

# 1 *Cognitive Evolution and World Ordering*

## *Opening New Vistas*

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International Relations (IR) scholars have researched international orders for many decades. Every major school of thought produced frequently cited works on the topic, including Realism,<sup>1</sup> English School,<sup>2</sup> Liberalism,<sup>3</sup> Critical Approaches,<sup>4</sup> Feminism<sup>5</sup> and Constructivism.<sup>6</sup> Recently, interest in studying international orders has been surging to entirely new levels. In 2018, the journal *International Affairs* dedicated its annual special issue to the topic “Ordering the World? Liberal Internationalism in Theory and Practice.” The *International Studies Review* followed suit with a special issue on changing international orders, featuring no less than nineteen articles. In 2021, *International Organization* celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary with a special issue on “Challenges to the Liberal World Order.” The latter title gives away what drives most of the surging scholarly interest: a hunch that the resilience of international ordering we have grown accustomed to remains no longer as unchallenged as it once may have been.

Emanuel Adler’s recent *World Ordering: A Social Theory of Cognitive Evolution* is a highly welcome contribution to current debates. The book pushes us toward adapting our (meta-)theoretical toolboxes for studying processes of world ordering. Departures from the existing literature are rather pronounced. Most remarkably, Adler does not write about one single and static world order, but analyzes multiple and simultaneous processes of world ordering. These are underwritten by cognitive evolution, which describes changing landscapes of practices. About a decade ago, Adler likened cognitive evolution to “an evolutionary collective-learning process that explains how

<sup>1</sup> Waltz 1979; Gilpin 1981.    <sup>2</sup> Bull 1977; Wight 1977.

<sup>3</sup> Keohane and Nye 1977; Krasner 1983b.    <sup>4</sup> Wallerstein 1974; Cox 1981.

<sup>5</sup> Tickner 2001.    <sup>6</sup> Ruggie 1993; Wendt 1999.

communities of practice establish themselves, how their background knowledge diffuses and becomes institutionalized, how their members' expectations and dispositions become preferentially selected, and how social structure spreads."<sup>7</sup> His 2019 book links cognitive evolution firmly to world ordering.

The purpose of this edited volume is to discuss how Adler's social theory of cognitive evolution helps us study international orders. This introduction provides an overview of his innovative ideas for researching world ordering, locates these in Adler's own "cognitive evolution" – so to say – as a scholar of world politics, and proposes vistas for doing research that extend his theory of world ordering. We proceed in four steps. First, we discuss the similarities and differences between Adler's thoughts on world ordering on the one hand and the existing literature on the other. Second, we unpack the building blocks of his theory of cognitive evolution. Third, we open up vistas for further research out of our critical discussion of Adler's (meta-)theoretical framework. Finally, we provide an overview of the chapters of this book, which follow-up on the vistas we sketch.

## Theories of International Order

In this section, we seek to locate Adler's theory of world ordering in terms of its main alternatives on offer in IR. This exercise helps us identify a number of key innovations, as well as zoom in on areas of debate among scholars. Throughout, we use Ikenberry's seminal theory of international order<sup>8</sup> as our main foil, although we also touch on other IR works where relevant. The section is organized around five main questions, which overlap with the three interrogations that Adler mentions in opening his book:<sup>9</sup>

- 1) What is order?
- 2) How is order created?
- 3) How does order reproduce and change?
- 4) What is international order made of?
- 5) Where is the international order headed?

<sup>7</sup> Adler 2008, 202.    <sup>8</sup> Ikenberry 2001, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> The three questions that structure *World Ordering* are: (1) where do orders come from?; (2) why do they take the shape they do? and (3) how do they change? (p. 2).

Table 1.1 Comparing theories of international orders

	Ikenberry	Adler
What is order?	Settled rules (stable, unique)	Configurations of practices (in flux, multiple)
How is order created?	Material domination; rational bargain; functional institutions	Social emergence within communities of practice
How does order reproduce and change?	Rational interest, coercion and path dependence	Integrative effects of jointly enacted practices; practical reflexivity
What is the international order made of?	Open trade and rules to limit the exercise of power	Clashing communities of liberal and nationalist practices
Where is the international order headed?	Authority crisis under control due to low barriers to entry for challengers	Contingent balance of practices between liberal and nationalist modes of action

The first three questions deal with social ontology and are not limited to world politics; whereas the latter two concern the international realm specifically, including its contemporary evolution. Table 1.1 summarizes the main elements of our comparison.

### 1) *What is Order?*

In past decades IR scholars have espoused a variety of ontologies when it comes to theorizing order. The key issue here is to determine what social orders are *made of*. In IR, major alternatives include:

- order as a balance of power (in the form of a distribution of capabilities);<sup>10</sup>
- order as material hegemony;<sup>11</sup>
- order as a set of functional institutions and regimes;<sup>12</sup>
- order as a structure of norms, moral purposes and identities;<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Waltz 1979. <sup>11</sup> Modelski 1978; Gilpin 1981.

<sup>12</sup> Krasner 1983a; Keohane 1984.

<sup>13</sup> Hall 1999; Reus-Smit 1999; Wendt 1999.

- order as a combination of coercion and legitimacy;<sup>14</sup>
- order as a structure of institutional relationships;<sup>15</sup>
- order as a dominant economic and technological mode of production<sup>16</sup> and
- order as a settled pattern of action geared toward certain goals such as the preservation of sovereignty.<sup>17</sup>

Adler's social ontology departs from all these conceptions, as it conceives of order as based on the joint enactment of practices. Let us contrast his theory with that of Ikenberry, which is centered on rules and institutions. Similar to other internationalist writings, Ikenberry conceives of order as "settled rules and arrangements."<sup>18</sup> At any given point, one may identify a set of rules of the game that are relatively stable within a social configuration. Agents know these rules and, as will become clear later, generally feel an interest in upholding them.

Contrast this understanding of order with Adler's, which is premised on practice theory. For him, social orders are "configurations of practices that organize social life."<sup>19</sup> Social groupings coalesce around a set of ways of doing things, which stabilize expectations and relationships. As such, for Adler any social order may be located along a continuum between interconnectedness and dissociation. Indeed, the integrative effects of practices are never complete, not only because some practices are much more competitive than others, but also because communities of practice overlap with one another, generating friction and possibly conflict.

