

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# ‘Turning’ everywhere in IR: on the sociological underpinnings of the field’s proliferating turns

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(Received 3 December 2018; revised 25 February 2020; accepted 21 April 2020;  
first published online 15 June 2020)

## Abstract

In the past two decades, calls for International Relations (IR) to ‘turn’ have multiplied. Having reflected on Philosophy’s own linguistic turn in the 1980s and 1990s, IR appears today in the midst of taking – almost simultaneously – a range of different turns, from the aesthetic to the affective, from the historical to the practice, from the new material to the queer. This paper seeks to make sense of this puzzling development. Building on Bourdieu’s sociology of science, we argue that although the turns ostensibly bring about (or resuscitate) ambitious philosophical, ontological, and epistemological questions to challenge what is deemed to constitute the ‘mainstream’ of IR, their impact is more likely to be felt at the ‘margins’ of the discipline. From this perspective, claiming a turn constitutes a position-enhancing move for scholars seeking to accumulate social capital, understood as scientific authority, and become ‘established heretics’ within the intellectual subfield of critical IR. We therefore expect the proliferation of turns to reshape more substantively what it means to do critical IR, rather than turning the whole discipline on its head.

**Keywords:** International Relations theory; turns; sociology of knowledge; critical IR; Bourdieu; field

In the past two decades, calls for International Relations (IR) to ‘turn’ have multiplied. Having reflected on Philosophy’s own linguistic turn in the 1980s and 1990s, IR appears today in the midst of taking – almost simultaneously – a range of different turns, from the aesthetic to the affective, from the historical to the practice, from the new material to the queer. This paper seeks to make sense of this puzzling development. Building on Bourdieu’s sociology of science, we argue that although the turns ostensibly bring about (or resuscitate) ambitious philosophical, ontological, and epistemological questions to challenge what is deemed to constitute the ‘mainstream’ of IR, their impact is more likely to be felt at the ‘margins’ of the discipline. From this perspective, claiming a turn constitutes a position-enhancing move for scholars seeking to accumulate social capital, understood as scientific authority, and become ‘established heretics’ within the intellectual subfield of critical IR. We therefore expect the proliferation of turns to reshape more substantively what it means to do critical IR, rather than turning the whole discipline on its head.

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Calls for some kind of ‘turn’ in the discipline of IR have grown exponentially and become ubiquitous in recent years. For instance, although the 2013 International Studies Association (ISA) Convention programme listed only one paper with a title unambiguously referring to a turn, the 2014 Convention had three, the 2017 nine, the 2018 ten, and the 2019 no less than fourteen.<sup>1</sup> IR turns include, most prominently, the ‘visual’ (also known as ‘aesthetic’), the ‘affective’ (or ‘emotions’), the ‘historical’, the ‘practice’, the ‘new material’, and the ‘queer’ turns. These turns are gathering substantial interest and momentum in the discipline, with journal special issues being published, novel research agendas being pursued, grants won, and careers made.

This paper interrogates this proliferation of turning endeavours in IR whereas simultaneously seeking to provide a particular reading of this puzzling development. Our aim is neither to assess, individually or collectively, the turns’ substantive contributions nor to propose any new one. Rather, we seek to address nascent questions as to where this growing urge to produce turns is coming from.<sup>2</sup> We engage with existing discussions unpacking the dynamics that structure IR as a field in general<sup>3</sup> and (re)emerging scholarship reflecting upon the direction the discipline is taking in particular.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, we suggest that although the multiplication of turns appears at first sight to re-define IR as a whole, these moves are actually unlikely to turn the entire discipline on its head. Instead, we argue, the turns’ fragmenting and destabilizing effects are likely to be felt chiefly within the discipline’s critical milieu.

We develop this argument in two steps. A first, propaedeutic section offers an itinerary that runs through a number of key recent turns with the intent of outlining the main contours of this phenomenon, and situating its apparent intellectual stakes against the backdrop of a discipline previously marked by a number of so-called ‘great debates’ and the more recent ‘end of IR theory’ argument. From this perspective, the turns can be viewed as levelling ambitious philosophical, ontological, and epistemological challenges to the IR canon, contesting its axioms and re-igniting theoretical disputes at a time when the field appeared to have settled for some kind of theoretical peace at best or atheoretical empiricism at worst.

Yet in the second section of our paper, we put forward a somewhat more ‘cynical’ reading, as Inanna Hamati-Ataya would label it,<sup>5</sup> of this phenomenon that allows us to significantly scale down, or at least re-locate, the turns’ impact. Stemming from a sociology of science viewpoint, we explain why the very specific language of *turn* is being used, to what social ends, and with what actual

<sup>1</sup>A table documenting the growth of papers and panels/roundtables addressing a ‘turn’ in ISA Conventions (2013–19) is available as an online Appendix.

<sup>2</sup>See for example McCourt (2016). A handful of panels and roundtables at recent ISA Annual Conventions have also started to reflect, somewhat critically, on this phenomenon. Most notably in the case of the panel ‘A Re-Turn to Politics’ held at the 2019 ISA Convention in Toronto.

<sup>3</sup>Hamati-Ataya (2011, 2012), Waever (2016).

<sup>4</sup>Colgan (2016), Kristensen (2018).

<sup>5</sup>Hamati-Ataya (2012, 632).

implications for the field. Here, we build on sociological studies of academic life in general<sup>6</sup> and their application to IR in particular.<sup>7</sup>

We do so to interrogate what the proliferation and characteristics of turning claims reveal about and do to IR *as a social field*, understood as a network of social relations within which individuals are hierarchically positioned and jockey for power, status, and influence. Specifically, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu, we suggest that the turns ought to be understood as a position-taking move which, by rhetorically displaying a radical critical stance, allows scholars to establish or renew their ‘social capital’, defined in this context as ‘scientific authority’ within a specific sub-field of the discipline, namely that of ‘critical IR’.<sup>8</sup> In other words, turns are bids to become an ‘established heretic’.<sup>9</sup> Such an appraisal hence leads us to argue that the turns’ intellectual impact is, perhaps paradoxically, most likely to be felt within the boundaries of IR’s critical subfield, despite their often-stated intent of upending the vilified mainstream instead.<sup>10</sup>

### ‘Turning’ everywhere in IR: towards fragmentation or a new great debate? IR’s proliferating turns

It is widely acknowledged that Philosophy’s ‘linguistic turn’ in the 1980s and 1990s – see especially Richard Rorty’s 1967 volume *The Linguistic Turn* –<sup>11</sup> has had a profound impact on the discipline of IR.<sup>12</sup> Considerations about language, alongside other theoretical influences, made their way in IR when self-proclaimed ‘dissident’ scholars<sup>13</sup> aimed to revolutionize or, at the very least, diversify the field’s theoretical landscape during the ‘third debate’ – or ‘fourth’, according to other counts.<sup>14</sup> Drawing on a purposely wide and composite array of intellectual sources in philosophy (from Wittgenstein and Austin to Foucault and Derrida) and sociology (from Berger and Luckmann to Bourdieu), IR scholars began ever more consistently to reflect upon and investigate the role of language in shaping and constituting meanings, perceptions, actions, and social reality more broadly. The

<sup>6</sup>Chiefly Bourdieu (1975, 1988, 1991).

<sup>7</sup>See Wæver (1998, 2016); also Hamati-Ataya (2012), Kristensen (2018).

<sup>8</sup>Bourdieu (1975, 23).

<sup>9</sup>Bourdieu (1988, 105).

<sup>10</sup>We acknowledge that the term ‘science’ has come to hold somewhat loaded connotations in the discipline of IR. The point being that the lingo of science is often brandished by and closely associated with one particular philosophical and methodological stance, the (neo)positivist one. Often attacked for not being ‘scientific enough’, more interpretivist, critical, and reflexive approaches in IR have tended to view the term science – and the disciplining logics associated with it – with suspicion. Yet, following Patrick Jackson (2011), this need not be so. Hence in our understanding of social capital in the academic field of IR as ‘scientific authority’, we are not only drawing on Bourdieu’s usage of these terms but also embracing a broader notion of science – as ‘careful and rigorous application of a set of theories and concepts so as to produce a “thoughtful ordering of empirical actuality”’ (Jackson 2011, 193) – which includes scholarship produced from critical theoretical areas of the discipline.

<sup>11</sup>Rorty (1992) [1967].

