

Theorising *praxis* and practice(s). Notes on Silviya Lechner's and Mervyn Frost's *Practice Theory and International Relations*

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Abstract: Silviya Lechner's and Mervyn Frost's book *Practice Theory and International Relations* offers a new approach to theorise international relations in terms of 'practices'. It is a welcome contribution to an intensifying debate about 'praxis', 'practice' and 'practices' because Lechner and Frost actually engage key authors of praxis, such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, who, in IR, have often only been referenced in passing. While the rediscovery of Wittgenstein as praxis theorist is welcome, the reading of his approach to praxis is irritating because 'internalism' and 'descriptivism' – two concepts which Lechner and Frost highlight as central in both Wittgenstein's work and their new practice theory – are interpreted in ways which are difficult to reconcile with Wittgenstein's late philosophy. This critique offers a different reading of Wittgenstein's approach to praxis and argues that such an alternative reading opens up an understanding of praxis which, if adopted more widely, would also free IR theorising from self-imposed strictures.

Keywords: practice theory; praxis; Wittgenstein; descriptivism; ordinary language philosophy

*The unspeakable diversity of all the everyday language games
does not enter our consciousness,*

because the clothing of our language makes them all alike.

The New (Spontaneous, 'Specific') is always a language-game.

Ludwig Wittgenstein¹

¹ Wittgenstein 2009 (1953), *Philosophy of Psychology* (henceforth PP) § 335; fragment xi, at 236), my translation; the German original reads as follows: 'Die unsägliche Verschiedenheit aller der tagtäglichen Sprachspiele kommt uns nicht zum Bewußtsein, weil die Kleider unserer Sprache alles gleichmachen. Das Neue (Spontane, "Spezifische") ist immer ein Sprachspiel.' The English translation provided in Wittgenstein 2009 (1953) PP, xi, 236^e is somewhat different.

I am not saying: if such-and-such facts of nature were different, people would have different concepts (in the sense of a hypothesis). Rather: if anyone believes that certain concepts are absolutely the correct ones, and that having different ones would mean not realising something that we realise – then let him imagine certain very general facts of nature to be different from what we are used to, and the formation of concepts different from the usual ones will become intelligible to him.

Ludwig Wittgenstein²

Does it make sense to theorise international relations (or global politics) in terms of 'practices' and, if so, what does it mean to speak of 'practices', i.e. how would one want to conceptualise 'practices' and approach studying them? These questions lie at the core of Silviya Lechner's and Mervyn Frost's book *Practice Theory and International Relations* (henceforth referred to as *PT*). It is a most welcome contribution to an intensifying and broadening debate about 'praxis', 'practice' and 'practices' in the social sciences more generally and in IR specifically.³ It is welcome from this reader's angle in particular because Lechner and Frost actually engage key authors of *praxis*, such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, who, in IR, have often only been referenced in passing even though their central status in any serious discussion of *praxis* and social practices has been acknowledged early on (and often, if equally briefly, ever since).⁴ *Practice Theory and International Relations* is an important contribution to IR debates because it more systematically develops what the authors call an 'internalist' perspective on studying practices via a 'descriptivist' approach.

While I am very sympathetic vis-à-vis (and was initially even enthusiastic about) the emphasis on Wittgenstein and a form of social science which highlights 'internalism' (in contrast to 'externalism', *PT* 27–8) and 'descriptivism' (in contrast to prescriptivism, *PT* 10), I have been increasingly struggling with the actual interpretation (or usage) of all three in the course of the authors' development of their argument. 'Struggling' here means that I found it increasingly difficult to understand *and* accept the vocabulary Lechner and Frost are using (or introducing) in their book in order to theorise practices anew. Two dimensions of this increasing struggle are worth highlighting.

² Wittgenstein 2009 (1953) PP, § 366, xii.

³ For recent overviews see Bueger 2017 and Cornut 2017; the most thorough and broad-based theorisation of 'praxis' is provided in Kratochwil 2018.