Two critical implications follow. First, contrary to Ikenberry and other conceptions prevalent in IR, Adler likens order to flux— not to stability. In Ikenberry, the rules of the game are "settled." More broadly, in the functionalist logic order is an equilibrium solution to collaboration problems. By contrast, for Adler "social orders are in a permanent state of nonequilibrium."<sup>20</sup> In the complexity ontology, order obtains "through fluctuations." We will return to the theme of change later, but for the time being, the second implication needs to be parsed out: if order is process, that is, if no social order is ever "congealed" or stable, then we need to open the door to the multiplicity of

<sup>14</sup> Phillips 2010. <sup>15</sup> Nexon 2009. <sup>16</sup> Wallerstein 1974; Cox 1986.

<sup>17</sup> Bull 1977. <sup>18</sup> Ikenberry 2011, 12.

<sup>19</sup> Adler also speaks of "fields" and "landscapes" of practices (2019, 6).

<sup>20</sup> Ikenberry 2011, 32.

orders. In Ikenberry and others, the emphasis is generally on one dominant order, although some contestation is allowed around the edges.<sup>21</sup> Adler makes the opposite postulate: at any moment in time, there are several overlapping orders, some clashing and other mutually reinforcing. The multiple orders “constantly change”<sup>22</sup> and are never set for good – a point that begs the questions of creation, reproduction and change.

## 2) *How is Order Created?*

In IR, the dominant approach to the creation of international order is what Ikenberry calls the “political control model.”<sup>23</sup> According to this view, rules and institutions are “tools” in the hands of states to achieve their objectives. We find this starting point in both realism (e.g., hegemonic stability theory)<sup>24</sup> and liberal internationalism.<sup>25</sup> In the former case, order is the creation of the powerful, and it serves to foster its dominant interests. In the latter case, order is designed by its participants to help resolve collective action problems. Interestingly, Ikenberry’s own theory combines both insights. On the one hand, order is imposed by the strong, generally the winner(s) of a major war. This is the vertical or “hegemonic” aspect of order. Other participants buy into the imposed rules of the game in order to benefit from public goods, as well as to limit the use of arbitrary power by the hegemon. The latter amounts to the constitutional or horizontal dimension of order.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, Ikenberry also acknowledges the functionalist logic, according to which rules serve to resolve collective action problems.<sup>27</sup>

The key point is that in IR order is generally thought of as volitional or intentional. Order is designed, by dominant countries or by the whole of participants, in order to effect some purposes. Adler considerably nuances this understanding, to emphasize the evolutionary dimension of social order. For him, social orders are primarily socially emergent; the result of the joint enactment of practices. That does not

<sup>21</sup> For example, Reus-Smit’s “autarkic states” (1999). <sup>22</sup> Adler 2019, 1.

<sup>23</sup> Ikenberry 2011, 28. <sup>24</sup> Gilpin 1981. <sup>25</sup> Keohane 1984.

<sup>26</sup> This is an intriguing commonality between Ikenberry and Adler: both acknowledge the mixed nature of order (horizontal and vertical), although ultimately Adler is far more interested in the former than in the latter.

<sup>27</sup> Ikenberry 2011, 91.

preclude, however, a key role for reflexivity in the making of social orders: actors learn and seek to improve their conditions on that basis (more on this later). But it is a different kind of agency, flowing from the joint enactment of practices, as opposed to the expression of preferences. As Adler explains: “International social orders are neither purely spontaneous and detached from practitioners’ dispositions and expectations nor the exclusive result of human design. They result from emergent processes *within* communities of practice.”<sup>28</sup>

The key question thus becomes “why some international practices end up being adopted rather than others.”<sup>29</sup> As for Ikenberry, Adler does introduce agency in the form of power. But he operates from a deeply different understanding than the ones usually on offer in IR, which center on material capabilities (primarily economic and military). Without denying the importance of such factors, Adler mainly focuses on the attachment of meaning, primarily in the form of deontic power, which is the glue that dynamically holds together the community of practice, but also performative power (which rests on the credible enactment of practice) and practical authority (which revolves around the struggle for competence, as well as epistemic knowledge, such as values and norms, making-up practices). Adler then adds a number of other social forces, ranging from dominant discourse to functionality through identity, in order to explain the particular shape that configurations of practice (orders) take at a particular point in space and time. Altogether, these factors drive what is arguably the most distinctive contribution of *World Ordering* to the question of order: explaining how practices spread within and across communities of practice.

### 3) *How does Order Reproduce and Change?*

We have already established that for Ikenberry, orders are created through coercion and rational interest or, to use his own words, “command” and “consent.”<sup>30</sup> Actors comply because it is in their interest to do so, in order to control the hegemon (or, reversely, to enact domination), to benefit from global public goods, as well as to deal with institutional artifacts such as sunk costs and adaptation. As

<sup>28</sup> Adler 2019, 147. <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.

<sup>30</sup> Ikenberry adds a third mechanism, balance, but it is not central to his theory.

equilibrium, order maintains itself so long as it resolves collective action problems. As a structure of power, alternatively, it reproduces to the extent that it reflects the distribution of material capabilities in the system. Thus, changes in the dominant actors, or in the nature of collaboration problems, are likely to lead to a new order, even though path dependence produces strong stabilizing effects (more on this later).

Adler gets to the problem of reproduction and change from the opposite angle. Remember that according to his theory, order is constantly in flux; it never stands still. Asking how order changes, then, is misplaced; the real question has to do with how practices are stable enough, locally, to (temporarily) fix a social order. Stability, here, is nothing but appearance; it rests on tons of political work and agency. The joint enactment of practices produces a number of integrative effects, in the form of mutual expectations, for instance. This is what explains continuity, according to Adler: “the intersubjective legitimacy of social orders is associated neither with utilitarian-functional considerations nor with the mere fact of their embeddedness in institutions. Foremost, it rests with practices’ capacity to create interconnectedness and practitioners’ mutual commitment to their practices.”<sup>31</sup>

Here it is critical to confront the typical understanding of compliance in IR with Adler’s. As he explains, whether one uses rational choice theory (logic of consequences) or normative constructivism (logic of appropriateness), ultimately the logic of compliance is one of rule-following. Order comes first (in the form of settled rules); then compliance follows (rule-following) and the order gets reproduced. By contrast, for Adler orders results from “enacting rules.”<sup>32</sup> It is practice that comes first; order follows from joint performance, because of the socially integrative effects that it generates.<sup>33</sup> In a sense, we could say that, compared to the usual trio of explanations for compliance in IR (coercion; interest; legitimacy),<sup>34</sup> Adler suggests a fourth, complementary one, centered on the mutual accountability that practitioners party to a community of practice feel toward one another due to joint enactment and open social interaction.