<sup>12</sup>Albert *et al.* (2008), Neumann (2002). Assessments of the turn are still underway, for instance in the case of the ‘What’s Left of The Linguistic Turn’ roundtable held at the 2017 ISA Annual Convention, Baltimore.

<sup>13</sup>George and Campbell (1990).

<sup>14</sup>Balzacq and Baele (2014), see also Lapid (1989), Wæver (1996).

turn durably influenced the discipline, accelerating the progress of constructivist and poststructuralist theories in IR, and triggering the development of novel approaches to security such as securitization theory. Reviewing seminal constructivist interventions of the mid-1990s, Jeffrey Checkel would diagnose a ‘constructivist turn in International Relations theory’,<sup>15</sup> thereby announcing IR’s first own turn.

In the footsteps of these major theoretical developments, IR has witnessed a dazzling proliferation of turns and calls thereof since the 2000s. One after the other, scholars have come forward suggesting the field ought to take a substantially different direction. Six turns, in particular, have been especially visible within IR theoretical debates in recent decades, namely the emotions/affective, visual/aesthetic, historical/temporal, practice, new material, and queer turns.

At first, the discipline was called upon to turn its attention towards emotions. A growing number of scholars would claim that IR theories needed to fundamentally rethink how they integrated affects and sentiments in their analyses of international affairs.<sup>16</sup> A significant amount of research has followed that crossed over the boundaries with neurosciences and psychology.<sup>17</sup> Along the way, Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker have argued, it has ‘become common to speak of an “emotional turn” in IR,<sup>18</sup> which others have also referred to as the ‘affective turn’.<sup>19</sup> A recent forum in *International Theory* in 2014 has played an important role in cementing the turn.<sup>20</sup>

Then, practically simultaneously, new voices emerged suggesting that IR should turn towards images. Scholars argued that images (pictures, artistic creations, cartoons, and so on) significantly shape IR in a distinct way, leading some authors to proclaim a ‘visual’ or ‘aesthetic’ turn. The turn was first explicitly invoked by Bleiker in the early 2000s from the pages of *Millennium*.<sup>21</sup> Since then the works of David Campbell, Lene Hansen, and Michael Williams have been instrumental in giving greater attention to the issue of pictures and images in IR along with defining some of the main arguments and themes of the visual turn.<sup>22</sup> Large-scale research programmes, such as the *Images and International Security* at the University of Copenhagen led by Lene Hansen, have been launched and, more recently, several extensive reviews<sup>23</sup> and journal forums<sup>24</sup> have certified to the turn’s growing strength in the field.

A parallel historical/temporal turn has been making its way through the discipline since the early 2000s.<sup>25</sup> This turn’s aims have been multiple. These include problematizing the ‘myths’ we tell about the origins of the current international

<sup>15</sup>Checkel (1998).

<sup>16</sup>Bleiker and Hutchison (2008), Crawford (2000), Hall (2015), Mercer (2005, 2006), Ross (2006).

<sup>17</sup>Baele *et al.* (2016), Halperin (2015), McDermott and Hatemi (2014).

<sup>18</sup>Hutchison and Bleiker (2014, 492).

<sup>19</sup>Hoggett and Thompson (2012).

<sup>20</sup>International Theory (2014).

<sup>21</sup>Bleiker (2001).

<sup>22</sup>See, respectively, Campbell (2004, 2007), Hansen (2011, 2015), Williams (2003, 2018).

<sup>23</sup>Kirkpatrick (2015).

<sup>24</sup>*Millennium* (2017).

<sup>25</sup>Bell (2001), Hom (2018), Hutchings (2008), Lawson (2012), McCourt (2012), Puchala (2003), Roberts (2006), Teschke (2003), Vaughan-Williams (2005).

system whereas also re-examining the past's constitutive role in shaping the present; re-thinking how IR approaches and uses History as a discipline and history as the past; emphasizing the role of temporality, context, contingency, complexity, and/or change over IR theoretical predilections for generalizations, parsimony, and stability; advancing narrative as a mode of explanation; and bringing to light the history of IR as a discipline and the assumptions about temporality embedded in its different theories. The on-going attempt to bridge the apparent 'eternal divide'<sup>26</sup> between the disciplines of IR and History has gathered such momentum to warrant, among others, a special forum on *Millennium* in 2008<sup>27</sup> and the creation of a novel Historical International Relations section at ISA in 2013.

The last two decades have similarly witnessed growing and persistent invitations to turn towards practices.<sup>28</sup> Vincent Pouliot, claiming to be inspired by 'a larger trend advocating a "practice turn" in social theory', for instance, openly called for a similar 'practice turn in IR theory'<sup>29</sup> – a terminology thereafter largely accepted in the field<sup>30</sup> and diffused once again through journal symposiums.<sup>31</sup> Drawing extensively on Bourdieu's sociology and similar endeavours in social theory,<sup>32</sup> IR scholars are invited to pay far greater attention to the 'socially meaningful patterns of action' that are 'performed' on the international stage in a way that 'simultaneously embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world'.<sup>33</sup>

Calls to focus on practices have dovetailed with another turning injunction, generally referred to as the 'new materialist' turn. A special issue on *Millennium*,<sup>34</sup> a forum on *International Political Sociology*,<sup>35</sup> Mark Salter's double edited volume *Making Things International*,<sup>36</sup> and a growing string of articles in major critical IR journals,<sup>37</sup> have all sought to move IR beyond its 'anthropocentrism'<sup>38</sup> and pay greater attention to 'how does matter matter'.<sup>39</sup> New materialists draw inspiration from a variety of philosophical and social theoretical sources – posthumanism, assemblage, and actor-network theory, historical materialism, and feminism –<sup>40</sup> to show how world politics is shaped, determined, and constituted by 'things', 'bodies', 'nonhuman processes', 'technologies', 'microbes', or 'ecological forces', even more so than human subjectivities and social forces.

Inspired by social theorists such as Michel Foucault or Judith Butler and building on earlier IR feminist work, other scholars have proposed to bring into IR

<sup>26</sup>Lawson (2012).

<sup>27</sup>*Millennium* (2008).

<sup>28</sup>Adler and Pouliot (2011), Bigo (2011), Bueger and Gadinger (2015), Neumann (2002), Pouliot (2008).

<sup>29</sup>Pouliot (2008, 258–59).

<sup>30</sup>Kustermans (2016).

<sup>31</sup>International Studies Quarterly (2015).

<sup>32</sup>See Bourdieu (1990a); also Cetina *et al.* (2005).

<sup>33</sup>Adler and Pouliot (2011, 6).

<sup>34</sup>*Millennium* (2013).

<sup>35</sup>International Political Sociology (2013).

<sup>36</sup>Salter (2015, 2016).

<sup>37</sup>Grove (2016), Schouten (2014), Walters (2014).

<sup>38</sup>Connolly (2013, 400).

<sup>39</sup>Srnicek *et al.* (2013, 397).

<sup>40</sup>Coole and Frost (2010), Deleuze and Guattari (2004), Latour (2005).

inquiries that: ‘trouble and destabilise – *queer* – “regimes of the normal” (“normal” versus “perverse”) and show their contingent and thus political character [emphasis in original].<sup>41</sup> The development of a ‘queer international theory’, initially outlined by scholars such as Cynthia Weber,<sup>42</sup> sought to identify and challenge the ‘powerful formations and mobilizations of sexed, gendered, and sexualized binaries’ and to deploy ‘critical analyses of how these binaries are normalized’ in IR.<sup>43</sup> Recent forums and online symposiums respectively on *International Studies Review* and *International Studies Quarterly*,<sup>44</sup> are cementing the contours of what several agenda-setting articles are formally identifying as a ‘queer turn’.<sup>45</sup>

To sum up, since the 2000s, IR has witnessed a mushrooming of turns and calls thereof. Invitations to turn certainly go beyond the six developments sketched above – for instance, in the case of the ‘religious turn’ in world politics<sup>46</sup> or the ‘local turn’ in peace and conflict studies<sup>47</sup> – and a year seems not to go by without some new turn emerging. In the following subsections, we highlight why, if we are to take all turns’ claims at face value and embrace their agendas, it seems the discipline of IR is headed: either for further pluralism at best or fragmentation at worst; or even the (re)turn to a *new great debate*, especially as the core assumptions on which the discipline’s mainstream rests upon come under attack.