⁴ See Neumann 2002 whose article is often taken to be the starting point of 'the practice turn' in IR: 'Concerning the practice turn overall, the work of the early pragmatists and of Wittgenstein and Wittgensteinians stand out as particularly relevant' (Neumann 2002: 632). He then referenced an edition of selected writings of Charles Sanders Peirce as the sole source for 'the early pragmatists' and quoted Harry Collins according to whom 'Wittgenstein is the philosopher to whom nearly all theorists of practice defer' (Neumann 2002: 632 quoting Collins 2005 (2001): 115). For works engaging Wittgenstein in a practice (or otherwise IR) context see also Gadinger 2017 and Grimmel and Hellmann 2019.

First, my own reading of Wittgenstein in general, and of his take at *praxis*⁵ in particular, leads me to think quite differently of *praxis* and ‘practices’ – and I would also claim that my Wittgensteinian alternative conceptualisation is closer to *ordinary uses* of the terms in both ordinary language *and* established scholarly language games about practice and practices in IR. To be sure: ‘ordinary’ uses are not necessarily *superior* uses – and scholarship is often about teaching/training and enticing us to acquire a new vocabulary and speak differently in order to see (and *act* in) the world differently (Rorty 1989: 5–7). However, with Wittgenstein I would claim that there might be good reasons why particular *habits of speaking* about ‘practice’ and ‘practices’ have sunk in which we should, at a minimum, acknowledge and respect, and which lead us *not* to use them *synonymously* with the concept of ‘institution(s)’, as the authors do.⁶ One reason not to change established language games hastily is that new ways of speaking about ‘practice’ and ‘practices’ should *connect* with old ways, either in order to entice speakers to adopt the new way of speaking via Kuhnian ‘language learning’ or to at least encourage dialogue.⁷ Moreover, to change a language game implies that changes in one concept reverberate with a supporting net of additional concepts. This is what Donald Davidson calls the ‘holism of the mental’ – meaning that to have a concept (say, of ‘practice(s)’) implies that one has to have *many other related concepts* (Davidson 2001: 123–7 and Davidson 2004: 3–18 and 135–50). Therefore, in order to be meaningful (i.e. *resonate* with potential interpreters of our way of speaking) a concept ought to fit within established ways of speaking or be refitted with *novel* ways of actually acquiring a ‘new vocabulary’.⁸

⁵ I am using Wittgenstein’s German term ‘Praxis’ in order to signal early on that there is a significant *conceptual* difference (at least in my reading of Wittgenstein) between his understanding of ‘Praxis’ as *acting here and now* and ‘practice’ or ‘practices’ as *a typical way (or typical ways) of acting* in comparable situations. The latter are called ‘Praktik’ and ‘Praktiken’ in German or ‘Handlungsweise(n)’, Wittgenstein’s preferred words which are usually translated as a ‘course(s)’ or ‘kind(s) of action’ (for Wittgenstein’s uses of ‘Praxis’ and ‘Handlungsweise(n)’ see Wittgenstein 2009 (1953) *Philosophical Investigations* (henceforth PI) §§ 7, 51, 54, 197, 201, 202, 206, 420, 489). Those conversant with the German language might also want to consult the etymological sources of ‘Praktik’ (or ‘Practik’) and ‘Praxis’ in ‘Deutsches Wörterbuch der Gebrüder Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm’ at: <http://woerterbuchnetz.de/cgi-bin/WBNetz/wbgui_py?sigle=DWB&lemid=GP06943&hitlist=&patternlist=&mode=Gliederung&lemid=GP07157#XGP07157>.

⁶ ‘(A) practice (*practices*, in the plural) is not a type of action but an institution which constitutes a meaningful framework for interaction’ (PT 3, emphasis in original).

⁷ On the difference between the notions of ‘incommensurability’ and ‘language learning’ in Thomas Kuhn’s work see Hellmann 2017.

