RESEARCH ARTICLE

Turning towards practices: on the common ground of international relations and European studies

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Abstract
The so-called practice turn in International Relations (IR) has established a new paradigm that puts practitioners’ quotidian doings front and centre of IR theorizing. It is proving to be an influential development also for area studies (AS) that share much of IR’s scholarship and objects of study. This is certainly the case for European studies (ES) where the works of International Practice Theory (IPT) scholars has greatly contributed to raise attention to situated, mundane, and everyday practices of EU institutions. This article reviews the contribution of IPT scholars to ES to assess the added value of this research agenda and its potential to become a ‘trading zone’ where IR and ES/AS scholars can advance understanding of how the local and the global connect. It also identifies two challenges that have not been adequately addressed in the extant literature: (1) finding ways to theorize and empirically observe the transition from the level of situated practices to EU-wide doings (generalization challenge); and (2) assessing the exact role of interaction in structuring and transforming both the global and the local (challenge of relationism). The article ends by calling for a global practice theory as a way to tackle these two challenges.

Keywords: European Union; international relations; political theory

Introduction
International Relations (IR) scholars operate in an academic environment deeply affected by a culture of fields and subfields where drawing boundaries and setting hierarchies of values is often more important than acknowledging common histories, trajectories, and synergies (Bell, 2009; Fierke and Jabri, 2019). As the Special Issue tries to show, this is especially problematic when it comes to the boundaries and hierarchies set up between IR and area studies (AS) (D’Amato et al., 2022). In fact, competing disciplinary politics within IR and AS have ensured the continuous reproduction of Western and American dominance of IR, favoured IR scholars over AS specialists, and constrained the space of interaction between the two (Acharya, 2014; Bell, 2009; Chamlian, 2019; Fawcett et al., 2020; Köllner et al., 2018; Katzenstein, 2002; Teti, 2007). This, in turn, has hindered our ability to conceptualize the relationship between the local and the global (Acharya, 2014; Wiener, 2018; Aris 2021) and therefore to best understand the challenges of our contemporary interconnected world (Chan et al., 2001; Fierke and Jabri, 2019).

In this article, I focus on the common history and developments of IR and European studies (ES)¹ to emphasize the importance of interdisciplinary conversations and question the utility of

¹In this article I use the term 'European Studies' as 'a catch-all name for the study of EU integration, the institutions of the EU, and the public policy domains with which the EU is closely associated: agriculture, regional policy, the single market and so on, and indeed all things European' (Rumford, 2009). However, I unknowledge that the core of my discussion will focus on the specific interconnectedness and cross-fertilization between IR and what is also often called 'EU Studies' (EUS) (Manners
boundaries and hierarchies between IR and ES – and more in general between IR and AS. In particular, I draw attention on the latest cross-fertilization between IR and ES, which has been sparked by a group of scholars that have called for a practice turn in IR and established what it is known as International Practice Theory (IPT) (Adler and Pouliot, 2011a, 2011b; Adler-Nissen, 2016; Bueger and Gadinger, 2018b).

Focusing on IPT is timely, due to its increasing popularity and influence over IR research agendas and methods (Bueger and Gadinger, 2018b: 3). Even if practices ‘have long been a prime object of analysis in IR’ (Adler and Pouliot, 2011a: 1) and to some scholars ‘practices of one kind or another are what scholars of international relations always have studied’ (Ringmar, 2014: 2), it took longer to the family of theoretical accounts normally known as practice theory to enter IR theoretical debates (Bueger and Gadinger, 2018b). These accounts differ greatly with regards to the way they understand and study ‘practice’ but have something fundamental in common: they are united by the proposition that practice is the basic ordering medium in social life and the site where meaning is established (Schatzki, 1997: 284). From an ontological point of view, IPT sees ‘international practices’, which are understood as embodied, shared, and patterned actions in social context (Leander, 2008; Cornut, 2017), as ‘the stuff that drives the world and makes it “hang together”’ (Bueger and Gadinger, 2015: 449). In terms of research strategy and methods, it implies a shift towards the study of the mundane everyday practices of diplomats, international governmental and non-governmental officials, legal experts, etc. and the use of ethnographic methods. These ontological and methodological moves have led IPT scholars to claim a disciplinary turn (Adler and Pouliot, 2011a, 2011b; Bueger and Gadinger, 2015, 2018b; Cornut, 2017).

While criticisms of IPT scholarship have been neither rare nor light (see, e.g. Epstein, 2013b; Frost and Lechner, 2016; Ringmar, 2016; Ralph and Gifkins, 2017; Epstein and Wæver, forthcoming), in this article I assess the specific potential of IPT to become a bridge between IR and AS. I take IPT’s rendering of EU politics as a point of departure and discuss the possibility for IPT to work as a ‘trading zone’ (Bueger and Gadinger, 2018b) where IR and ES/AS can converge to make sense of the interplay of the local and the global. In this context, I argue that while IPT scholars have fruitfully challenged traditional assumptions and distinctions of ‘levels of analysis’ (Bueger and Gadinger, 2018b: 2) that characterize both rationalist and constructivists approaches to IR and ES, more theoretical and empirical work is needed to make sense of the co-existence of local and global practices.