### ***From promising innovations to the threat of fragmentation***

A favourable reading of the turns would portray these as important avenues for philosophically, theoretically, and empirically opening up and broadening the core of the discipline thanks to the work of audacious scholars adventuring away from the all too well-trodden paths to explore uncharted territory. From such a standpoint, some may welcome the turns in the same way that third/fourth debate ‘dissidents’ embraced as many (potentially incompatible) intellectual influences as possible in their bid to ‘resist knowing in the sense celebrated in modern culture, where to “know” is to construct a coherent representation that excludes contesting interpretations and controls meaning’.<sup>48</sup> Multiple turns represent as many new objects, methods, or theories that diversify and enrich the discipline.

Another positive interpretation, one that is explicitly being offered, presents the turns instead as promising avenues for the reinvigoration and expansion of older, increasingly stagnant, theoretical paradigms in IR. David McCourt, for instance, argues that the practice-relational turn represents the ‘New Constructivism’.<sup>49</sup> This endeavour is understood by McCourt as recovering many of the original promises of constructivism and giving this theory a new lease of life, following its unproductive ‘narrowing’ over time to a specific scientific ontology focusing overwhelmingly on the role of identity, norms, and culture in IR.

<sup>41</sup>Richter-Montpetit (2018, 224).

<sup>42</sup>Weber (2014, 2015, 2016).

<sup>43</sup>Richter-Montpetit and Weber (2017).

<sup>44</sup>International Studies Review (2014), International Studies Quarterly (2016).

<sup>45</sup>Richter-Montpetit (2018), Wilkinson (2017).

<sup>46</sup>Kubalkova (2013), Thomas (2016).

<sup>47</sup>Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013).

<sup>48</sup>Ashley and Walker (1990, 261).

<sup>49</sup>McCourt (2016).

Yet, this potential enrichment inevitably comes with a risk of fragmentation. First, there are (many) more turns than canonical theories, and the practice one might well be the only turn truly seeking to graft with them. Moreover to turn is not cost-free: in a discipline where resources are not infinite, any claim to turn in fact inherently contains an argument for de-elevating existing modes of inquiry. At the least, time and resources (money, conference space, manpower, hires, and so on) spent focusing on the force of, say, objects or emotions, is time not spent on other aspects of IR. This may reinforce worries that the turns could give further impetus to what Christine Sylvester would call IR's 'camp' mentality.<sup>50</sup> The notion that the discipline is fragmenting into a sprawling multiplicity of disparate and insular intellectual camps, which are ever less capable or even interested in communicating with one another across the discipline.

Second, and more fundamentally, others may be concerned that what could thus be lost with the turns is a coherent discipline with an easily-identifiable object of analysis (violent and non-violent interactions between states, with perhaps important non-state actors); populated by few, well-defined, dominant theoretical frameworks (the neo-neo 'consensus', with perhaps a constructivist add-on); and where a mainstream epistemology is clearly recognizable and desirable (positivism, with perhaps an interpretive twist).<sup>51</sup> Turns, hence, may ultimately appear to be pushing, pulling and possibly tearing the discipline – as a cumulative endeavour with a shared or coherent sense of identity and a record of scientific progress – in many different and at times incompatible directions.

### ***A new great debate?***

A second potential consequence of the multiplication of turns is to launch a renewed phase of contestation of the discipline's major theoretical frameworks, with echoes of yet another 'great debate'. Although seemingly pulling the field towards sometimes very different directions, turns share a common desire to vigorously bring back metatheoretical discussions to the fore of IR (to the potential chagrin of those wishing IR acquire the status of a 'normal science'),<sup>52</sup> whereas simultaneously questioning the very status of IR as a discipline, especially one structured around well-defined isms (to the potential chagrin of those who remain wedded to the paradigms).<sup>53</sup>

This common desire to re-open discussions on the discipline's ontology and epistemology comes in the context of the lead-up to, and unfolding of, the so-called 'end of IR theory' debate.<sup>54</sup> The 'end of theory' discussion painted a picture of a discipline intellectually exhausted both by the great *isms* (Realism, Liberalism, Marxism, and Constructivism), which on their own could allegedly account for less and less of an ever more complex international system, and by the inter-paradigmatic wars that proponents of these theories had been engaging in for

<sup>50</sup>Sylvester (2013); also Kurki (2011).

<sup>51</sup>See for example Jarvis (2000).

<sup>52</sup>Such as Lake (2011).

<sup>53</sup>For example Mearsheimer and Walt (2013).

<sup>54</sup>*European Journal of International Relations* (2013); also Lake (2011), Sil and Katzenstein (2010), (2011), Sylvester (2007).



decades. As a reaction, the field appeared to be moving away or beyond ‘theory-explicit work as well as work that engages in debate across paradigms’,<sup>55</sup> towards adopting the status of ‘normal science’ (to use Kuhn’s term). IR as a ‘normal science’ was seen as taking two particular directions, both celebrated by some for allowing scholars to finally focus on real-world problem-based analyses rather than on metatheoretical musings and paradigmatic conflicts that – in David Lake’s words – ‘resolved little’.<sup>56</sup>

One of these directions is represented by the rise of research using ever more complex formal models and statistical methodologies to test specific hypothesis about particular empirical occurrences. In some cases, such hypothesis would be articulated deductively to confirm or disconfirm theoretical insights, but in a growing number of cases these would be formulated inductively sidestepping exiting theoretical considerations. Traditional concerns of IR such as war in general and civil conflicts in particular,<sup>57</sup> along with other domains such as those of international political economy, have thus increasingly become the subjects of highly methodologically sophisticated empirical research rather than theoretical debate.

A second direction being taken has sought to deploy IR’s growing theoretical richness, diversity and pluralism as a means to produce better research. Rather than viewing theories as philosophically, ontologically, and epistemologically incommensurable, a range of voices have increasingly presented them as complementary tool-kits whose insights could be combined in ‘analytically eclectic’<sup>58</sup> or ‘integrative pluralist’<sup>59</sup> ways to form middle-range theories that generate more detailed and comprehensive explanations of complex empirical phenomena.<sup>60</sup> Scholars in the discipline were thus invited here to ‘set aside metatheoretical debates in favour of a pragmatist view of social inquiry’.<sup>61</sup>

Both avenues have attracted their fair share of criticism. In the former case, for instance, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt have bemoaned the progressive abandonment of paradigmatic theorizing in lieu of a discipline adrift in ‘simplistic hypothesis testing’ where methods appear to be triumphing over theoretical reflection.<sup>62</sup> What is at stake, from this perspective, is the hypothetic-deductive logic and the very existence of IR as a scientific discipline organized around a clearly identifiable ‘research programme’ and a set of ‘core’ axioms. In the latter case, some have cautioned about the dangers of analytical eclectic approaches that ‘bracket metatheoretical inquiry’,<sup>63</sup> a move seen to result in the narrowing rather than the expansion of practically relevant knowledge IR scholars are likely to produce. Despite these dire warnings, the ‘end of theory’ debate clearly photographed a discipline that was perceived, at best, to be settling for some kind of ‘theoretical

<sup>55</sup>Dunne *et al.* (2013, 418).

<sup>56</sup>Lake (2013, 567).

<sup>57</sup>For example Fearon and Laitin (2003).

<sup>58</sup>Sil and Katzenstein (2010).

<sup>59</sup>Dunne *et al.* (2013).

<sup>60</sup>See also also Bennett (2013), Lake (2013).

<sup>61</sup>Sil and Katzenstein (2010, 417).

<sup>62</sup>Mearsheimer and Walt (2013); see also Cohen (2010).

<sup>63</sup>Reus-Smit (2013, 590); see also Jahn (2017).



peace<sup>64</sup> or, at worst, to be ‘leaving theory behind’<sup>65</sup> to allegedly produce more fine grained empirical explanations of world political events and processes.