⁸ On Rorty’s notion of ‘vocabularies as wholes’ see Rorty 1989: Ch 1; see also Brandom 2000: 167–71 and Rorty 2000: 187–9.

Lechner and Frost are quite aware of these requirements since their whole book can be read as an invitation to switch to such a 'new vocabulary'. However, I am not convinced (yet), whether potential gains in switching to the new vocabulary (or 'theory') on offer (i.e. the focus on macro-practices as institutions) will actually compensate for major losses which I see mainly in a fairly rigid and unnecessary denigration of other ways of speaking about (or theorising) 'praxis', 'practice' or 'practices' which link more easily with ordinary and established scholarly use.⁹ More specifically I cannot yet see the advantage of eliminating the close link between (of course: a much fuller, i.e. pragmatist, notion of) 'action' on the one hand and practice(s) on the other because this severs (or, at least, significantly weakens) the critical link between agency and social responsibility.

In response to such a criticism of their position Lechner and Frost might refer to sentences like the following:

The only *agency* that *undertook the responsibility* to install an institutional regime [during the global banking crisis 2008, GH] that will prevent financial crises spurred by private speculation in the future *was the mature society of states*. What bears emphasis in this connection is that *the society of states is able to counteract the excesses of powerful private actors* in global civil society because it is a kind of public authority governed by concerns with the common good. (PT 171, emphasis added)

From my Wittgensteinian angle it sounds quite odd (or *extra-ordinary*), however, to conceptualise 'the society of states' in 'agency' terms and associate 'responsibilities' with it, especially when 'deliberation' and 'intentionality' (but not necessarily purposiveness) in the sense of pursuing a plan ('do something') are explicitly said to be associated with all 'common practices' (PT 202). In my ears this sounds like a 'nonsensical combination of words' – to use a Wittgensteinian formula (Wittgenstein 2009 (1953) PI § 512) – because the practice(s) vocabularies I am familiar with¹⁰ would not combine the equivalent of an 'institution' (such as the 'society of states') with deliberateness or intentionality as suggested by Lechner

⁹ Although the authors emphasise that '(i)t is quite common to think that the term "practice" refers to *action* (a doing that has an originator or "agent") and that "practices" represent different types of action' they interpret this to be 'a grave misconception' (PT 3, emphasis in original). In other words, and quite surprisingly from a Wittgensteinian point of view, 'ordinary language' in daily practices and/or scholarly discussion is considered to be somehow *deficient*.

¹⁰ Here I would include the 'practice turn' literatures Lechner and Frost are critiquing in Chapter 2, but also the pragmatist or 'constructivist' IR literatures, often associated with *praxis* scholarship; see Kratochwil 2018 and the special issue on 'Third Generation' constructivist scholarship in the *European Review of International Studies* (2016) esp. Kessler and Steele.

and Frost. Now, the full quote from Wittgenstein just referred to actually allows for ‘nonsensical combinations of words’ (in contrast to ‘nonsensical imagining’)¹¹ in the same way as the second introductory Wittgenstein quote above rejects the view that ‘certain concepts are absolutely the correct ones’. In other words, Lechner and Frost certainly ought to be listened to carefully when they suggest an unfamiliar new way of theorising ‘practices’. However, it ought to become clear (or at least clearer as it is for me at this point) what internationally relevant practices we may *grasp better* if we start to theorise what we have thus far called ‘institutions’ as ‘practices’ henceforth, especially when the introduction of this new vocabulary is accompanied with an almost wholesale rejection of alternative ways of conceptualising ‘practice(s)’.

Second, I am struggling with the interpretation of Wittgenstein, internalism and descriptivism offered because it combines very *different* conceptual vocabularies. This relates in particular to Wittgenstein, Oakeshott and Hegel which I am not equally familiar with. However, I find it difficult to combine these conceptual vocabularies as suggested in PT based on my (partly limited) understanding of the work of all three referenced authors. For instance, in my reading of Wittgenstein, especially as far as his insistence is concerned that we should not waste too much time on definitions or try to legislate particular ways of speaking when we observe ‘praxis’ and practices, certain ways of writing about ‘misconceived’ (or ‘proper’) notions of practice in PT¹² strike me as utterly un-Wittgensteinian – besides being not particularly constructive in advancing dialogue about possible *different* and equally *meaningful* (or at least sensible) ways of theorising practice(s).