As I am myself conducting research that draws heavily on IPT scholarship and thinking tools, this criticism is advanced as an internal and hopefully constructive critique. In fact, it is what I learnt in the course of fieldwork I have conducted in Brussels and remotely since February 2020 to research EU’s practices of ‘human protection’ (Bellamy, 2016), which made me both convinced of IPT’s potential to become a trading zone between IR and AS and painfully aware of the challenges ahead. Thus, the key arguments presented in this article want to be conversation openers to engage the IPT community in what I feel is a much-needed discussion.

In the following, I first examine the common history and development of IR and ES to demonstrate that the rise of social constructivism has created a strong common ground between the two. Second, I review some of the key contributions of IPT scholars to flag how they can be understood as being at the same time a product of and a challenge to such a common ground. In this context, I assess the strengths of these contributions and I explain how they build new bridges between IR and ES. Third, I reflect on two interrelated problems pertaining current formulations and applications of IPT to the case of the EU to demonstrate that some more clarity and reflectivity about theoretical and empirical choices is needed to make IPT up to the task of connecting the local and the global in novel and fruitful ways. Finally, I build
on Fierke and Jabri’s conceptualization of ‘global conversations’ (Fierke and Jabri, 2019) to call for a global practice theory (GPT) that could take us beyond those disciplinary pecking orders that separate IR from AS and hinder our ability to appreciate the interconnectedness of the local with the global.

**A tale of one, two, or more disciplines?**

How IR and ES became separate disciplines is an object of contention (Rosamond, 2007), not only because of diverging readings of the relevant disciplinary histories but also because of limitations that are intrinsic to disciplinary history writing, which requires a difficult reconstruction of both ‘knowledge-practices’ and ‘knowledge-complexes’ and how they interact (Bell, 2009). Moreover, as disciplinary divides are produced and productive of academic knowledge institutionalization and socialization processes, they and their historiographies are all but stable (De Franco et al., 2019). Therefore, in this section I attempt a reflective reconstruction of IR and ES’ common history and developments to show that a common ground exists and is fecund of interdisciplinary conversations that can advance understanding of the local–global nexus, more than to establish how those disciplinary divides came to exist in the first place.

By necessity, this will be a partial endeavour because a full review of joint scholarship and approaches is beyond the scope of this article and because I will focus only on the relationship between IR and ES. If we broaden the scope of the analysis, a tale of many disciplines would actually emerge. In fact, while ES’ relation with IR (and comparative politics) is widely discussed, the role of cognate disciplines, such as anthropology, has remained hidden (Adler-Nissen, 2016). Thus, the goal here is not to argue that IR is ES’ ‘home turf’, but to show how IR and ES have developed together, through some intense interdisciplinary conversations that ultimately question the utility of disciplinary boundaries (Rosamond, 2007; Manners and Whitman, 2016).

This is important not because it is necessary to decide whether EU politics is a matter for ES, IR, political science, or a wider cluster of cognate disciplines (Rosamond, 2007: 236). Rather, this discussion is key to raise fundamental questions about the nature of the objects of study (the EU/European integration and international politics) and how they should be studied. In fact, the starting point here is the simple observation that the split between IR and AS – ES included – has constrained our ability to grasp the interconnectedness of the local and the global and that interdisciplinary convergence can mitigate this problem (Katzenstein, 2002; Chamlian, 2019).

Arguably, the first explicit efforts to theorize the process of European integration were made in the 1960s by IR scholars such as Ernst Haas, Leon Lindberg, and Stanley Hoffmann, who employed general theories of economic and political integration such as neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism to debate over conceptions of European integration as either a gradual, self-sustaining, and unavoidable process, or a nonlinear result of national strategic preferences (Pollack, 2001; Kreppel, 2012). Mainstream disciplinary history considers this phase as being ES’ ‘launch era’ (Pollack, 2001; Keeler, 2005), but how it produced a disciplinary split is actually a contested issue. For example, it has been argued that the centrality of the application of neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism to the European case and the gap between these approaches and the rest of IR in the launch era should be questioned (Rosamond, 2007). The case was not that neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism were the only approaches used at the time to understand the European phenomenon, nor that they were applied only to the European integration process because in fact they were not (Manners and Whitman, 2016). Instead, their prevalence was guaranteed by ‘disciplining actions’ (Manners and Whitman, 2016), claims, and processes that took place within both IR and the emerging field of ES and contributed to create the impression that the body of works on European integration had a very different character from the broader IR literature of the time. On the one hand, the narrative of the IR’s great debates contributed to create the impression that state-centred
approaches dominated IR and made it unsuitable to explain the hybrid legal and institutional system of the European Economic Community (EEC) (Bourne and Cini, 2006; Manners and Whitman, 2016; Tiilikainen, 2019). On the other hand, the dominant portrait of the integration scholarship as revolving around neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism constituted ES as a new process-oriented field (Manners and Whitman, 2016).