The emergence of the turns and their destabilizing potential could be understood in this context.<sup>66</sup> What this widening and deepening wave of turns appears intent on doing is to disrupt, often implicitly but increasingly also explicitly, the (meta)theoretical ‘peace’ or ‘bracketing’ that IR has seemed to settle for in the past two decades with the rise of quantitative empiricist and analytical eclectic scholarship. Emotions scholars, for instance, call to radically shake the rational actor assumption; new materialists invite us to look away from humans and assign agency to things; whereas proponents of the practice turn suggest we stop trying to infer decision-makers’ intentions, preferences, or ideas altogether, and focus instead on practical imperatives, un-thought habits, and embodied dispositions. Along the way, most turns advance a relational ontology that directly challenges the substantivist ontology underpinning much of the dominant paradigmatic and post-paradigmatic theorizing in the discipline.<sup>67</sup>

Turns therefore increasingly and forcefully bring back on the agenda the kind of meta-theoretical discussions which unfolded during the third/fourth debate. Indeed, as some have started to note, the contours of a new ‘great debate’ seem not too far-off the horizon.<sup>68</sup> Most turns do not propose a re-turn to the old *isms*<sup>69</sup> or to grand theorizing more generally.<sup>70</sup> Turnists, so to speak, generally do not seek to provide a new paradigm or central theory for IR; rather, they tend to distance themselves quite explicitly from older *isms* with the intention of overcoming their alleged inadequacies. Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, for instance, explain that their ‘claim is not that practice offers the universal grand theory or totalizing ontology of everything social’,<sup>71</sup> whereas Thomas Birtchnell for example states that ‘it would be a misconstrual to presume that new materialism is simply code for post-modernism, and this would indeed miss the point entirely for this optic’.<sup>72</sup>

Overall, multiple turns seem to be contesting and potentially eroding the sense of coherence and stability that either the old *isms* or novel understandings of IR as a normal science may appear to give to the discipline. Yet, to what extent is this really the case? By casting a sociological light on the turns, the next section develops our argument that the turns’ shockwaves, whereas non-negligible, are unlikely to be felt so widely and deeply across the discipline of IR. Perhaps paradoxically, we may find

<sup>64</sup>Dunne *et al.* (2013, 406).

<sup>65</sup>Mearsheimer and Walt (2013, 427); see also Berenskötter (2018).

<sup>66</sup>Some turns had already been called for before the early 2010s when the ‘end of theory’ debate explicitly unfolded (see Crawford 2000, Bell 2001, Bleiker 2001, Pouliot 2008). Perhaps too few and too faint at the time, these theoretical developments were generally overlooked by the debate.

<sup>67</sup>On relationalism in IR see for example Jackson and Nexon (1999).

<sup>68</sup>Curtis and Koivisto (2010), Joseph and Kurki (2018), Lundborg and Vaughan-Williams (2015).

<sup>69</sup>*Contra*, for instance, Mearsheimer and Walt (2013).

<sup>70</sup>*Contra*, for example, Albert (2016), Kratochwil (2018) and Adler (2019). It is possible to similarly interpret these moves in the context of – and as a reaction to – the existing general dissatisfaction with the state of disciplinary fragmentation and lack of theorizing at the ‘end of IR’.

<sup>71</sup>Adler and Pouliot (2011, 2).

<sup>72</sup>Birtchnell (2017, 696).

that the very place from which most turns emerged is the most likely to experience their potentially radical effects.

### Why claim a turn? Turning as a critical practice in the field of IR

To better understand the turning frenzy and evaluate and locate the turns' potential impact on the discipline, we suggest shifting the perspective towards the *social* dynamics involved in the very act of 'turning'. Our intent is to unpack what the proliferation of claims for a turn tells us about the state of IR not simply understood as an intellectual enterprise but *as a social field*. We follow here Bourdieu's field theoretic understanding of science as 'a social field like any other, with its distribution of power and its monopolies, its struggles and strategies, interests and profits', where 'practices are directed towards the acquisition of scientific authority (prestige, recognition, fame, and so on)'.<sup>73</sup> As some observers have already highlighted, Bourdieu's prolific sociology of science and academia is not uniform and even at times discordant.<sup>74</sup> Rather than building on a precise exegesis of this oeuvre and endorsing one particular contribution, we use pragmatically Bourdieu's rich conceptual toolbox to make sense of current turning endeavours in IR, only highlighting theoretical tensions when they could lead to diverging understandings of these turns' rationale and impact.

When viewing IR not exclusively as a scientific endeavour but also as a game of 'position-taking in a field of struggles',<sup>75</sup> invoking a turn becomes not solely an attempt to re-shape intellectual inquiry by including a new object of analysis (e.g. practices and images) or philosophical sensibility (e.g. time and sexuality) and subsequently revising the core axioms of a theoretical framework or the discipline as a whole. It is rather, we argue, a positioning move among others<sup>76</sup> with which a scholar attempts to increase his/her 'social capital' defined as 'scientific authority',<sup>77</sup> in other words his/her 'reputation for scientific worthiness',<sup>78</sup> within the social field of IR. Claiming a turn is thus a move whose success has to be evaluated against the backdrop of both its consequences on colleagues' research behaviours and changes in the claimant's own status in terms of the various dimensions of his/her scientific authority (prestige, recognition, fame, and legitimacy).

Turning, we argue, affects the claimant's overall position in the hierarchy of the whole field because it raises its position within one of its subfields: that of 'critical IR'.<sup>79</sup> The following two sub-sections develop this argument further. First, we unpack the specificities of 'turning', which we define as a linguistic practice consisting in rhetorically displaying a scholar's theoretical ambition and radical critical

<sup>73</sup>Bourdieu (1975, 19, 21); also Bourdieu (1988).

<sup>74</sup>Camic (2011).

<sup>75</sup>Hamati-Ataya (2012, 636).

<sup>76</sup>Other such position-taking practices include for example 'symbolic' uses of citations (Kristensen 2018), attempts to join more 'prestigious' institutions, choice of particular journals for publication, or efforts to network with more established scholars during conferences.

<sup>77</sup>Bourdieu (1975, 23).

<sup>78</sup>Bourdieu (1988, 96).

<sup>79</sup>On the view of IR as constituted both at once by one larger disciplinary social field which encompasses a series of more specific subfields characterized by more particular practices and doxa, see also Hamati-Ataya (2012).

stance. Second, we analyse how such a practice is mostly available to a particular set of scholars who occupy certain positions in the field of IR and are already endowed with certain forms of social capital. We show how calls for a new turn therefore, although appearing at first sight to constitute a move rejecting IR's doxa and practices as a whole, actually constitute a move aiming at sustaining the subfield of critical IR whereas also gaining scientific authority and a higher standing within this milieu. Moreover, by enhancing his/her status within this subfield, a 'turnist' can simultaneously become even more prominent and known across the wider field of IR as such.

### ***Turning as a rhetorical display of criticality***

As Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar observed, 'rhetorical persuasion' is key when it comes to scholars seeking to gain prestige and credit in their discipline.<sup>80</sup> Specifically, we argue that turning, understood as a particular linguistic practice, contains two dimensions that allow the claimant to gain social capital. First, and most evidently, this practice *relies on the very term 'turn'*, which directly evokes the authority of the linguistic turn and signals the theoretical ambition and willingness to re-orient the discipline; second, it tends to *articulate radical forms of critique* of the 'mainstream' through the adoption of a rather ambitious, at best, if not somewhat inflated, at worst, language.

First, the very use of the turn metaphor purposively evokes the well-established 'linguistic turn' in a bid to enhance the legitimacy credentials of a specific claim and to categorize one's own attempt in the same class of a major and successful past theoretical innovation. In some cases, the connection is explicitly established. Iver Neumann, for example, directly situates the practice turn as an offshoot of the linguistic turn, which he sees as not fully accomplished given its singular focus on 'textual approaches' that 'brackets out the study of other kinds of action'.<sup>81</sup> Opting for the term turn also possesses advantages over alternative labels similarly associated with significant change. Arguing in favour of a 'paradigm shift', for example, could sound inflammatory or counter-productive, considering past inter-paradigmatic wars, whereas merely suggesting the inclusion of a new object of analysis – say, emotions – might be understood as a very incremental intervention and thus not warrant much attention from the wider discipline as a whole.

Yet, considerable difference potentially lies behind this carefully-chosen terminological reference adopted by 'turnists'. Broadly speaking, three types of turns could be said to exist: *retrospective*, *prescriptive*, and *descriptive* turns. These differ in their respective chronological outlooks and produce distinct forms of scientific authority. The original linguistic turn, in Philosophy, was a *retrospective* turn, whereby scholars – most famously Rorty – looked in the rear-view mirror and diagnosed that their field had turned. Yet, contemporary IR turns are generally of a different kind. They are either *prescriptive*, namely turns that authors think should take place, or *descriptive*, that is turns that scholars claim are taking

<sup>80</sup>Latour and Woolgar (1986, 240).

<sup>81</sup>Neumann (2002, 627).

place in the present. All three types of turns are rhetorical moves potentially enhancing the claimant's position in his/her field, yet each involves a different type of possible gain in terms of authority and a different positioning move in the field.