In Adler’s theory, then, a key engine of change comes from “liminars,”<sup>35</sup> that is, actors that are located on the periphery or at the

<sup>31</sup> Adler 2019, 148. <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 40. <sup>33</sup> See also Neumann 2007.

<sup>34</sup> Wendt 1999. <sup>35</sup> Adler 2019, 3.

intersection of communities of practice. More broadly, because practice comes first, orders are always in the process of being made and remade. But this does not lead to instability – on the contrary. As Adler explains: “Fluctuations, such as practice learning, negotiation, and contestation, keep social orders in a metastable state.”<sup>36</sup> This is where politics enter the picture the most clearly. Whereas conventional wisdom generally associates politics with change, Adler connects it to stability: “Politics,” he writes, concerns how agents “strive either to keep social orders metastable or to bring about their evolution.”<sup>37</sup>

Overall, then, evolutionary as Adler’s theory of world ordering may be, he nonetheless gives pride of place to intentionality and value judgments as the bases for innovation or creative variation.<sup>38</sup> Agency connects to change in three main ways: (1) learning within communities of practice (negotiation and contestation of meanings); (2) competition between communities (with some having preferential growth over others) and (3) the invention of new actors. Ultimately, then, agency is central to the reproduction and transformation of social orders, but it is a form of agency that is based neither on instrumental calculation nor on deep internalization, but rather on practical reflexivity: “Practitioners make value judgments about their performance and its outcomes, and if disenchanted, intentionally act differently from before.”<sup>39</sup> Social orders are always up for grabs at the individual level; but communities of practice tend to impose constraints on such volatility.

#### 4) *What is the International Order Made of?*

We now switch gear and move from first-order to second-order issues, focusing on world politics per se. What do the different conceptions of order – including its creation, reproduction and change – have to say about the international realm? What, if anything, is particular to this level of analysis compared to other social spheres? A classic answer to this question comes from Bull, according to whom the preservation of sovereignty is the basic goal that all participants to the international order share. Fittingly, his definition of international order rests on this specificity – “a pattern of activity that sustains the elementary goals of the society of states.”<sup>40</sup> The peculiar institutions of international

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.    <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.    <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.    <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.    <sup>40</sup> Bull 1977, 8.



society, such as war, diplomacy, international law and the balance of power, are all geared toward the logic of state sovereignty. Note that there is nothing liberal about Bull's notion of the international order: in "the absence of social solidarity," he writes, only "common interests" can provide a stable foundation.

By contrast, Ikenberry explicitly qualifies the post-1945 international order as a liberal one. Like Bull (and contrary to Adler, see later), Ikenberry focuses on states and states alone. But the substance of the rules that comprise the international order is more specific than for Bull. Beyond the preservation of sovereignty, a liberal order is distinct in that it is "open" and "rules-based." Openness for Ikenberry primarily refers to "trade and exchange on the basis of mutual gain";<sup>41</sup> whereas a rules-based order is "at least partially autonomous from the exercise of state power."<sup>42</sup> Horizontal as both characteristics may be, liberal orders also admit variation along the vertical dimension. According to Ikenberry, for instance, the American-led international order is a hybrid form in which multilateralism combines with patron-client relationships, power balance and hierarchy. Put differently, there is one liberal order, structured around open rules, but it can accommodate hierarchical deviations.

Adler's notion of international order differs in significant ways, beginning with the fact that it admits a plurality of overlapping orders. His theory of world ordering also challenges state centrism, putting communities of practice (which may comprise not only powerful states but also any other kind of actor) in the driver's seat. What helps qualify the orders under study are the key practices around which communities converge. Adler suggests thinking of international orders as fluctuating along a continuum bordered by nationalism at one end and liberalism at the other. What he calls "global anchoring practices"<sup>43</sup> are dominant modes of action that help distinguish one order from the others (although they always overlap in some ways). Nationalistic practices, for instance, include mercantilism, power politics, populism and immigration controls. By contrast, liberal practices cover regional integration, free trade, multilateralism and international law. In our current era, Adler observes, liberal and nationalistic communities of practice clash through the enactment of these contending practices, generating fluctuations and contradictions.

<sup>41</sup> Ikenberry 2011, 18. <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 18. <sup>43</sup> Adler 2019, 153.

The fact that “[c]ognitive evolution theory suggests a concept of multiple international social orders”<sup>44</sup> significantly transforms our understanding of international orders, as well as their evolution. As Adler explains: “Existing and emerging international social orders can be superimposed for extended periods of time when the existing order has not yet evolved but the emerging order has still not taken hold.”<sup>45</sup> In order to capture this flux, he coins the concept of “balance of practices,” in which clashing modes of action coexist and often rub against one another. Adler gives the example of the European Union’s response to the ongoing refugee crisis, in which liberal and nationalistic practices compete as part of the policymaking process. In addition, Adler’s theory helps capture the infinite nature of international orders, which “have never covered the entire globe and have always been a matter of perspective and context.”<sup>46</sup> Instead of unicity and homogeneity, then, we have an international realm characterized by multiplicity and heterogeneity at every step of the way.