Later, as the EEC became the European Community (EC) and then the EU, the way scholars engaged with it changed too. In the mainstream account of ES’s history a ‘doldrums era’ driven empirically by the stagnation of the integration process is said to be followed by a new ‘renaissance/boom era’ of integration studies due to the relaunching of the integration process between the 1980s and the early 2000s (Keeler, 2005). In the boom era, a more apparent split between IR and ES is said to have taken place (Keeler, 2005) through the creation of specific venues of disciplinary knowledge building, such as specialized journals (e.g. The Journal of European Public Policy), professional associations, and their derivative conferences (Rosamond, 2007: 240). From within these venues a narrative emerged that scholars should look at the EU as a ‘normal’ political system and draw more decisively on comparative and American politics literatures, which pushed IR increasingly to the margins of EU studies (Rosamond, 2007; Kreppel, 2012; Tortola, 2014).

However, ES’ shift towards comparative politics should not be overestimated as a substantive literature criticizing the ‘normalization’ of the EU also exists within ES (Rosamond, 2007). Moreover, the booming integration process provided an obvious playground for IR approaches going beyond realism’s power-based determinism and exploring the importance of rules, norms, and institutions (Pollack, 2001). This led to frequent collaborations between research enterprises as different as the rationalist liberal institutionalism of Keohane, Martin, or Caporaso (Caporaso, 1992; Martin and Simmons, 1998; Keohane, 2002; Martin, 2017), Moravcsik’s own liberal intergovernmentalism (Moravcsik, 1997; 1999; Keohane et al., 2009), Europeanization theory (Borzel, 2002; Featherstone and Radaelli, 2003), and constructivism (Risse, 1996, 2005, 2012; Flockhart, 2013). Thus, while some scholars emphasize this third phase of ES’ development as a definitive split between IR and ES, others note the emergence of a common core curiosity and the increasing convergence towards common epistemological concerns and methods to the point that distinctions separating rationalist and constructivist/reflective approaches to the study of the EU appear more sensible than traditional disciplinary divisions (Manners and Whitman, 2016; Chamlian, 2019).2 In line with the latter narrative, a different history has been written that breaks with the ES/IR divide and focuses on the different phases of the development of integration theory (explaining integration, analysing governance, and constructing the EU) as an alternative to the mainstream three-phase narrative of the chronological evolution of ES (Diez and Wiener, 2018).

In this context, it has been emphasized that the very growth of social constructivism, together with an increasing prevalence of Europe-based scholars engaged in EU research and favouring a ‘pluralist approach’ (Rosamond, 2014) to EU studies (Andrews, 2012; Kreppel, 2012: 636), produced a strong common ground between IR and ES, which led to key theoretical and empirical breakthroughs in the last two decades of the 20th century (Tiilikainen, 2019) and questions disciplinary divides.3 First, the broad conceptualization of states’ preference-formation should be considered as an important development emerging from common discussions in IR and ES about the dense and diverse institutional composition of the EU (Tiilikainen, 2019: 2Manners, Whitman, and Chamlian criticize this narrative for being a disciplining move that marginalizes constructivist approaches in EUS and deprives them of the status of ‘science’ (Manners and Whitman, 2016; Chamlian, 2019). In contrast, I see the distinction between rationalist and constructivist/reflectivist approaches as a way to question mainstream claims that want EUS as a separate field from IR and the knowledge pecking orders that come with those disciplinary distinctions. In fact Manners and Withman’s critique of the distinction between rationalist and constructivist approaches is based on a very narrow understanding of ‘EU Studies’, as demonstrated by the publications they review (Manners and Whitman, 2016).

3It can be argued that this applies more in general to the role of constructivism in AS, as per the discussion by Teti (2007).
This agenda has united IR and ES scholars over their quest for explanations of EU institutional expansion and brought attention in both disciplines to the role of institutions and norms in the formation of national identity and interests (see, e.g. Moravcsik, 1997; Risse, 2005). Second, research conducted since the late 1990s and revolving around the EU’s external action (see, e.g. Manners, 2002, 2006; Diez, 2005; Pace 2007; Krotz and Maher, 2011), while originally seeking to differentiate the EU’s distinctive identity from that of a state, led to a profound reconsideration of how contingent and everchanging traditions, conventions, and cultural self-understandings, affect states’ international profile and policies and the very functioning of what is normally called the ‘Westphalian system’, therefore challenging realist assumptions (Flockhart, 2013). Third, thanks to – and not despite – its rooting into comparative politics, ES functioned as a transmission belt for ideas, concepts, and approaches seeking to bridge the study of domestic and international politics, therefore furthering the constructivist agenda (Warleigh, 2006).