Retrospective diagnoses that the field has taken a turn, if embraced by peers, enhance the credibility of the claimant by associating him/her with the superior intellectual ability to have a bird's eye view of the field. It subsequently increases his/her legitimacy not merely as a participant in the theoretical debate but as a figure *above* the debate, who is able to offer new insights into the history of the whole field. Scholars who put forward such a turn thus potentially gain field-wide recognition and authority.

By contrast, *prescriptive* propositions that the discipline should turn seek to put the claimant in the position of an important participant in the IR theoretical debate, as someone who is able to offer radically novel insights intended to and capable of re-orienting the field. The type of authority potentially acquired with such a move is thus different from the one gained with retrospective turns, and instead similar to that which comes with 'scientific discoveries'. As Bourdieu explains, 'the authority-capital accruing from a discovery is monopolised by the first person to have made it, or at least the first person to have made it known and got it recognised'.<sup>82</sup>

Somewhere in between these two types of turns, are *descriptive* claims that a turn is currently taking place and should be simultaneously encouraged and supported. These claims bring the benefits of both retrospective and prescriptive turns, yet in a less powerful way. The claimant deflects the merit of the discovery to other scholars yet can still be credited with coalescing important work in an original way that makes the discovery explicit to all, perhaps even including those who made it. Successfully describing a turn therefore enhances the claimant's scientific authority in the two different ways exposed above: by evidencing both an ability to know the whole field and a capacity to offer original advances. Although descriptive turns are not as powerful as avowedly retrospective or prescriptive turns, they have a certain appeal. In some cases they may be a safer bet, because plainly claiming a prescriptive turn may sound presumptuous if not voiced by already well-established scholars (c. below). In other cases, they overlap with a critical ethos which values openness over individual responsibility to set the agenda, and the disciplining move that such an intervention may entail.<sup>83</sup> Figure 1 summarizes these three types of turns, their chronological outlook on the discipline, and their potential associated gains in terms of scientific authority. The size of the grey shading represents that of the gains potentially reaped.

<sup>82</sup>Bourdieu (1975, 25). To claim a prescriptive turn can similarly be understood as vocally announcing the 'creation of a new scientific fact', to use Latour and Woolgar's (1986, 196) words. Through such a move, the claimant seeks to 'establish access to a market for his contributions [and] as a result, he would be invited to any meeting which discussed this [fact], he would be cited in any paper dealing with this issue, [...] thus able to transform his small savings into greater revenue'.

<sup>83</sup>For instance, Bleiker (2017, 260) explicitly argues about the aesthetic turn, that: 'this is not about agenda setting. It should not be up to me – or anyone else – to determine what can and cannot be investigated as a political theme, and what is and is not proper International Relations research. In short, the main point I want to make in this commentary is that the aesthetic turn was and should continue to be about opening up thinking space'.

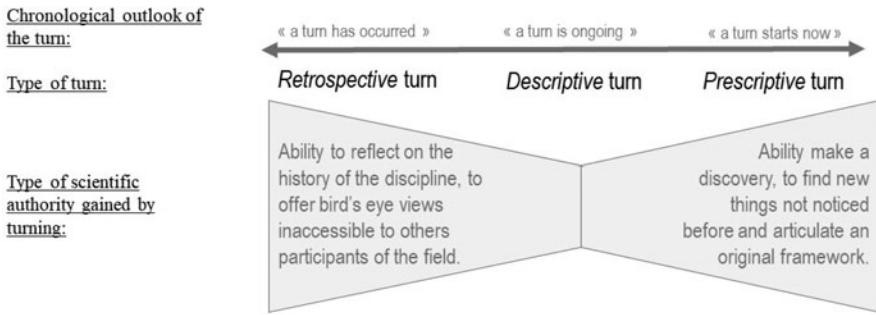


Figure 1. Types of turns, with their respective outlooks and authority.

In sum, a scholar whose name becomes associated with a turn (e.g. visual turn ⇒ Roland Bleiker; practice turn ⇒ Vincent Pouliot) gains social capital and scientific authority from two sources. On the one hand, by adopting the very term of *turn*, these scholars evoke and place their contributions in relation to the notorious linguistic turn, with all the symbolism of a major theoretical intervention that is associated with it. On the other hand, given that current turns in IR are predominantly of a prescriptive and descriptive nature, this can lead to increased citations, invited talks, and other markers of scientific authority that come with being recognized as having made a new discovery.

The second dimension of IR's turns understood as an authority-enhancing linguistic practice, has been the adoption of extremely ambitious, at best, or rather inflated, at worst, language. One commonality among current prescriptive and to some extent descriptive turns in IR, has been their claim to unveil phenomena that are 'everywhere', 'omnipresent', or even 'more present now than ever', which are often 'ignored' or 'dismissed' by the wider discipline, be it emotions, pictures, sexuality, things, or practices. For example, Neta Crawford opened her contribution to the *International Theory* special forum on 'Emotions and World Politics' claiming that 'emotions are ubiquitous intersubjective elements of world politics'.<sup>84</sup> Salter similarly alerts us that: 'The international, the globe, the world is made up of things, of stuff, of objects, and not only of humans and their ideas'.<sup>85</sup>

Yet, turns do not just put forward disparate claims that a particular, pervasive, aspect of IR has been overlooked and should be taken into account. They further suggest that because that particular object of analysis constitutes a defining feature, if not even the most basic element, of international politics, its inclusion necessitates a complete re-appraisal of a series of IR's generally established axioms. Taking into account these ubiquitous phenomena, it is claimed, allows us to see IR in a completely new way, shattering the discipline's dominant assumptions and points of reference.

In Bleiker's own words for example, 'an appreciation of aesthetics offers us possibilities to re-think, re-view, re-hear and re-feel the political world we live in'.<sup>86</sup> In

<sup>84</sup>Crawford (2014, 535).

<sup>85</sup>Salter (2015, vii).

<sup>86</sup>Bleiker (2017, 260).

an earlier intervention, he similarly claimed that the aesthetic turn provides ‘an entirely different approach to the study of world politics’, which ‘reorients our very understanding of the political’.<sup>87</sup> At stake with the surge of interest in history in IR, McCourt argues, is the ‘nature of political knowledge itself’.<sup>88</sup> William Connolly presents new materialism as no less than a move away from ‘simultaneously some features of Augustinianism, neo-Kantianism, deconstruction, phenomenology, classical Marxism, and the linear sciences’.<sup>89</sup> Stressing the potential of the queer turn, Melanie Richter-Montpetit argues that it can ‘crack open for investigation fundamental dimensions of international politics that have hitherto been missed, misunderstood or trivialised’.<sup>90</sup> Adler and Pouliot insist that ‘a focus on international practices’ unlocks a better account of ‘power and security, trade and finance, strategy, institutions and organizations, resources, knowledge and discourse’.<sup>91</sup> Christian Bueger and Frank Gadinger proclaim, in a similar vein, that practice theory will transcend the discipline’s most persistent dichotomies, including ‘between agency and structure, micro and macro, subject and object, individual and society, mind and body or the ideational and the material’.<sup>92</sup> These impressive claims contribute to reinforcing the perception, already provided by the use of the turn term, that something truly major is being put forward that cannot be missed.

Even more radically, turns often seem bent on directly challenging the idea of IR as a self-conscious and self-contained discipline structured around a handful of grand theories or core concepts. This *vanguardist* spirit is clearly encapsulated by Bleiker as follows: ‘Twenty years ago, when I started working on my “Aesthetic Turn” essay [...] I wanted to break through disciplinary walls’.<sup>93</sup> Similarly, the historical turn in IR aims at showing how ‘assumptions of an eternal divide between history and social science melts away’, when we start to appreciate the extent to which these fields and enterprises are ‘co-implicated’.<sup>94</sup> Rather than simply proposing an exercise in borrowing or inter-disciplinary exchange, turns signal a desire to transcend disciplinary boundaries drawing upon wider trans-disciplinary movements seeking to apply a novel ‘vision’ regardless of social science subject matter.<sup>95</sup>

Rhetorically, the anatomy of a turn can thus be formalized as comprising the three following steps (where X can be any aspect of social reality):

<sup>87</sup>Bleiker (2009, 18, 19).

<sup>88</sup>McCourt (2012, 25).

<sup>89</sup>Connolly (2013, 399).