### 5) *Where is International Order Headed?*

The final question that we address regards the current state and prospects of the international liberal order. Ikenberry’s *Liberal Leviathan* makes a relatively sanguine appraisal here: the liberal international order is undergoing an “authority crisis,” due to “shifts in power, contested norms of sovereignty, threats related to nonstate actors, and the scope of participating states.”<sup>47</sup> That said, Ikenberry rushes to add, the resilience of the order remains unprecedented, primarily because of low barriers to entry, which facilitate the integration of challengers. In addition, the absence of a real contender to the liberal order helps maintain it even in the face of its authority crisis: “Appealing alternatives to an open and rule-based order simply have not crystallized.”<sup>48</sup>

As we have already seen, Adler rejects such an assumption of unicity for the liberal international order: “Even at the height of American power after World War II, and after the fall of the Soviet empire in 1989,” he writes, “international order consisted of a plurality of international social orders.”<sup>49</sup> Put differently, the liberal order has never

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 6.    <sup>45</sup> Ibid., 23.    <sup>46</sup> Ibid., 24.    <sup>47</sup> Ikenberry 2011, 46.    <sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Adler 2019, 142.

been dominant to the point of displacing entirely its alternatives. That said, Adler and Ikenberry do agree that the liberal order is currently enduring a serious crisis. For the former, however, it is difficult to predict how competing communities of practice will feature in the making and remaking of international orders. Contrary to Ikenberry, then, it is not the substance of the liberal order, as much as the productive effect of practices and the competition between communities of practice, that are likely to determine the fate of multilateralism and open trade.

How can we conjecture about the future of the liberal order, then? While Adler provides analytically general mechanisms that operate in any social realm, Holsti suggests a series of requirements that are peculiar to the international realm of sovereign states.<sup>50</sup> On top of legitimacy, he argues that international order requires a system of governance, the possibility of assimilation, a deterrent system, conflict-resolving procedures, a consensus on war, procedures for peaceful change and some anticipation of future issues. These are, in fact, the conditions for stability in the international society. For Holsti, the post-World War II order suffers from insufficient mechanisms of deterrence, peaceful change and anticipation, a problem that has, and continues to, put its resilience to test. This argument, however, does not take into account the specificities of the current period, including the rise of nationalism across the globe.

Adler, for his part, understands the fate of the liberal order in terms of its main alternative, the nationalist one. His claim, which is partly indeterminate, is that “[f]luctuations of practices (particularly contestation of the present social order) may be approaching a sociocognitive threshold. If it gets crossed, Europe’s social order could tip and evolve.”<sup>51</sup> In order to tell where the liberal international order is headed, then, we need to study – empirically – the balance of practices that currently structure these two communities. Equipped with Adler’s mechanisms of change, centered around performative power, learning and competition, we may not predict the future, but we can certainly better understand its making.

Adler does not stop with recognizing the contingency of world ordering, however. His theory is also explicitly normative. Practitioners have a responsibility in the evolution of international

<sup>50</sup> Holsti 1991. <sup>51</sup> Adler 2019, 7.

orders: their practices are better, in the normative sense, when they are based on an acknowledgment of our common humanity. *A Theory of World Ordering*, then, not only puts forward a conceptual apparatus in which norms feature prominently, as in Reus-Smit or, to a lesser extent, Ikenberry. It also suggests that global practices can evolve toward the better – nondeterministic as these normative processes may be (more on this later).

### **The Building Blocks of Cognitive Evolution Theory**

Now that we have located Adler's theory in the IR literature on international orders, we want to parse out the key components of his (meta-) theoretical framework. Adler's social theory of cognitive evolution is built on six core building blocks: (1) evolution and process; (2) social learning, agency and background knowledge; (3) practices and communities of practice; (4) creativity, reflexivity and deontic power; (5) social order and multiplicity and (6) bounded progress. This section discusses each of them in turn.

#### *Evolution and Process*

Adler's theory is based on evolutionary logic. Evolution describes the incremental process of social transformation. This is the key parallel between cognitive evolution and biological evolution. Notwithstanding their fundamental differences, the worlds that social scientists and natural scientists seek to understand do share a crucial feature: they are constantly changing. Beyond this similarity, there are also major differences between cognitive and biological evolution, starting with agency. Cognitive evolution is underpinned by agential processes. Political actors do certain things rather than others, and this makes the social world evolve in certain ways rather than others. Adler divides the process of cognitive evolution into three main phases: innovation, selection and diffusion.<sup>52</sup> Overall, the evolutionary metaphor is persuasive for two reasons: first, it shifts the analytical focus to the institutional environment, where the selection process takes place; and second, it points out that the process lacks a necessary direction. History and the evolution of ideas are not teleological processes guided by a supreme entity.

<sup>52</sup> Adler 1991, 55–58.

Adler's emphases on becoming and agency hang together. In the social world, the former cannot be explained without scrutinizing the latter. Equally important, Adler asserts that we cannot make sense of agency without taking a close look at the evolution of the social world. This kind of ontology requires not only an epistemology that helps make sense of change but also one that does not reduce the study of change to linear causal relationships. Adler, therefore, settles on what may be described as a pragmatist epistemology. Early American pragmatists, especially Peirce, James and Dewey feature prominently in his thinking, as do Mead, Toulmin and D. Campbell. Furthermore, Adler borrows from complexity theory and from Popper. The former is an important source of inspiration for him primarily because it is all about nonlinear relationships. For his part, Popper tried to grapple with something that makes Adler wonder too: there is not just a material world; there are also subjective and intersubjective worlds. It is Popper's epistemological ideas on these worlds that Adler is particularly interested in.

"Becoming" lies at the center of Adler's thinking about international politics and the social world. Taking his cue from Heraclitus, he starts from the premise that one can never cross the same river twice. For Adler "the idea of 'becoming' considers everything to be in flux, as a permanent process of change and evolution, even that which appears to be static."<sup>53</sup> This is a critical point for Adler, because in his view order happens through fluctuations (see earlier). Evolutionary logic is key because it paves the way to a thoroughly processual understanding of the social. The social world – interacting with the material world – is never carved into stone. It evolves.

In line with his ontology of becoming, Adler assumes that orders evolve. Not only do orders never stand still for portrait, but the kind of change to be understood is evolution rather than distribution (or redistribution), transformation or friction.<sup>54</sup> Material changes are connected to changes of order, for example, through external shocks. At the same time, order can also be meta-stable. But even meta-stability involves evolution, insofar as it is generated through expansion. Meta-stability, defined by Adler "as practices' continuity in a stable state of flow below a sociocognitive threshold,"<sup>55</sup> is akin to resilience.<sup>56</sup> Communities of practice (more on this later) expand to other

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 43. <sup>54</sup> Adler 2019, 156–64. <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 3. <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

geographical and/or institutional environments. Echoing the literature on resilience,<sup>57</sup> this phenomenon is not about order staying exactly the same. It is about order being adapted over and over.