In the next section, I will discuss how the ‘practice turn’ in IR is a product of this common ground and how it does not simply further existing conversations between IR and ES scholars but changes the terms of the discussion and opens specifically to a novel exploration of how the local and the global connect.

**IPT’s new rendering of EU politics**

In a powerful article contributing to a Special Issue of the *Journal of Common Market Studies* devoted to ‘dissident’ approaches to EUS (Manners and Whitman, 2016), Adler-Nissen called for a ‘practice turn’ in ES (Adler-Nissen, 2016). Here she introduced IPT as a new constructivism of sorts challenging simultaneously traditional constructivist as well as rationalist approaches to IR and argued that such theoretical development should be of interest to ES as it provides a much-needed theory of the everyday of European integration and institutions (Adler-Nissen, 2016).

Since then, research employing practice theory in the study of the EU has produced a burgeoning literature that can no longer be labelled as ‘dissident voices’. On the contrary, research applying IPT to the European case accounts for some of the key works and authors constituting IPT scholarship⁴ and some of the best-known IPT scholars would most probably define themselves as being IR and ES scholars at the same time.⁵ Retrospectively, Adler-Nissen’s call for a practice turn in ES seems somehow misplaced because the amount and relevance of IPT works on the EU suggest that the practice turn in IR has rather strong roots into ES.

It is indeed worth reflecting on the fact that some of the key conceptual tools of IPT have been developed iteratively through situated research on EU politics and institutions. The burgeoning literature building on Wenger’s understanding of communities of practice, for example, is somehow dependent on those key initial works by Adler that focused on the European example (see, e.g. Adler, 2004), 2008, 2009) and continues to be much anchored onto the observation of EU politics (see, e.g. Bicchi, 2011; Hofius, 2016). The same can be said about other flourishing bodies of IPT research such as those exploring diplomatic practices (Mérand, 2006, 2010; Adler-Nissen, 2014a; Mérand and Rayroux, 2016; Adler-Nissen and Drieschova, 2019) and transnational governance (see, e.g. Bigo, 2000; Kauppi, 2003, 2018; Kauppi and Madsen, 2014; Ekengren, 2018). In other words, IPT is – at least to some extent – a product of the constructivist common ground between IR and ES as well as an example of how fecund a ground it can be.

Having reviewed this literature and building on Adler-Nissen’s original article (Adler-Nissen, 2016), I believe it is possible to identify three areas where attention to practices has produced

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⁴Confront, for example, the works cited in this article with the ones discussed by Bueger and Gadinger to take stock of the practice turn (Bueger and Gadinger, 2018a).

⁵Rebecca Adler-Nissen, for example, has been a member of the board of the Danish European Community Studies Association (ECSA-DK) between 2013 and 2017.
novel and valuable contributions to EU studies that demonstrate IPT’s potential to become a trading zone where IR and ES/AS scholars can together recast the way we conceive the interaction between the local and the global. In the following, I briefly discuss these three contributions and offer some examples of the scholarship that shaped them. To orientate the reader through the muddy waters of the different IPT approaches, I specifically discuss scholars building on Bourdieusian sociology (Bourdieu, 1990), Wenger’s conception of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), and Foucault’s governmentality (Foucault, 2007).

**Focusing on the everyday of European integration and EU institutions**

While most EU scholarship develops from assumptions about given factors’ explanatory power to understand EU politics (e.g. agent’s motives and resources, cost/benefits ratio, ideas, and norms), practice theory questions the utility of such predetermined choices and suggests that it is the unfolding of everyday practices that needs to be studied as it produces the bigger phenomena and social realities that we label as ‘EU politics’ or ‘European integration’. Thus, instead of working with predetermined variables, practice theories employ thinking tools and sensitizing concepts that allow to approach practice abductively and reject ‘the idea that objects or structures have a fixed, stable identity or that closure is achieved at some point’ (Adler-Nissen, 2016: 94).

To capture the everyday of the EU, IPT scholars have looked at it through the lenses of different concepts. Studies focusing on the EU as a community of practice have, for example, shed new light on how the everyday of EU practitioners brings about a ‘EU way’ of doing things and transcends national boundaries and differences through a high degree of mutual engagement and the establishment of shared repertoires of practice. First opened by Adler (2004, 2009), this stream of IPT research has produced a number of flagship publications looking at the EU as such or at specific EU departments, units, or delegations as communities of practice and investigating to what extent they support or hinder coordination with other international organizations and/or EU member states (EUMS) (see, e.g. Bicchi, 2011, 2016; Græger, 2016).

Foucault’s concept of governmentality, instead, has been used to make sense of the EU normative agenda and demonstrate the normative relevance of those governing techniques, which make up for the EU’s everyday operationalization of international norms such as human rights (Huelss, 2017). Similarly, the EU’s democracy promotion tools have been studied to show that they shape the model of democracy that the EU promotes as well as the power relations between the EU and the local democratizers (Kurki, 2011).