<sup>90</sup>Richter-Montpetit (2018, 220). Elsewhere, Richter-Montpetit and Weber (2017, 1) similarly argue that a queer approach brings new insights on a dazzlingly vast range of issues: ‘sovereignty, intervention, security and securitization, torture, terrorism and counter-insurgency, militaries and militarism, human rights and LGBT activism, immigration, regional and international integration, global health, transphobia, homophobia, development and International Financial Institutions, financial crises, homocolonialism, settler colonialism and anti-Blackness, homocapitalism, political/cultural formations, norms diffusion, political protest, and time and temporalities’.

<sup>91</sup>Adler and Pouliot (2011, 2).

<sup>92</sup>Bueger and Frank Gadinger (2014, 3).

<sup>93</sup>Bleiker (2017, 259); see also Moore and Shepherd (2010, 308).

<sup>94</sup>Lawson (2012, 213).

<sup>95</sup>Indeed IR is not the only field in the midst a turn frenzy, with fields such as science and technology studies experiencing a similar movement as Vasileva (2015) shows. We thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this point.

- (1) X is everywhere in or deeply constitutive of world politics;
- (2) But X has been completely ignored by IR and therefore the discipline needs a *turn* to X;
- (3) Yet, taking X into account fundamentally overturns IR's core axioms and theoretical points of reference, if not even putting into question the boundaries of the discipline as a whole.<sup>96</sup>

Such persistent calls to fundamentally alter, re-shape, and destabilize the discipline fall, we would argue, into the type of 'anti-mainstream' discourses identified in IR by Hamati-Ataya.<sup>97</sup> What is at stake is not only an intellectual effort to question the mainstream but more importantly the rhetorical display of a radical critical stance on a 'mainstream' diagnosed as flawed at its core. As Hamati-Ataya continues: 'typically, the narrative required to justify and legitimate anti-mainstream discourse is one of "crisis" [...]: there is something fundamentally wrong with the discipline that needs to "urgently" be addressed, something that undermines its very identity and vocation. The discipline is portrayed as fundamentally at odds with its object of study'.<sup>98</sup>

Proclaiming a turn in the way it is mostly done currently in IR is thus a linguistic practice that signals, in a powerful way, the claimant's defiance vis-à-vis, and radical rebuttal of, the field's vilified 'mainstream'. In so doing, the 'turnist' raises his/her authority within the critical milieu, where criticizing the *isms* is part of the doxa and a valued practice. Bistra Vasileva's analysis of the turn metaphor in science and technology studies highlights this implied anti-mainstream position across the various meanings the word turn can take when mobilized in an academic field.<sup>99</sup> Since turning denotes an axis or course of direction from which to depart, it implies 'the existence of a certain creature: a homogenous entity with a single central/focal point/axis around which all activity swirls', or 'a unique, coherent entity – a vehicle – undertaking a prime, singular shift while travelling a path or trajectory'.<sup>100</sup> Turning moves are therefore rhetorical attempts to challenge, through magnified claims, the supposedly coherent mainstream of the field and the social scholarly hierarchy that goes with it. We build on Ole Wæver to suggest that boundary-drawing claims such as these are more 'about who are to be included/excluded and who are more central than others', than about what IR should focus on.<sup>101</sup>

Overall, IR turns thus seem to belong to what Bourdieu names 'subversion strategies', which 'explicitly refuse the beaten tracks [...], challenging the very principles of old scientific order, creating a radical dichotomy, with no compromise, between

<sup>96</sup>We thank one anonymous reviewer for his/her suggestion we provide a more schematic formulation of this argument.

<sup>97</sup>Hamati-Ataya (2011, 2012).

<sup>98</sup>Hamati-Ataya (2012, 637). Bleiker (2017, 259), for example, explicitly positions the aesthetic turn against the 'mainstream', whereas Moore and Shepherd (2010, 308) proclaim that the practice turn has already begun to 'destabilise the disciplinary parameters of IR'.

<sup>99</sup>Vasileva (2015).

<sup>100</sup>Vasileva (2015, 455–56).

<sup>101</sup>Wæver (2016, 304).



two mutually exclusive systems'.<sup>102</sup> Yet, at the same time turns are also, and perhaps primarily, what the French sociologist conceptualizes as 'succession strategies',<sup>103</sup> that is strategies aiming at increasing one's social capital within a given field. That is because the very display of heterodoxy is what makes turns valued within a particular subfield of IR: its critical community. In parallel, increased authority in that subfield can lead even to broader recognition across the whole field. A dual process of social capital accumulation whose mechanisms we unpack in the next section.

### **Turning as a position-taking strategy**

Here, we use Bourdieu's conceptual toolbox further to explore how, by ostensibly calling to shake IR to the core, turns are a strategy that through apparent subversion, in reality simultaneously produce succession. That's because scholars proposing a turn rather than ending up turning the field on its head and occupying the position of the new disciplinary priesthood, largely acquire instead the role of the 'established heretic'.<sup>104</sup> Scholars successfully identified with calling and launching a turn, in other words, accrue the kind of social capital and scientific authority necessary to occupy a high/central position within IR's critical subfield, and subsequently to gain recognition in the whole field. We reach this conclusion by shifting the focus from rhetorical practices to placing these in the context of the structure of IR as a social field. This allows us to show that turning moves are not available to everyone and tend to be favoured by a specific type of academic.

A detour to Peter Kristensen's recent network visualization of the IR field is useful here.<sup>105</sup> His 'sociological autopsy' of IR, based on published articles and citations, clearly reveals a structure of the discipline solidly anchored in three major, central, and interconnected 'citation camps' corresponding to the realist, liberal institutionalist, and constructivist traditions, which still 'occupy a central role in the field'.<sup>106</sup> Through this methodology, Kristensen effectively shows that the discipline's canon of the major *isms* continue to be at the core of the discipline organizing and shaping the bulk of the theoretical discussion. What this visualization also reveals is the presence of a range of small theoretical or methodological communities, many of them commonly associated with the 'critical' tradition, that gravitate around this core, corresponding to tight-knit groups of scholars engaging with each other's work more than with the mainstream of the three major *isms*.<sup>107</sup> This observation validates Hamati-Ataya's claim that IR should not be 'envisaged as a single "field of force", like a homogenous set of concentric circles of "peripheries" centred on its American "core"', but rather as a conglomerate of 'different fields of forces'.<sup>108</sup> Yet, at the same time it clearly shows that these subfields are tied together in a broad network corresponding to an, arguably diverse, whole IR field.

<sup>102</sup>Bourdieu (1975, 30–31).

<sup>103</sup>Bourdieu (1975, 30).

<sup>104</sup>Bourdieu (1988, 105).

<sup>105</sup>Kristensen (2018).

<sup>106</sup>Kristensen (2018, 245). For a fuller understanding of our claims here, we invite the reader to examine the network graph displayed in Kristensen's paper.

<sup>107</sup>Not all these subfields are associated with the critical tradition, some are usually understood to be against it (e.g. positivist peace and conflict studies).

<sup>108</sup>Hamati-Ataya (2012, 635).

IR scholars, we therefore suggest, position themselves both at once in the larger field of the discipline of IR as well as within a particular subfield characterized by its own, more specific, norms and hierarchy. Such a diagnosis fits well with a Bourdieusian take on scientific disciplines. Bourdieu's theoretical writings do tend to depict scientific fields as structured by a simple oppositional binary, 'between, on the one hand, the "central" players, the orthodox, the continuers of normal science, and, on the other hand, the marginal, the heretics, the innovators, who are often situated at the boundaries of their discipline'.<sup>109</sup> Yet, as Charles Camic also notes, Bourdieu's more nuanced empirical work shows how networks of scholars at times coalesce both among the orthodox and the heterodox, reflecting mutually beneficial arrangements and cooperation efforts.<sup>110</sup> IR can thus be characterized by both an overarching orthodox (core)/heterodox (periphery) structure, as well as one constituted by a multiplicity of communities. In other words, IR can be understood as simultaneously a whole field tied together by a series of loosely common practices (e.g. attending ISA conventions, publishing in 'IR' journals) and doxic knowledge (e.g. the *isms*, the canonical scholars), and as an ensemble of subfields with their own, more particular practices and knowledge.