### *Social Learning, Agency and Background Knowledge*

In Adler's theory, evolution is cognitive in the sense that it describes a process of social learning. Put differently, it is knowledge, especially background knowledge, which varies here. Accordingly, for Adler "learning means the evolution of background knowledge (intersubjective knowledge and discourse that adopt the form of human dispositions and practices)."<sup>58</sup> Here the connections to American pragmatism should be clear. Adler's understanding of pragmatism includes a careful theoretical engagement with constitutive and causal relationships. This sets him apart from epistemological postulates of "following the actors."<sup>59</sup> Adler vows not just to follow how actors cognitively cope with the world in a particular set of circumstances. He aims for uncovering generalizable processes through which agents figure out what to do, how this affects the social context that constitutes them, and vice versa.

Thus, learning describes the acquisition, transformation and invention of knowledge. For Adler, learning occurs primarily – though not exclusively – via experience. Even more importantly, learning is social in that it occurs via joint participation in practice (more on this later). This is the agentic dimension of Adler's theory: people's ideas change because they do things together. He works from a socially thick notion of agency, which is very different from the focus on individual beliefs or perceptions that one often finds in social science. For Adler, agents "manage" selection according to their own agential plans, which are formed socially, intersubjectively and within an institutional structure. At least in that sense, learning and development are not purely arbitrary, and furthermore the agents and structures are not separated.

How do orders evolve into certain directions rather than others? The short answer to this is: agency! Very few IR theorists have gone at such great length to address agency. Adler lists no less than seven attributes

<sup>57</sup> Young 1999, 133–62; Armitage 2008, 15; Schmidt 2016; Root 2017; Bourbeau 2018.

<sup>58</sup> Adler 2005, 20. <sup>59</sup> Latour 2005, 12.

of the concept.<sup>60</sup> The most important one – something akin to his *Menschenbild* (image of human beings) – is creativity. This is an analytical clue he borrows from Joas.<sup>61</sup> In Adler's thought, context and creativity do not exclude one another. On the very contrary, context prompts agents to be creative.

Adler's understanding of cognitive evolution is informed by, but also goes beyond, what he labels Giddens' "social functionalism" as well as Elster's individualism and intentionalism. It is also quite removed from various established strands of institutionalism such as historical institutionalism and rational choice institutionalism. Adler elaborates much more on agency and change than Giddens does, and, in contrast to the British social theorist, he relies on the concept of practices in order to overcome the dualism of structure and agency.<sup>62</sup> Adler borrows considerably from the insightful questions that Elster asks about agency, but he rejects his eventual conclusion, that is, to settle for a focus on individual actors who act fully intentionally. Finally, while Adler is very interested in institutions, he criticizes historical institutionalism for reasons not all that dissimilar from his critique of Giddens. Relying too much on structural forces (path dependency), it is unclear where change should come from. His criticism against rational choice institutionalism echoes his remarks about Elster: Adler is skeptical about individualist and fully intentional accounts of agency.

For Adler, neither structure nor agency is ontologically prior. They affect one another in profound ways. While this is an argument about an *aurea mediocritas* (golden middle), it is important to underline that he puts more emphasis on agency than most IR theorists. This, of course, applies to systemic theories of IR, no matter whether they conceptualize structure in material<sup>63</sup> or ideational<sup>64</sup> terms. Yet it also applies to early studies on norms<sup>65</sup> in which norms were assumed to weigh heavily on political agency, poststructuralist work<sup>66</sup> and Gramsci-inspired research<sup>67</sup> in which intersubjectivities of domination leave little room for agency to overcome radical inequality, and even literature that draws on Bourdieu.<sup>68</sup> In Adler's work, the concept of practices features as prominently as in Bourdieu. He also draws from

<sup>60</sup> Adler 2019, 198–99. <sup>61</sup> Joas 1996. <sup>62</sup> Adler 2019, 39.

<sup>63</sup> Waltz 1979. <sup>64</sup> Wendt 1999. <sup>65</sup> Berger 1996. <sup>66</sup> Walker 1993.

<sup>67</sup> Gill and Law 1989. <sup>68</sup> Hopf 2010; Pouliot 2016.

Bourdieu's understandings of the field, doxa and habitus to a considerable extent. But he rejects Bourdieu's theory of agency as being too restrictive.

### *Practices and Communities of Practice*

For Adler, the social gets manifested in practices, defined as "knowledge-constituted, meaningful patterns of socially recognized activity embedded in communities, routines and organizations that structure experience."<sup>69</sup> As he writes, "we know and understand through action and practice."<sup>70</sup> This is because practices "structure consciousness."<sup>71</sup> Their role is not causal but constitutive, by establishing a common platform for interaction: "rather than rules mechanistically 'telling' people what to practice, background knowledge works by enabling linguistic and perceptual interpretations, thus, by structuring consciousness." It is interesting to note how Adler's persistent interest in ideas fashioned his current understanding of practices. Unlike certain accounts of habitus, in Adler's hands practices bear the cognitive features of ideas, subject to learning, cognitive evolution and judgment. Those reflective cognitions mark humans as thinking agents, working relentlessly and consciously toward change and normative progress.

By analogy, think of a group of practitioners as being akin to a field of sunflowers. In general, the flowers look in the same direction – that of the sun, even though there always are a few plants defying the pattern for a variety of reasons. Human beings are similarly oriented by practice. Practices provide ready templates for action, which exert a centripetal force on practitioners. People need not use them all the time or always in the exact same way, but as a general rule, they will refer to them, if only because it makes social interaction possible in the first place. In the theory of cognitive evolution, then, collective-background knowledge creates the propensity for similar action.<sup>72</sup>

As such, practices are fundamentally social in nature. And because they produce "interconnectedness," practices lead to horizontal integration, which is – in contrast to vertical integration – conducive to learning.<sup>73</sup> For Adler, communities of practice are the agents of change. They play a crucial role in "meaning investment"<sup>74</sup> that can transform

<sup>69</sup> Adler 2008, 198. <sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 118. <sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 16. <sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 166–67.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 183. <sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.



even the most deeply held “background knowledge.” Put differently, social learning – the essence of cognitive evolution – happens by way of communities of practice. Knowledge moves around and morphs via the joint participation in practices. This stands in opposition to what Adler calls the “‘bucket’ view of learning, in which people add knowledge and skills to the mind as if it were a bucket.”<sup>75</sup>

The concept of communities of practice does a number of important things for Adler. Most centrally, it provides him with a vehicle for social learning. Social learning happens by way of communities of practice. Since these communities overlap, agents are never part of just one community. What Wenger refers to as boundary objects, that is, “artefacts, documents, terms, concepts, and other forms of reification,”<sup>76</sup> crisscross. This makes actors engage in brokering and translation. Brokering means that agents “introduce elements of one practice into another.” Translation is “relating things that were previously different.”<sup>77</sup> These overlaps also obtain at the global level: boundary regions, for instance, are productive spaces in terms of cognitive evolution.