As for the studies inspired by Bourdieusian sociology, they have ventured into an exploration of how the EU’s internal and external actions contribute to transnational governance (Kauppi and Madsen, 2014; Ekengren, 2018; Kauppi, 2018) and produce a field of security practice where the internal and the external are hardly distinguishable (Bigo, 2000). In this context, the everyday of EU politics appears shaped by the practical predisposition and background knowledge of the practitioners involved more than by any intrinsic characteristics of the problem they try to respond to or intergovernmental dynamics. It has been shown, for example, how EU officials and diplomats during the aftermath of the Arab Spring acted on the basis of dispositions and background knowledge that had developed over several decades of EU’s Mediterranean policies (Bremberg, 2016) and how, more in general, individual EU representatives respond to specific local context and situations by bringing in their embodied and unconscious ‘memory’ of earlier experiences (Ekengren, 2018). It has been also discussed how resources like connections, reputation, poise, charm, and presence matter in formal and informal meetings as they structure complex distinctions between well-informed and relaxed insiders – normally representatives of ’old’ EUMS – and ill-informed and ill-at-ease outsiders – normally the representatives of ’new’ EUMS (Kuus, 2014, 2015). Finally, the diplomatic practices of negotiations within COREPER have been brought to light to show how long-standing routines and habits are affected by changes in the use of information and communication technology (Adler-Nissen and Drieschova, 2019).
In the quest for a better understanding of local/global dynamics, IPT’s focus on situated practice is important because the local and the global come to be understood as neither different geographical sites of practice nor different historical moments in an expanding world (Wenger, 1998: 131). Instead, they can be seen as related levels of participation in a practice that always coexist and shape each other (Wenger, 1998), constituted through assemblages of practice (Brandenburg, 2017; Bueger, 2018), or produced at the intersection of different fields of practice (Bigo, 2000; Leander, 2008).

Recasting conceptions of power and agency through a relational ontology

Practice theoretical approaches build on a relational ontology that implies a novel understanding of both power and agency as emergent from practices and observable through agents’ interactions. On this view, social interactions are the fundamental building blocks of social life (Adler-Nissen, 2016: 95), and therefore neither power nor agency can be assessed as general capabilities or resources: they are deeply contextual. This is important to advance understanding of the interconnectedness of the local and the global because, once again, it requires observing how the global is structured through situated interactions in national as well as transnational settings and how both power and agency emerging from such encounters assume global relevance through the configuration of different transnational fields of practice (according to a Bourdieusian approach), the expansion of linkages across different communities of practice (according to a community of practice approach), or the deployment of governance techniques (according to a Foucauldian approach).

In the extant IPT literature, the EU’s agency is depicted as emerging from a two-way relationship between transnational practices and translocal action and the specific practical sense of how to act that comes with it (Ekengren, 2018: 20). In the specific field of counter-piracy practice, for example, research has shown how the EU managed to become a core actor off the coast of Somalia through daily practical work, which was recognized as ‘competent’ by other actors in the field (Bueger, 2016).

The ‘power’ of the EU is also described in terms that fundamentally challenge the way in which EU foreign policy is normally studied, that is, departing from classical explanations based on capability-expectation gaps, normative power Europe (NPE), etc. (see, e.g. Hill, 1993; Manners, 2002, 2006; Diez, 2005; Larsen, 2020). The very notion of NPE has been revisited on the basis of the community of practice concept and therefore recast as ‘a transnational polity with a security community of practice in its midst’ that breaks ‘ground with the concept of modernity from a power-politics perspective’ (Adler, 2009: 74). Thus, NPE operates via practices of ‘cooperative security’, on the basis of self-restraint, and through its ‘magnetic attraction’ (Adler, 2009: 72).

Similarly, the power of the European External Action Service (EEAS) has been evaluated not through the lenses of traditional power-based analysis of EU foreign policy, but in terms of the EEAS’s challenge to the state’s monopoly of symbolic power in the European diplomatic field (Adler-Nissen, 2014b). By exploring how the EEAS and the national foreign services struggle over the appointments of Heads of Delegations and consular affairs, it has been argued that the EEAS ‘questions the state as “a central bank for symbolic credit”’, making national foreign services unease, despite its limited material power (Adler-Nissen, 2014b: 659).