In particular, I find it very hard to agree with Lechner’s and Frost’s claimed ‘agree(ment) with Wittgenstein and Oakeshott that the *proper task of the theorist qua theorist* is to elucidate *the practices* under investigation by *providing coherent and accurate descriptions*’ (PT 30, italics added). This claim strikes me in many ways as the opposite of what Wittgenstein was arguing for. Whereas Lechner and Frost seem to be largely in agreement with Wittgenstein’s scathing criticism of a type of ‘craving for generality’ (Wittgenstein 1958: 16–20) he associated with what we have come to call the ‘social sciences’, their understanding of ‘theorising’ (or the synonymously used word ‘philosophising’) as ‘a search for conceptual synthesis over and above a taxonomy of practices’ is at odds with the later

¹¹ ‘It looks as if one could say: “Word-language allows of nonsensical combinations of words, but the language of imagining does not allow us to imagine anything nonsensical”.’ (Wittgenstein 2009 (1953) PI § 512).

¹² Cf. PT, limited to the ‘Introduction’: 3, 11, 17–18, 24, 28, 30.

Wittgenstein's criticism that strange 'philosophical problems' only arise 'when language goes on holiday'.¹³ In the reading of most Wittgenstein scholars of his late work¹⁴ this view marks a clear distancing from the *Tractatus* phase's emphasis on 'logic' and 'definitions', i.e. the *early* Wittgenstein. Lechner and Frost rely on when they approvingly quote his take at philosophy and 'theory' as aiming 'at the logical clarification of thoughts' (PT 4). For good reasons the late Wittgenstein was quite critical of his early views and most likely would have characterised Lechner's and Frost's depiction of Oakeshott's understanding of theorising as being 'directed at the understanding of a not-yet-understood identity' (PT 4) as a sentence 'produc(ing) in us mental cramp' because a 'substantive' (identity) makes us look for a 'substance' or 'a thing that corresponds to it'.¹⁵

Moreover, Lechner's and Frost's claim that Wittgenstein urges us to provide 'coherent and accurate descriptions' insinuates a correspondence theory of truth which (at least) the late Wittgenstein was fundamentally opposed to. He repeatedly criticised (and even mocked) the fixation of much of philosophy on 'clarity' or 'exactness' (even 'ideal exactness' (Wittgenstein 2009 (1953) PI § 88)).¹⁶ In this sense he probably would also have been highly critical of the huge effort Lechner and Frost invest in developing their 'theory' with extended definitional elaborations and a critique of alternative ways of theorising or conceptualising practice(s) as 'defective', 'too crude' or 'misconstrued' (e.g. PT 63, 82, 91). Rather than legislating new vocabularies the later Wittgenstein's 'descriptivism' boils down to a strong plea for the description of 'language games'

¹³ Wittgenstein 2009 (1953) PI § 38. The original German reads: '(D)ie philosophischen Probleme entstehen, wenn die Sprache *feiert*', both emphases in the original. A somewhat different and 'more literal' translation would be that philosophical problems arise 'when language *celebrates*'.

¹⁴ Cf. Glock 1996; Stern 2004; Ahmed 2010; McGinn 2013; Fox 2014; Grève and Mácha 2016; Glock and Hyman 2017, esp. Parts IV and VI–VIII.