Communities of practice are also important because, beyond being the crucible of learning, they also favor, to a variable extent, mobilization and collective action. For instance, a community’s material and organizational capabilities help explain the differential rate of success that its practices enjoy, both within it and on its outside. As such, communities of practice “compete with other communities for the successful institutionalization of their practices.”<sup>78</sup> A key part of the theory precisely seeks to explain the differential rate of success that various communities obtain.

### *Creativity, Reflexivity and Deontic Power*

Joint participation is at the source of creativity, which Adler, taking his cue from Joas, conceives as a collective process. New knowledge is the product of interaction, which enables reflexivity and the problematization of existing background knowledge. Nothing comes out *de novo*.<sup>79</sup>

In line with his epistemology, Adler aims for a detailed theoretical specification of agential processes. He identifies four of them:

<sup>75</sup> Adler 2005, 18.    <sup>76</sup> Adler 2019, 226.    <sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>78</sup> Adler 2008, 201.    <sup>79</sup> Adler 1991, 56.

“practice-driven changes,” “apprenticeship through learning,” “agents’ reflexivity and judgment” and “social power.”<sup>80</sup> Through these processes, which are “inherently intertwined,” actors come to learn together. Practice-driven changes naturalize new background knowledge “through self-fulfilling expectations.” Apprenticeships change identities around. Judgment is of key importance. Actors denaturalize the old, for example, by delegitimizing it. This entails moving from habit to reflection. Change, according to Adler, involves reflective dimensions (alongside non-reflected ones).

How does new knowledge develop into a practice? Adler’s answer to this question is selective retention. There are two kinds of selective retentions. Horizontal retention happens via expansion. Communities of practice expand further geographically or organizationally. Vertical retention is about inheritance. Actors pass on practices to one another. Thus, some may be new practitioners but they use (at least a considerable amount of) established practices. Selective retention is a particular kind of institutionalization. It is not the kind of institutional design that many scholars address, but rather the reification of social institutions as social practices. Adler again borrows from Wenger to argue that while designed institutions matter, ultimately it is practice that matters more.<sup>81</sup> This kind of institutionalization has, according to Adler, something to do with layering and conversion. The former is about grafting “new elements onto an otherwise stable institutional framework.” The latter is more far-reaching. It is about the “adoption of new goals or the incorporations of new groups into the coalitions on which institutions are founded.”<sup>82</sup> Adler hints here at something like rules of the game.

Agency naturally leads to the issue of power. As we have seen earlier, Adler conceives of power in two main ways: performative and deontic. To start with the former, he writes that “[p]erformative power is the capacity to present a dramatic and credible performance on the world stage.”<sup>83</sup> In the dramaturgical tradition of Jeffrey Alexander, Adler is interested in the constitution of society via practice, that is, competent performance. In this scheme, “[p]erformative power means using the contingency of interpretations and performances.”<sup>84</sup> When it comes to the deontic face of power, Adler builds on Searle and focuses on the

<sup>80</sup> Adler 2019, 29–30. <sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 252. See Wenger 1998.

<sup>82</sup> Thelen quoted in Adler 2019, 258. <sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 18–19. <sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

assignment of status and function to things, institutions and people. Deontic power is unequally distributed not only among practitioners but also between communities. This facilitates the diffusion of some background knowledge over other. As he explains, rights, duties, obligations, requirements, permissions, authorization and entitlements become stabilized by means of practice.<sup>85</sup>

This is where Adler's theory of cognitive evolution has a decidedly normative bent. In line with Rouse, mutual accountability is what allows practitioners to go on, to interact collaboratively or competitively around a variety of projects.<sup>86</sup> This deontic process explains how society comes together, including on the international stage. But the deontic power of practice also describes how normative change becomes possible, by allowing practitioners to reflect, critique and justify certain ways of doing things over others.

### *Social Order and Multiplicity*

As discussed in the first section of this chapter, for Adler international order is not just one order but consists of a configuration of international social orders. In other words, social orders are multiple: coexisting, clashing or alternatively mutually reinforcing. In a coauthored 2009 article, Adler explored the overlap between distinct repertoires of security practices, for instance, security community and balance of power practices cohabiting in the very same regional space in the form of a "balance of practices." Emphasizing the heterogeneity of international order, Adler and Greve argued that different systems of governance coexist and overlap,<sup>87</sup> sometimes intentionally but often as historically contingent patterns. Later on, in 2010, Adler built on Eisenstadt's concept of "multiple modernities" as another instantiation of the fluidity and inchoateness of social orders as patterns of practices. Obama's nuclear disarmament agenda, which Adler discussed in a 2013 chapter, similarly combines realpolitik practices with the global governance repertoire. This is what social orders look like in practice.

Orders, which are akin to fields, are constituted by communities of practice. In Adler's process ontology of "order through fluctuations," "social orders originate and derive from, and are incessantly being constituted by, practices." Cognitive evolution happens through the

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 130. <sup>86</sup> Rouse 2007. <sup>87</sup> Adler and Greve 2009, 80.

joining of, and competition between, communities of practice, which are the vehicles and sites of learning and innovation. Because cognition is social, based on interaction and engagement with practice, creativity is a socially emergent collective process. Here we see how the concept of practice provides Adler with an endogenous explanation for change and transformation. At the same time, resilience is also a product of contestation. This, of course, echoes complexity theory, from which Adler has taken inspiration for about half a century.