Focusing on how theories and practices interact

Even if by and large, IPT emphasizes the role of practical, embodied, and reflexive knowledge in everyday practices, it is also interested in metatheoretical reflections on how scientific knowledge is co-constitutive of policy practice (Bueger and Gadinger, 2007; Bueger, 2012). This opens to considerations about how the local and the global are sites of knowledge production and how theory and practice are entangled in the social construction of what is local and what is global.
in the first place. With respect to a better understanding of EU politics, practice theoretical approaches develop on the basis of awareness of the fact that the social sciences play an important role in shaping ideas and practices of European integration (Adler-Nissen and Kropp, 2015) – and vice versa (Chamlian, 2019). This has significant implications also on the specific ES’ agenda, which has so far neglected the interconnectedness of theories and practices of European integration and politics and has still to develop a full understanding of how EU’s policies and instruments in support of scientific research are key components of the EU’s global ‘actorness’.

The limits of IPT’s view of Europe
As discussed above, the focus on practice as patterned actions in a context, the conception of power and agency as emergent from social interaction, and the careful consideration of different sites of knowledge production make IPT a likely candidate to become a trading zone for IR and ES/AS scholars interested in rethinking the local–global nexus. However, two interrelated challenges can be noted, which IPT needs to address to advance interdisciplinary understanding of how the local and the global connect.

The ‘generalization’ challenge
Most IPT research seems to follow the practical guideline that ‘defining what counts as an international practice and what does not is best left to practitioners themselves in their actual performance of world politics’ (Adler and Pouliot, 2011a: 6). Such a proposition hides the interpretative work that is still necessary to identify practices out of practitioners’ accounts of given actions (Epstein and Wæver, forthcoming). It also hides the interpretative work that it is needed to transform the idiosyncratic performances that constitute practices into entities with some degree of stability across time and space (Hui, 2017). Most importantly for this discussion, it inhibits reflection on what it takes for practice to be ‘international’, and what does indeed mean that practice can be local, or global.

In the IPT literature focusing on the EU, lack of reflectivity on this issue translates into a tendency to jump – without explanation – from situated practices to EU-wide patterned ways of doings things. Even when the fragmentation of EU practice is emphasized, this always comes with some degree of generalization. The community of practice approach, for example, while holding the promise of a better understanding of the EU’s institutional complexities, is divided between research offering unitary visions of the EU as one single community in the interaction with other international actors and the vision of a fragmented reality made of more complex constellations of communities of practice (c. e.g. Adler, 2009; Bicchi, 2011, 2016; Lequesne, 2015; Græger, 2016). The difference between the two visions lays only in how far research goes with the generalization of practice, but they both lack convincing explanations of how situated practices can become far-reaching.

Other IPT approaches to the EU display the same ambiguity about how contextual and situated practices are and to what extent we can imagine practices and communities to be ultimately generalizable to the whole of the EU. For example, authors employing the concept of assemblage have produced insightful case studies where the specific dynamics of specific assemblages of practices (and agents) in given regions/crises have been used to characterize a certain way of ‘doing Europe’ in broader policy fields (see, e.g. Bueger, 2016; Brandenburg, 2017).

Understanding how to move from situated to more widespread practices has been a key concern underpinning my own research. In fact, my analysis of EU diplomatic practices has underscored the existence of different EU diplomatic actors (or communities of practice) with different social and symbolical capitals, performing different understandings of ‘doing diplomacy’ and competing among each other over the definition of the ‘genuine diplomat’ (De Franco, forthcoming). Making sense of these findings has not been easy as they contrast with unitary visions of an EU diplomatic
corps in a competition with national diplomatic services (Adler-Nissen, 2014b), but also with work emphasizing a ‘limited fragmentation’ of practice and drawing boundaries between practices and communities according to geographical locations (Bicchi, 2016; Hofius, 2016), or seniority in EU institutions (Kuus, 2014, 2015; Lequesne, 2015).

In social research, this problem is normally explained in terms of micro and macro levels of analysis (Turner and Boyns, 2001) and this is also how a few IPT scholars have been reflecting on it (see, e.g. Bicchi and Bremberg, 2016; Ekengren, 2018). It has been argued that a macro approach to the EU as a single community and a micro approach emphasizing the EU as a ‘community of communities’ are compatible (Bicchi, 2011: 1119), but it is unclear why this is the case. It is true that the EU can be conceived as ‘a “community without unity” in which senses of belonging emerge in the absence of a homogeneous “we”’ (Hofius, 2016: 941), but this hardly solves the problem of understanding how we move from the situatedness of practice to its generalization to a wide range of actors, sites, and temporalities.

To understand this problematique and why it is relevant to my argument, it is key to realize that from a practice perspective this issue is actually not about the micro–macro gap (Turner and Boyns, 2001), but about the local–global nexus. Following Latour, in particular, the global is precisely that social space that comes into existence because of the recursivity of practice across time and space and, vice versa, the local is that space of interaction that is made possible by those partitions, frames, umbrellas, fire-breaks that constitute a veritable but porous boundary between the local and the global (Latour, 1996).

This argument is very much related to IPT claim to overcome traditional dichotomies, such as the one between agents and structure (Adler and Pouliot, 2011a). In fact, Latour’s theorization of how the local and the global come about is very much based on the co-existence of agents and structure. In Latour’s own words:

‘Neither individual action nor structure are thinkable without the work of rendering local – through channelling, partition, focusing, reduction – and without the work of rendering global – through instrumentation, compilation, punctualization, amplification’ (Latour, 1996: 234).