¹⁵ 'What is the meaning of a word? Let us attack this question by asking, first, what is an explanation of the meaning of a word; what does the explanation of a word look like? The way this question helps us is analogous to the way the question 'how do we measure a length?' helps us to understand the problem 'What is length?' The questions 'What is length?', 'What is meaning?', 'What is the number one? etc., produce in us a mental cramp. We feel that we can't point to anything in reply to them and yet ought to point to something. (We are up against one of the great sources of philosophical bewilderment: a substantive makes us look for a thing that corresponds to it.)' Wittgenstein 1965: 1. The phrase 'We try to find a substance for a substantive' replaces 'a substantive makes us look for a thing that corresponds to it' from Wittgenstein (1965: 1) in a manuscript archived in the so-called 'Rose Rand Papers' (Wittgenstein (n. d.) 1).

¹⁶ Wittgenstein 2009 (1953) PI § 133 (emphasis in original): 'We don't want to refine or complete the system of rules for the use of our words in unheard-of ways. For the clarity that we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear.'

(or ‘forms of life’) as ‘proto-phenomena’.¹⁷ This is particularly so when we think about what it may mean to ‘describe’ (or ‘theorise’) praxis and practice(s). Here Wittgenstein’s ‘anthropological’ observations (as manifested in his critique of Frazer’s ‘The Golden Bough’ (Wittgenstein and Rhees 1967)) – are relevant because the analogy between observing ‘strange’ (foreign) cultures can productively be compared in analogous fashion with the observation and description of ‘international practices’.¹⁸ In other words, his descriptivism is a plea for the *description of descriptions*¹⁹ which has no place for notions of ‘true’ or ‘truth’ in combination with ‘description’ (e.g. PT 24, 43–4) and which contrasts starkly with Lechner’s and Frost’s argument in favour of ‘normative descriptivism’ (PT 184–5).

Does such a critique really matter? Why should IR scholars care about very different readings of a dead philosopher when one wants to theorise (international) praxis and practices anew? My argument is that (the late) Wittgenstein is indeed an extremely helpful source to theorise (international) praxis and practices anew because he sensitises us for *observing praxis carefully* and *self-critically* and for rejecting the ‘pneumatic conception of thinking’ which somehow associates something more ‘concrete’ or ‘substantive’ ‘behind’ our linguistic signs. This is also why Wittgenstein insisted ‘that our considerations must not be scientific ones’ and that

we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. All *explanation* must disappear, and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light – that is to say, its purpose – from the philosophical problems. These are, of course, not empirical problems; but they are solved through an insight into the workings of our language, and that in such a way that these workings are recognised – *despite* an urge to misunderstand them. The problems are solved, not by coming up with new discoveries, but by assembling what we have long been familiar with. (Wittgenstein 2009 (1953) PI § 109; emphases in original)²⁰

Wittgenstein finds ‘theories’ (as they are practised in the natural sciences) absolutely misplaced in understanding praxis and practices because the very equation of social action and natural facts fails to grasp that language as our key tool for relating to and making sense of ‘the world’

¹⁷ Wittgenstein 2009 (1953) PI § 654 (emphasis in original): ‘Our mistake is to look for an explanation where we ought to regard the facts as “proto-phenomena”. That is, where we ought to say: *this is the language-game that is being played.*’

¹⁸ Brusotti 2018; Albinus *et al.* 2016

¹⁹ Gruender 1962; Gert 1997.

²⁰ On Wittgenstein’s rejection of this ‘pneumatic conception of thought’ see Schulte 2006 and McGuinness 2005: 8–10.

is not 'picturing', but constituting 'reality'.²¹ Because this is so we are, in *understanding* what motivates social action, indeed dependent on practising a form of 'internalism' with regard to what (or whom) we conceptualise as actor or agent (in contrast to 'externalism'). Practising social science has to take into account, and reflect the fundamental difference between, *praxis* which indeed makes up 'a meaningful whole' (PT 15) to the agent *here and now* on the one hand, and an observer, on the other hand, who tries to make sense of such a meaningful whole via some form of description or explanation which, by necessity, has to reconstruct this meaningful whole 'from the outside'. This does not mean that there is no difference between what Lechner and Frost, correctly in my view, call the significant difference between externalist and internalist accounts of *praxis*. Yet, in my reading of Wittgenstein the type of 'internalist' account he values would be one which looks at phenomena as 'proto-phenomena' – i.e. that he would precisely *not* claim that 'we are searching not just for *any* set of descriptions but for *appropriate* ones' (PT 24, emphasis added) because in his view we lack any measure which might enable us to establish 'appropriateness'. After all, in encountering fellow human beings we ought to approach them with 'an ethnological way of looking' rather than assimilating an observed *praxis* of others to practices we are used to.²²

