power have been unmasked, we cannot continue in our practices as we have done before. For Ralph and Gifkins, the normative goal of their analysis is arguably to help make practices at the Council become “fit for purpose” (i.e., better able to live up to the promise of the R2P norm). However, Ralph and Gifkins also emphasize that the challenge does not merely consist in the task of choosing the right means for a given aim. Rather, there is a “plurality of normative commitments” that practitioners and scholars need to reconcile in their judgments ([Ralph and Gifkins 2017, 648](#)). In a later article [Ralph \(2018\)](#) further elaborates what this alternative perspective entails. Spelling out how IR constructivism can further a “pragmatic” ethic that assesses norms by how well they help “ameliorate lived social problems,” he argues that as “pragmatic constructivists,” we “can maintain faith in R2P as a norm that sets out a process for ameliorating the problem of atrocity in the context of political pluralism” ([Ralph 2018, 174, 194](#)). For Ralph and Gifkins, the problem thus is not so much that social processes that unfold behind the back of the actors bring about undesirable outcomes. Instead, the problem is that actors in a world of plural moral standards fail to engage in a constructive discourse, which would be the prerequisite for collective action on the problem of atrocity.

When we interpret the debate over the intervention in Libya in this way, it may transpire that both sides have an important critical point to make. On the one hand, Adler-Nissen and Pouliot offer a compelling account of the workings of a stratified international order. They help us understand how socially recognized standards of competence cement inequalities by strengthening the position of those who are already in possession of various sources of social and material capital. On the other hand, Ralph and Gifkins are concerned that the suspicion that competent practices merely serve power—a suspicion that at least some practitioners at the Security Council share with Adler-Nissen and Pouliot—distracts from normative commitments that should play an important role in the deliberations of the Council. Ralph and Gifkins therefore foreground the critical capacities of social actors themselves and seek to assist practitioners in engaging in collective action that aims at solving the social problem of how to protect vulnerable populations from atrocities.

Conclusions

In this article, we have elaborated a clear distinction between two ways of criticizing international practices. As our discussion of the theoretical debate surrounding the international intervention in Libya has illustrated, one obstacle to realizing the critical potential of practice theory lies in the fact that scholars do not fully appreciate the differences between the two options for critique. Without a clear understanding of the two alternatives, scholars however risk talking past each other. In the particular case of the Libya intervention, we have seen that each of the two ways of criticizing practices offers valuable insights into what is wrong with diplomatic practices at the UN Security Council. A social critique of these practices can uncover how socially recognized competence serves as a tool of domination and perpetuates social inequalities. Conversely, a pragmatic critique of the same practices brings into focus how mistrust poses a political problem and hinders collective action. But what are the implications of this observation? What does it mean that the two perspectives on practices are opposed and nonetheless both offer important insights?

One significant implication of our argument is that the two perspectives cannot easily be reconciled or transcended. Our argument instead implies that there is a genuine choice to be made. Social critique and pragmatic critique stand in opposition to each other. While social critique begins with the premise of asymmetry between academic and lay knowledge, pragmatic critique starts from the premise of symmetry. While social critique tries to uncover the naïveté of practitioners’ trust in the rules of the social game, which in reality is a game of domination, pragmatic critique is concerned about excessive mistrust in our practical capabilities that establishes barriers to the proper functioning of our common sense. While social critique unmasks the hidden workings of power, pragmatic critique empowers practitioners and enables collective action. A choice thus needs to be made between these options, since it is—with respect to these three traits—impossible to have both, to proceed both symmetrically and asymmetrically, to criticize the same common sense for being too naïve and too skeptical, and to unmask the same common sense as a tool of power while enabling it to function better. We do not rule out the possibility that one can use one kind of critique in one situation and another in another situation. As they stand, however, the two kinds of critique represent mutually exclusive options for practicing critique. One will thus have to decide which one is more adequate, useful, and important for one’s scholarly and political purposes.

However, this does not mean that one can simply embrace one perspective to the exclusion of the alternative. The continuous reflection on the choice between the two options for critique is essential if practice-theoretical research—no matter along which of the two options it ultimately proceeds—is to be critical. If one begins to approach every social situation based on the premise of asymmetry, then the Bourdieusian critique of common sense ceases to fulfill its critical purpose. The mistrust of common sense becomes so excessive that one can hardly imagine how social change can take place. This excessive mistrust is a problem that can be revealed through pragmatic critique. Conversely, the pragmatic agenda of looking at everything in symmetrical terms can also become excessive (see [Koddenbrock 2015](#)). The trust it places in practitioners’ common sense risks becoming naïve when it simply takes every statement and every opinion at face value and thus loses the ability to distinguish between more or less appropriate forms of knowledge. This naïve trust can in turn be criticized by means of social

critique. The two options of critique thus rely on each other. Or at least they rely on an awareness that there is a choice and that specific reasons speak for one or the other alternative. This means that critique has to be self-reflexive. One ultimately is not critical simply because one relies on a specific premise, is motivated by a specific concern, or aims at realizing a specific objective. Rather, what makes practice theory critical is the reflexive awareness that its theoretical choices are indeed genuine choices—choices that reflect a specific stance toward what is going on in the world. To realize its critical potential, practice theory needs to cultivate what Cox (1981, 128) has called a “perspective on perspectives,” a perspective on the alternative ways in which we can criticize international practices.

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