As Bourdieu explains, scholars' strategies are directly dependent on the structure of their field and their particular positions within it.<sup>111</sup> It is this structure which 'assigns to each scientist his or her strategies and scientific stances, [... which...] depend on the volume of capital possessed and therefore on the differential position within this structure'.<sup>112</sup> Similar to other strategies, scholars' decisions to opt for more or less subversive or successive moves can be explained by their respective positions in the field. Put simply, 'it is the field that assigns each agent his strategies, and the strategy of overturning the scientific order is no exception'.<sup>113</sup> As Camic, who draws on Bourdieu, notes there is a 'direct correspondence between an agent's field position – dominant vs dominated – and the same agent's basic intellectual stance – orthodox vs heterodox'.<sup>114</sup>

Bringing these insights back to our discussion helps shedding light on the fact that the turning move is not available or advisable to everyone and anyone seeking to accrue scientific authority. The evocative language of the linguistic turn along with the display of a radical anti-mainstream rhetoric, serve to evidence a scholar's commitment to the common knowledge and practices of the critical milieu and legitimize his/her attempt to position him/herself as a leader within his/her community. In other words, what scholars are doing by proposing a turn is seeking to establish their scientific authority within the critical research communities gravitating around the discipline's core. They do so by proving their commitment to the core 'identity', 'spirit', or 'ethos'<sup>115</sup> of one or several of these subfields, which includes to vehemently criticize the mainstream's alleged flaws, naivety, and

<sup>109</sup>Bourdieu (2001, 43).

<sup>110</sup>Camic (2011).

<sup>111</sup>Bourdieu (1975, 1991).

<sup>112</sup>Bourdieu (1991, 7, 9).

<sup>113</sup>Bourdieu (1975, 30).

<sup>114</sup>Camic (2011, 279).

<sup>115</sup>Bourdieu (1988, 56).

shortcomings in a heavily theoretical manner.<sup>116</sup> From a field perspective, such a move suits scholars with a very specific starting position and authority.

A closer look at the typical profile of ‘turnists’ helps to illustrate this point further. On the one hand, proposing a turn – especially prescriptive ones, much less so retrospective ones – is unlikely to be a strategically convenient move for already well-established scholars associated with the discipline’s leading theoretical paradigms or working at the world’s most prestigious institutions. Such scholars are more inclined, given their position in IR’s social structure, towards adopting what are explicitly succession strategies aimed at cementing their position at the core of the whole field.<sup>117</sup> It is not surprising therefore, that none of the abovementioned turns has been called from a top US department.

Yet, on the other hand, instructing a prescriptive turn or diagnosing a retrospective one already require some pre-existing field-relevant credibility and capital. Indeed claiming a turn does not simply potentially reinforce the claimant’s position in a certain hierarchy, establishing his/her ‘recognition of this new expertise as legitimate academic capital’<sup>118</sup>: for such rhetorical moves to be recognized as valid, they have to originate from a source that already possess at least some form of scientific authority. Truly marginal voices would simply not be considered legitimate enough to claim or diagnose a turn, let alone allowed through the various gatekeeping practices at play, such as selection for publication in well-known journals.<sup>119</sup> This is especially the case given the very ambitious, magnified, or inflated language – depending on how cynically one interprets this rhetoric – that characterizes prescriptive turns.

Bourdieu is right in observing that generally speaking it is ‘those least endowed with capital (who are often the newcomers, and therefore generally the youngest) [who] are inclined towards subversion strategies, the strategies of heresy’.<sup>120</sup>

<sup>116</sup>This general rule suffers from one exception, however. Although most turns generate traction within the critical milieu, a few interventions inspired by the practice turn seem to make headways within the constructivist pole of the mainstream, by deliberately attempting to operate a rejoinder or a re-vamping of the *ism* rather than to oppose it (e.g. McCourt 2016).

<sup>117</sup>In other words, our analysis does imply that rhetorical moves are similarly employed by scholars working within other intellectual communities, with the similar intent of carving out research space for a particular theory and accruing social capital for a particular individual. Indeed, as one anonymous reviewer pointed out, mainstream grand theorists have equally engaged in such strategies. Beyond the language of ‘turns’, for instance, the term ‘neo’ in paradigmatic IR discourse – as applied to *neorealism*, *neo-classical realism*, *neoliberal institutionalism*, and so on – may have had a comparable rhetorical function and career making potential for those scholars which have coined, popularized or been associated with these labels. Yet, as Bourdieu (1975, 39) himself remarked, the ‘neo rhetoric’, which ‘apes scientific cumulativeness by applying the typically academic procedure of “re-reading” to a work or set of works’, is a ‘paradigmatic scholastic operation of simple reproduction’ which further solidifies the field under the appearances of a revolution, and is thus favoured by scientists working in prestigious institutions, having a realistic prospect of reaching the very top level of the whole field.

<sup>118</sup>Hamati-Ataya (2012, 638).

<sup>119</sup>In this sense, one can posit that a series of proposed turns never gained traction – perhaps because they were voiced by insufficiently established scholars, perhaps because they inadequately obeyed the tacit codes of what theoretically sophisticated language should look like in IR, perhaps even because key ‘turnists’ themselves have reinforced the gatekeeping practices related to either ‘their own’ turn (or the ‘turning community’) or the very possibility of initiating new ones.

<sup>120</sup>Bourdieu (1993, 73).

However, we would add that for such heresy to be published, known, and recognized as valid interventions, it has to emanate from scholars who have already gained a favourable position at least within their subfield, through the skilful implementation of usual practices such as publishing in that subfield's esteemed journals, networking with other members of the subfield at conferences, citing key subfield work, and so on.

From this perspective, claims to turning are somehow paradoxical, reflecting the double stratification characterizing the wider IR field. On the one hand, they are in fact never completely at odds with the doxa and practices of the vilified mainstream, they are all sophisticated theoretical efforts that talk to the discipline *from within*, displaying evidence of obedience to all the formal norms that are necessary to establish scientific authority within the whole field of IR: using the appropriate, 'right' language and jargon, displaying academic credentials,<sup>121</sup> citing the works highly regarded by peers,<sup>122</sup> or including 'big names' in the paper's acknowledgements.<sup>123</sup> Rather than coming from truly marginal and peripheral voices, turns are thus authorized attempts to reach a higher standing in the social hierarchy of the entire field of IR.<sup>124</sup>

Yet, this occurs only indirectly as turnists actually seek to rise within subfields where criticizing the mainstream's shortcomings, through the use of anti-mainstream discourse, is a dominant norm. In the discipline of IR, prestige is generally gained through theoretical interventions rather than through sustained empirical work.<sup>125</sup> In a context where the major *isms* are now sophisticated and almost sealed intellectual constructs and communities with little room for new 'big names', any noteworthy novel theoretical positioning within IR can usefully be done by bringing in new objects or lenses of analysis and claiming that the ontological and epistemological implications of these inclusions are so deep that they invalidate or challenge the *isms* as they stand.<sup>126</sup> Claiming a turn, hence, constitutes a natural strategy for scholars already participating in the 'critical milieu' of the field who, by pursuing the status of 'established heretics', simultaneously enhance their position within this space and potentially solidify their position in the larger field of IR. In this respect, it is interesting to note that several scholars in this critical milieu have had important roles in claiming more than one turn.<sup>127</sup>

<sup>121</sup>Although these credentials will be different from those associated with the mainstream; for instance being affiliated with an institution known for its previous critical work (mostly to be found outside the USA).

<sup>122</sup>Although these references will be different from those associated with the mainstream; for instance, citing seminal critical work written in other disciplines (ideally not well known, to simultaneously signal oneself as one of the few readers of X or Y).

<sup>123</sup>Although here again these names will be different from those associated with the mainstream.

<sup>124</sup>In other words, successfully claiming a turn allows a scholar to become visible in Kristensen's (2018) aforementioned network.

<sup>125</sup>See also Wæver (2016, 308).

<sup>126</sup>This is not to say that novel theoretical interventions are not being made elsewhere. It is noteworthy how, for instance, a new wave of grand theoretical efforts put forward by influential scholars such as Adler (2019), Kratochwil (2018), and Wendt (2015) with high social capital inherited from previous interventions – mostly in this case connected to the establishment of Constructivism – have generally eschewed the language of turns.

<sup>127</sup>Campbell has been a leading figure in the linguistic turn first and then the visual turn, whereas Bleiker has spearheaded the aesthetic turn and made important contributions to the affective one too.