Against social theorizing starting from either the agent or the structure, practice theory can look at the rendering of the local and the global and their interconnectedness to make sense of the all of society (Latour, 1996: 234). However, this is not what IPT scholars have done so far. Take for example Adler-Nissen and Drieschova’s analysis of ‘track-change diplomacy’ (Adler-Nissen and Drieschova, 2019): while the authors spend almost a half a page to produce a convincing argument about the generalizability of their results based on a number of characteristics of the EU as a multilateral venue, they leave somehow on the margins a necessary discussion of how situated and embedded in layered historical transformations the diplomatic practices they study are and if it makes sense to imagine their recursivity at a more global level.

Studying the EU as a space of global–local connectivity from a practice–theoretical perspective should then be an opportunity to observe how the local–global nexus is a multiscalar phenomenon that requires careful consideration of the localization and globalization of practice. This is no easy task though as it requires the development of specific theoretical lenses building on existing tools such as communities or fields of practice, but departing quite fundamentally from extant generalization reasoning that have so far led practice theory scholars to assume that practice is easily transposable and generalizable – for example through cultural schemas and anchoring processes (see, e.g. Swidler, 2001; Adler and Pouliot, 2011a).

The challenge of relationalism

A second challenge IPT needs to address pertains the way in which IPT scholars implement the relational ontology that they claim to be key to their endeavour. In principle, such an ontology
comprehends relations as primary to entities. However, having observed how IPT has so far implemented relationism, I believe a careful consideration of the exact role of interaction and its ability to compose all society is direly needed (Latour, 1996: 229). IPT’s understanding of relationism seems based on an individual ontology which conceives international actors like the EU as unable to achieve any goal without passing through interactions with partners, but also as fundamentally pre-existing and never really altered by interaction. Such understanding of relationism is not the only one possible though, as more transformative and radical understandings exist, as in Barad’s for example (Barad, 2007), which might be better suited to grasp local–global connectivity.

Thus, relationism entails a conceptualization challenge that so far has not been dealt with reflectively enough. I had a taste of this problem in the course of research about the much-contested development of the European Peace Facility (EPF) when I understood I could not conceive it as just the result of a negotiation among EUMS mediated by EU institutions. Instead, I needed to look at such development as contingent to the state of the so-called AU–EU strategic partnership and as transformative of the agency of both the AU and the EU within that partnership (De Franco and Gelot, forthcoming). Furthermore, since the EPF, which substitutes an earlier funding instrument called African Peace Facility, is considered by many as fundamentally changing the nature of EU’s external action (Deneckere, 2019; Godefroy and Chinitz, 2019) and breaking expectations based on NPE conceptualizations, I had to understand to what extent AU–EU interaction is transformative of EU’s global practices.

In effect, the challenge posed by relationism is also empirical. In the extant IPT literature about the EU the relational ontology seems to apply mainly to the dynamics between EU institutions, on the one hand, and EUMS on the other (see, e.g. Bicchi, 2011; Adler-Nissen and Drieschova, 2019) while EU’s interactions with other international actors and organizations remain relatively marginal. To develop a better understanding of relationism we need more work in line with research on transnational fields or assemblages, but more reflective on what relationism entails than these extant literatures have been so far.

The challenge of developing an understanding of relationism that accounts for transformative interaction is interrelated with the previous challenge because it is fundamentally about carefully considering the role of interaction in the structuring of practice and its recursivity from the local to the global and vice versa. Thus, when we study the relationship between the EU and other international actors it makes a substantive difference to conceive the EU as a unitary – even civilizational – community or as a constellation of communities. In Græeger’s work (2016), for example, the claim that some loose EU–NATO communities of practice are emerging is based on a case studies of two CSDP missions that overlooks the significance of fractures within and across those organizations’ practices.

Flagging the generalization and the relationism challenges means to stress how in its current applications IPT is fundamentally reproducing IR’s traditional disconnect between the local and the global. This is problematic, not only because it is at odds with the explicit ambitions of at least some strands of practice theory (see, e.g. Wenger, 1998), but also because it somehow diminishes the innovative value of IPT’s contribution to both IR and ES.