In this sense a 'non-pneumatic' conception of thinking lets us look at our uses of language as very individual ways of coping in the world. Language (or, for that matter, the vocabularies or theories we use) don't *represent* anything 'out there' in the world (cf. Rorty 1992 (1967): 373 and Rorty 1991: 1 on 'anti-representationalism'). Rather it enables us in our daily *praxis* to *cope with* the world. This world does not 'speak' to us or suggest a vocabulary it wants to be described in (e.g. a 'society of states' or 'global rights', cf. Rorty 1989). Rather, we as humans are inventing such (necessarily and essentially *contested*) descriptions about this world and the *praxis* and practice(s) we observe. Whether these descriptions are 'true' or not does not matter, because 'truth' is a nonsensical concept combined with 'description'. What matters is whether these descriptions resonate and/ or are acknowledged by others in terms of their willingness to *act* (pragmatism's maxim that 'beliefs are rules for action'). In this sense

²¹ On Wittgenstein's evolving view on the 'picture theory' of language between his early and his late work see Glock 2017.

²² 'Already the idea of explaining the practice – say the killing of the priest king – seems to me wrong-headed. All that Frazer does is to make the practice plausible to those who think like him. It is very strange to present all these practices, in the end, so to speak, as foolishness.' Wittgenstein 2018 (1967): 29 (the German original is available in Wittgenstein and Rhees 1967: 234–5. On Wittgenstein's 'ethnological way of looking' see Brusotti 2014 and 2018.

‘knowledge’ is, in the end, always ‘based on acknowledgement’ (Wittgenstein 1969: § 378). This also means that rule-following in a (late) Wittgensteinian understanding is *praxis*, not ‘practice’ (‘Praktik’ or ‘Handlungsweise’)²³ in the insinuated sense of patterned or habitual action. It is precisely because there is indeed an ‘endless variety of social practices’ (PT 23) why any ‘theory’ that seems to claim (almost) all-encompassing validity should be very careful to limit the notion of ‘practice(s)’ to a specific set of practices as institutions.

Describing *international praxis*, then, would focus on both agency/action and interaction – i.e. *practices* such as waging war; conducting foreign policy; negotiating, signing and ratifying treaties; or deterring with nuclear weapons. However, it would obviously also focus on ‘single cases’ – i.e. the *praxis* of the current Syrian war and Iranian, Israeli or Russian strategising; the conduct of German foreign policy at a time when the EU is under increasing stress; the negotiation, signing and ratification of BREXIT; or the revision of NATO’s deterrent posture in the light of the collapse of the INF treaty – just to name a few contemporary problems of international *praxis* we ought to be concerned with. In other words, rather than inflating the ‘generalising’ aspect of practice theory, Wittgensteinian descriptivism would be open to the observation (and/or linguistic invention) of ‘patterned’ practice(s) as much as it would appreciate *praxis* ‘proto-phenomena’. Such an understanding of *international praxis theory* would be built around what we ordinarily conceptualise as ‘agency’ based on ‘intentionality’ and ‘purposiveness’. However, given that international *praxis* is *social* action (different from the ‘simple actions’ or ‘doings’ such as walking etc. which Lechner and Frost are distinguishing) this understanding would also appreciate the dimensions of situatedness and interaction of *praxis*. Nothing more is needed in order to understand *international praxis* – and all of that can also be realised in terms of sense making via social inquiry.

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²³ See fn 5.

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