Thus, on top of agency and learning there are structural elements in the theory as well. By presuming the multiplicity of social orders, Adler locates a source of change in the inevitable friction between social configurations. Communities of practice bump into one another, and practitioners often participate in several of them at the same time. Reflexivity is made possible by such interference. And while “‘friction’ between orders promotes change,” crises for their part act as “cognitive punches.”<sup>88</sup> They form the structural context of creativity and reflexivity.

Multiplicity is important because for Adler changes emerge out of “liminar situations,” which spark “cognitive thresholds.” Of particular interest are the boundaries between these orders. Following Wenger, Adler directs our analytical gaze toward studying these boundaries.<sup>89</sup> To put this simply, actors are never just steeped in one context but always in several ones. Practices overlap. So do communities of practice and, thus, social orders. As Adler explains, “we should consider world order to be a constellation and landscape of practice fields and communities of practice, some of which overlap, others which complement and depend on each other, and still others which are in contestation . . . Cutting across multiple international social orders, however, are *global anchoring practices* [which] straddle a spectrum between interconnect-edness and disassociation.”<sup>90</sup> For the former, Adler lists multilateral diplomacy and international contractual law; and national security, mercantilism and populist policy for the latter.

### *Better Practices and Bounded Progress*

In 2005, Adler endorsed a communitarian multilateralism,<sup>91</sup> or cooperation of the like-minded, in effecting progress in world politics.

<sup>88</sup> Adler 2019, 162. <sup>89</sup> Wenger 1998. <sup>90</sup> Ibid., 153. <sup>91</sup> Adler 2005.

His normative theory got even more explicit in his discussion of the European civilization and liberal practices.<sup>92</sup> In these works, Adler explicitly supports postmodern practices such as the elimination of borders and postnational citizenship, while also calling for more “relational practices” (e.g., self-restraint) to serve as “cultural roundabouts” for encountering the Other in world politics. As he concluded in 2010: “To my mind, practices of self-restraint and mutual tolerance are not only better practices than colonialism and imperialism – they also suggest the opportunity to establish civilizational encounters on mutual dignity and respect.”<sup>93</sup> In this way, Adler comes full circle in his book. By emphasizing the deontic power of practice, he weaves together the analytical and the normative dimensions of world politics. Mutual accountability is what allows practitioners to go on, to interact collaboratively or competitively around a variety of projects. This deontic process explains how society comes together, including on the international stage. But the deontic power of practice also describes how normative change becomes possible, by allowing practitioners to reflect, critique and justify certain ways of doing things over others. This is, perhaps, the destination that Adler has pursued for his entire career – spanning the divide between explaining and effecting political change.

Coming full circle means that Adler revisits his former engagement with the notion of progress and also examines how progress conforms with cognitive evolution. As was analyzed earlier, for Adler the attractiveness of evolution as metaphor is, among other things, in its not being teleological. Evolution as we came to know it depends on contingencies, and it lacks any predestined direction. This is surely different from how we usually think of progress: as the opposite of random change, in being intended and directional. Thus, Adler has to come up with a theoretical framework combining the two distinct notions in relative comfort. He offers a fruitful middle ground that transcends what appears to be unbridgeable dichotomy between the analytical and the normative. Understanding “practices as the repositories of ethical collective knowledge,”<sup>94</sup> Adler goes on to develop a network of novel concepts that together help him overcome problematic dichotomies, such as positive approaches versus normative approaches, communitarianism versus cosmopolitanism, transcendental versus immanent

<sup>92</sup> Adler 2010, 2013. <sup>93</sup> Adler 2010, 91. <sup>94</sup> Adler 2019, 266.

values, the Enlightenment idea of progress versus normative relativism, practice versus discourse and interconnectedness versus disassociation.

The concepts that take center stage in Adler's normative/political theory are "better practices" and "bounded progress," along with "common humanity" and "realist humanism." In tune with his Dewey-inspired pragmatist ethics, he defines better practices as "those that carry in their background knowledge constitutive ethical values about common humanity's worth and are emergent in practice, namely practice (and practitioners) are creative of ethical values."<sup>95</sup> Pragmatism enables Adler to ground values in the practices and their communities, as well as in the background knowledge surrounding practices. It also allows him to avoid overly meta-ethical discussions: values and practices are united together and provide the justifications for each other. Values are endowed with quality, which in its turn means value. True, there is in here a bit of circularity, but from a pragmatist perspective this circularity means that ends are shaped in "processes of ends deliberation" and "in response to concrete dilemmas."<sup>96</sup> Circularity is resolved by theoretically turning to deliberation and thus practically to the intersubjective process of social construction. Moreover, the pragmatic moves allow Adler to conceive practices as endowed with deontic power, as the driving force of cognitive evolution directing common humanity in bounded progress. Progress can then conform with cognitive evolution because the above-mentioned conceptual schemata reconceptualizes it as bounded; that is, as "neither deterministic, unconditional, and teleological, a concept of progress usually associated with the Enlightenment idea of progress, nor relativist, as in anything goes, or as in 'good' is whatever I say it is."<sup>97</sup>

None of this means that progress is guaranteed. On the contrary, all we can say is that although "progress may not happen, it still can happen."<sup>98</sup> Bounded progress occurs in this torturous and nonlinear process, otherwise known as human history through which better practices carried in and by communities of practice "spread, both horizontally and vertically, perhaps even to the global level, they constitute propensities for individuals', peoples', and states' moving away from inequality, authoritarian rule, war, and human rights abuses." Those better practices are infused with collective knowledge of a common humanity and they place the quality of human life as

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 270. <sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 272. <sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 267. <sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

a primary entitlement to which we are all entitled, being members of common humanity. Those better practices, while not guaranteed, can still happen and evolve “away from international policies that cause war, poverty, and human rights violations” toward, that is, the “better angels” of “our social orders.”<sup>99</sup>

### Critical Questions and Extensions for Research

Innovative as it may be, Adler’s social theory of cognitive evolution also raises a number of questions to be taken up by the community of IR scholars and beyond. One of the strengths of the book is that it succeeds in opening “new vistas” for studying world ordering. This section, engaging critically with Adler’s descriptive, explanatory and normative theorizing, identifies seven key avenues for further research.