In this double position-taking move, academic journals play a key role, and have to be considered as significant players in the IR 'field of struggle'. More precisely, a turn is a potentially symbiotic win-win move for both scholars and journals. On the one hand, scholars benefit from having a leading journal publishing their turning injunction: it both validates the move and gives it visibility. On the other hand, and provided the turner's social capital is sufficient enough to guarantee some visibility to the paper, the journal can enhance its own position by being recognized as the outlet that 'launched a turn', 'where cutting-edge thinking occurs', or more specifically 'where critical IR takes place'.

*Millennium* and the *Review of International Studies*' special issues and forums have in this sense provided valuable platforms for these journals to cement their role and legitimacy as the vanguard implicated in defining the future of the field; as opposed to 'mainstream' publications such as *International Organization* or *International Security*, that supposedly only publish incremental modifications to the dominant paradigms. *International Theory*'s openness to the turns – which include the publication of a seminal forum on the emotions/affective turn and of Adler and Pouliot's major statement on the practice turn –<sup>128</sup> can be similarly seen as a wise strategy to quickly position the young journal (launched in 2009) as the place where radical theoretical innovations happen.

As already suggested, this positioning game also possesses a geographical character, which echoes the intellectual history and social structure of the discipline. As Hamati-Ataya among others notes, 'IR is neither an international discipline, nor a symmetrical one in terms of cultural production'.<sup>129</sup> The TRIP surveys provide ample evidence of geographical and cultural diversity in terms of which epistemologies and theories are favoured by scholars.<sup>130</sup> From this perspective, it appears that scholars based at 'alternative' powerhouses in Australia, Europe, or Canada have been the loudest voices in this space, not academics at Harvard's Belfer Center or Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School. In other words, turns have seldom been launched from a place usually associated with the prestige of the old IR establishment and its canonical *isms*, yet neither have they come from further afield, namely from outside the 'West' broadly construed. More than forty years after Stanley Hoffman's depiction of IR as an 'American social science'<sup>131</sup> and 20 years since Waever's sociological assessment of IR as a 'not so international discipline',<sup>132</sup> the diagnosis of a plural field, its absence of voices from developing countries, and its correlation with publications hierarchies and prestige remains relevant, even when considering seemingly iconoclast interventions.

Additionally, this localization of turns in Western but non-American powerhouses needs to be understood by attuning to social dynamics external to the field. Moving beyond sociological analyses of scientific fields that only look at their 'internal' dynamics of position-taking strategies, Bourdieu also highlighted the impact of the 'larger social space'<sup>133</sup> within which these fields operate, the

<sup>128</sup>See, respectively, International Theory (2014) and Adler and Pouliot (2011).

<sup>129</sup>Hamati-Ataya (2012, 633).

<sup>130</sup><https://trip.wm.edu/>.

<sup>131</sup>Hoffmann (1977).

<sup>132</sup>Waever (1998).

<sup>133</sup>Bourdieu (1994, 33).

‘social cosmos’ in which they are ‘embedded’.<sup>134</sup> Although this consideration is not foreign to already existing intellectual histories of the discipline,<sup>135</sup> it allows us to further explain the turns’ geography. Turns emerge in places that are both closely connected to the American core (starting with sharing the English language), but also ‘enjoy some autonomy because of local disciplinary traditions and independent academic institutions’ that make them ‘less subjected to this [American] “hegemony” than non-Western ones’.<sup>136</sup> In this regard, places that have kept (or seek to develop) strong local disciplinary traditions at the expense of a deepened connection to the debates of the American core – similar to France and, to some extent, Italy –<sup>137</sup> do not produce turns, as do places that lack these traditions and thus more comprehensively embrace (or are colonized by) dominant paradigms.

In sum, from the sociological perspective offered above, the recent proliferation of turns in IR, as well as its origins and claims, is hardly surprising. What seems counter-intuitive, however, is the kind of effects that the turns are having on the discipline’s development. Rather than potentially challenging the mainstream core of IR or pluralizing (at best) and fragmenting (at worst) the discipline as a whole, these effects are being felt for the most part within IR’s critical milieu. Multiple turns represent as many strong signals of criticality and claims that studying one particular object holds the key to oppose the mainstream, leading not only to the establishment of a range of new critical communities but also to increased competition and friction among them.

Especially, divisions appear to be emerging between, on the one hand, theorists still committed to the premises established during the third/fourth debate when, among others, IR imported the linguistic turn, and on the other hand theorists moving beyond language to focus instead on images, emotions, practices, things, temporality, and the like. Put differently, what is now occurring is that turns are reshaping the contours of critical IR in a way that inevitably undermines the hegemony of discourse theorists. So successful has been this rhetorical practice in gaining scientific authority and opening up space for particular scholars and their research programmes, that we are witnessing discourse theorists starting to openly question the turns’ novelty or political/critical value.<sup>138</sup> The result is that the potentially destabilizing effects of the turns are more likely to be felt not on the vilified mainstream, but paradoxically among those who built their careers on attacking it.

## Conclusion

This paper addresses emerging discussions reflecting upon the discipline’s recent growing urge to produce and claim turns.<sup>139</sup> Our aim has been to interrogate

<sup>134</sup>Bourdieu (1990b, 298).

<sup>135</sup>To cite only two prominent examples, both Walt (1991) and Baldwin (1995) have shown how the vitality and centrality of particular approaches to IR during the Cold War was decisively influenced by a range of socio-political factors.

<sup>136</sup>Hamati-Ataya (2012, 634).

<sup>137</sup>On the cases of France and Italy see, respectively, Battistella (2013) and Lucarelli and Menotti (2002).

<sup>138</sup>These were, for instance, important threads at the ISA 2019 panel ‘Whither the Political in All These Turns?’ as well as, partly, in the ISA 2017 roundtable ‘What’s Left of The Linguistic Turn’.

<sup>139</sup>McCourt (2016).

this puzzling phenomenon, rather than evaluate – and thus praise or critique – the substantive content of any one or more particular turn. We adopted a Bourdieusian-inspired sociology of science approach whereby the discipline of IR does not simply appear as an intellectual enterprise driven by dispassionate search for knowledge unanchored to power dynamics, but as a social field wherein scholars, but also academic journals, engage in scientific credibility-enhancing strategies determined by their initial position and the overall structure of the field.

This lens led us to question the extent to which turns are likely to effectively be the radical critiques of and alternatives to the paradigmatic and post-paradigmatic mainstream of IR which at first sight they present themselves to be. We highlighted instead how calls for a particular ‘turn’ work perhaps more as succession rather than subversive strategies that – by evoking the authority of the original linguistic turn, claiming to have made new discoveries, and suggesting these radically upend existing philosophical, epistemological, and ontological conventions – potentially enhance the social capital of an author (or journal), within the complex milieu of critical approaches. Turns are rhetorical displays of criticality in practice that help secure a scholar’s status as an ‘established heretic’ in the subfield of critical IR, and along the way indirectly in the whole field. In other words, what turns do is not so much challenge and fragment the mainstream but advance a particular view of what anti- and non-mainstream IR is supposed to be about and concerned with.

With the proliferation of turns, what is therefore at stake – quite paradoxically – is not the stability and unity of the discipline’s canon, but the structure and identity of its critical scholarship. Wherever the discipline is headed, as some have been starting to ponder with renewed frequency,<sup>140</sup> the turns are thus unlikely to derail what is an otherwise still rather steady mainstream IR wagon. What they appear to be doing however, we argue, is two things at once. On the one hand, they are fruitfully multiplying the roads that scholars willing to work outside of the disciplinary core can take to critically interrogate the field and explore generally overlooked aspects of world politics. On the other hand, though, they are generating new fault lines within the discipline’s critical subfield, which over the past decades broadly coalesced around the premises laid down as IR imported its first linguistic turn. Reaping the fruits of the former path, whereas avoiding the risks of the latter one, seems to us what critical scholars should be especially mindful of at the present juncture.

**Acknowledgements.** We are particularly indebted to Thierry Balzacq for his initial thoughts on the project at the ISA Convention in Baltimore (February 2017). A first full draft of the paper was presented at the University of Exeter’s Centre for Advanced International Studies (CAIS) Brownbag Seminars (11 October 2017) – we are grateful to our colleagues David Blagden, Irene Fernandez-Molina, John Heathershaw, Beverley Loke, Klejda Mulaj, Patrick Porter, and Alex Prichard for their detailed comments and feedback at this occasion. We thank the sustained involvement of *IT*’s editors and anonymous reviewers, whose detailed comments and suggestions greatly improved the paper.

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<sup>140</sup>Colgan (2016), Kristensen (2018).



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