Moving towards a GPT

A shift from an international practice theory to a global practice theory (GPT) can be a way to create a new conversation between scholars of IR and ES (and AS more in general) and move both disciplines closer together in an attempt at furthering our understanding of the interplay of the local and the global. This is not just a matter of lexicon: GPT could contribute substantially to the way ‘the global’ is conceptualized in the first place and obtain important gains from shifting attention to those specific organizations and locales that entail a dialectic between the local and the global.
This idea builds on Fierke and Jabri’s work in favour of research focused on what they call ‘global conversations’ (Fierke and Jabri, 2019). To them, studying global conversations entails moving decisively from the kind of individual ontology based on the notion of ‘inter’ relations that characterizes IPT and IR more in general, to a relational ontology making better sense of the global as the interconnected space of politics we live in. In fact, ‘a conversation is an exchange between multiple parties that changes all who are involved’ (Fierke and Jabri, 2019: 510): it is a form of ‘intra-action’ (Barad, 2007). On this view, conversations among IR scientists as well as policy makers are understood as transformative of the boundaries of difference that constitute the world, including cultural differences between various locales and distinctions between national and international, internal and external, global and local.

This is very much in line with Latour’s suggestion to look at the local and the global as always co-existing and constantly re-arranged through practice (Latour, 1996). In fact, for IPT a shift towards a relationism of ‘intra-action’ would entail also approaching the generalization challenge in a novel way: by studying the sites of global conversations as fundamentally structuring the transition from local to global and vice versa. It would also mean treating boundary-making as a fundamental object of study to understand the complexity of global–local dynamics and their role in reproducing states, regions, the West/non-West distinction, or neo-colonial relations of power (Fierke and Jabri, 2019: 514), which is very much in line with Wenger’s suggestion to look at how practice is ‘an emergent structure in which learning constantly creates localities that reconfigure the geography’ (Wenger, 1998: 131).

Furthermore, a focus on ‘global conversations’ makes it possible to account for the part language plays in giving practice some stability and coherence across time and space, therefore allowing for the transition from the local to the global (and vice versa) (Gahrn-Andersen, 2019). It entails scrutinizing those practices that are constitutive of both the local and the global through language use, without having to refer to wider concepts, such as culture, to assume practice’s transposability and generalizability (as in e.g. Swidler, 2001). It would also mean to move more decisively towards a relational ontology that is more in line with constructivism’s founding project (Epstein, 2013a) and grasp the agency of those actors – including the EU – that have a relevant role in those processes where agency and identity are structured in and through language. From this vantage point, an analysis of the EU as a constellation of communities of practice might become sharper and more precise and the issue of the generalization of practice might be mitigated because ‘doing the EU’ (or any other regional organizations, or ‘local’ actor) would become a matter of situated entanglements where EU practitioners intra-act with other parties in a process of mutual (re)definition.

Finally, as I call for a GPT focused on global conversations, I also offer a way to overcome the problem I flagged at the beginning of this article: the artificial and counterproductive nature that characterizes academic disciplinary fractures and pecking orders between IR and AS. This is because GPT’s attention to global conversations would entail a shift in epistemological terms. The concept of ‘global conversations’ problematizes the frequent emphasis in IR on cultures and regions as the predefined ‘otherness’ that the dominating ‘Western’ academia should have dialogues with – a logic that applies also to some calls to bridge IR and AS (Aris, 2021). The concept also problematizes those disciplinary divides that enforce given narratives and methods and liberates ‘epistemology from prescribed edicts that claim the universality of validity and criteria of judgement, as well as from “standpoint” epistemology, where the subject invoked is somehow predetermined in gender, class, or cultural terms’ (Fierke and Jabri, 2019: 517).

Conclusion
This article has built on a review of the different contributions of IPT scholarship to the understanding of EU politics to demonstrate that the emergence of IPT is not just telling of the existence of a constructivist common ground between IR and ES but also possibly transformative of
that common ground. In particular, the article has emphasized IPT’s potential to become a trading zone for IR and ES scholars to further our understanding of how the local and the global are interconnected. In this context, the article has assessed strengths and weaknesses of the extant applications of practice theories to EU politics to underline two challenges that IPT needs to address to fully realize this potential: (1) finding ways to theorize and empirically observe the transition from the level of situated practices to EU-wide doings (generalization challenge); and (2) assessing the exact role of interaction in structuring and transforming both the global and the local (challenge of relationism).

It is worth stressing that underlining these two issues does not want to be a sterile provocation, but a way to prompt a reflection on what can be achieved if those challenges are addressed. Clearly IPT scholars have made some efforts to employ a fully fledged relational ontology (see especially Bremberg, 2016; Bueger, 2016; Brandenburg, 2017), they have expressed concerns about the issues of generalization of practices (see, e.g. Bicchi and Bremberg, 2016) and findings (see, e.g. Ekengren, 2018), and have started looking in the direction of boundary-making as structuring practice (Hofius, 2016). Nevertheless, more work is needed to make sense of the local–global nexus and transform IPT into a trading zone for IR and AS scholars. This would be an important development also to overcome the problem I flagged at the beginning of this article: the distinctions and pecking orders separating IR from AS.

I close by inviting the IPT community to seriously consider the option of working towards a GPT that can further practice theory’s appeal for both IR and AS scholars by paying attention to those global conversations where the rendering of the local and the global can be located and observed without having to assume any form of practice ‘generalizatiFunsi

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