First, how exactly do social orders relate to one another? Adler seems to assume that they overlap and form horizontal relations. But we probably need more research into these relations. Some orders are related to one another while others are not. What is more, some orders that are related to one another may do so horizontally but others may do so vertically.<sup>100</sup> We may encounter subordinate and superordinate orders. Something like a diplomatic field may amount to a meta-order in this complex constellation. Related, how are orders constituted within? What about contestation and differentiation within an order, and, thus, within a community of practice? This is an important question because Adler pays close attention to boundaries. If there are important boundaries within a field, this should also prompt the creativity of agents and it should have repercussions for change. To put this differently, orders vary and some variations may make change more likely. This is a point that Krause makes convincingly for the study of fields.<sup>101</sup>

Second, how exactly does the material world shape cognitive evolution? Adler insists on the role of the physical world but he does not supply specific mechanisms. For example, Wendt argues that material conditions impact ideas at two main levels: they define the physical limits of possibility, and they help define the costs and benefits of alternative courses of action.<sup>102</sup> For his part, Adler refers to

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 283. <sup>100</sup> Fligstein and McAdam 2015. <sup>101</sup> Krause 2017.

<sup>102</sup> Wendt 2000.

“assemblage” as “emergent unities of ‘things’ and ‘sayings’, which come together in a single context and respect the heterogeneity of their components”<sup>103</sup> – for example, the wasp and the orchid. But how do matter and knowledge come together in a social assemblage? What is more, what is the role of power and capacity here? Adler writes that “[p]ower is also associated with communities of practice’s material and institutional resources, for instance, objects and technology that a community of practice shares.”<sup>104</sup> By implication, power is not only performative and deontic, but also material, yet the connections between the three are in need of further clarification.

Third and related, why do some players have more deontic power than others? As Guzzini argues (this volume), the problem with any power argument is that it explains cause in terms of its effects: a powerful actor is one who exerts influence over others. But can we describe the power landscape otherwise than via its effects? If we are to avoid the *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* fallacy, this would seem to be an analytical requirement. Adler writes that “[t]he reason that practices and the background knowledge bound with them possess deontic power is easy to see: practicing or knowing in practice means to competently act on the basis of status-functions, which are collectively created, recognized, and legitimized by a community of practice.”<sup>105</sup> Critics may find the argument a bit tautological.

Adler argues that a key to cognitive evolution is to explain “how communities of practice establish themselves preferentially.” One way in which they do so is by wielding superior deontic power. But where do they get that power from? In other words, what are the sources of deontic power, other than successful performance, which it instantiates? How does one cultivate, or alternatively, lose such power? Is it possible for deontic power to be inefficient and if so why? And how can we operationalize deontic power? More broadly, in practice what is the difference between deontic power and what Adler calls epistemic practical authority? Last but not least, how do power and interests, as well as power and ideas, intersect and implicate each other?

Indeed, taking his cue from Wenger, Adler understands practice as the vehicle of horizontal social integration: shared patterns of doing things bring people together in the form of joint enactment. Correct as this insight may be, it is not entirely clear how it relates to another

<sup>103</sup> Adler 2019, 124–25. <sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 175. <sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.



aspect of practice, by which (in)competent performances foster vertical integration. Here practice pits people against one another, as part of an agonistic process of struggle over defining and molding the world and its unstable meanings. Of course, both views are probably correct, capturing complementary dimensions of social life. The challenge consists in understanding the competing effects of practice on social order and integration. For instance, while it is true that the mutual accountability upon which practice rests brings communities together, its mechanisms of reputation and peer recognition also generate friction and stratification dynamics. Can we square this circle, and if so, how?

Fourth, if reflectivity and creativity are the (agentic) engines of cognitive evolution, how can we determine the specific directions in which they move social orders? Put differently, what makes agents “tick”? This, of course, is one of the most difficult questions social scientists ask. Adler provides us with four different agential mechanisms and a number of related concepts, ranging from creativity to selective retention, from habit to reflection, from transaction to practices and so on. Different perspectives on cognitive evolution may rearrange these mechanisms and concepts somewhat differently. They may also part ways with some mechanisms and some concepts, moving, for example, away from reflexivity or even further toward it.

Adler argues that reflexivity emerges out of liminar situations; but aren't multiple orders always in tension? This is an important issue because liminar situations are arguably the norm rather than the exception. By implication, actors consistently find themselves in a potential cognitive crisis in which they need to resolve epistemic tensions. If that is the case, what explains that reflexivity is not more prevalent than it actually is in the world? Adler writes that “practices are also creative. Practitioners, through understanding, interpretation, imagination, and experimentation.”<sup>106</sup> But then, what are the differences between reflexivity, creativity and judgment?

Furthermore, what can Adler's mechanism tell us about the substance of change, that is, the specific content of background knowledge that wins the day? Overall it seems fair to say that Adler specifies why actors are sometimes able to “think outside of the box”; yet he does not tell us what these outside-of-the-box ideas will be. For instance, he writes that “variation from a cognitive-evolutionary perspective is

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

always creative . . . creative variation arises from the contingency of social life, rather than only from intentions and choices.” The best we can say is that cognitive evolution is likely to point in the direction of those actors and communities that exert the most deontic power. But as we just explained, it is not clear that we can specify *ex ante* who these powerful players are; we often have to wait until change has occurred before we know.

Adler also suggests that “change is nonlinear and dynamic: social orders evolve pushed by past practices and pulled by future practices.”<sup>107</sup> But what does it mean, exactly, to say that future practices pull current ones? Here the critical link is provided by the notion of expectations, which Adler theorizes as a key component of human dispositions. Human beings formulate plans; these plans are informed by the past, concern the future and are acted upon here and now: “Action is ‘pushed’ by the past from background knowledge dispositions, but is also ‘pulled’ toward the future with foresight, anticipation, and expectations.”<sup>108</sup>

Fifth, what role does communication play in cognitive evolution? If learning takes place via joint participation, then chances are that the participants will communicate, tacitly and/or explicitly, with each other along the way. Instead of a broader concept or set of concepts addressing communication, Adler relies on a narrow one, that is, performances. While discussing performances, however, the authors he cites firmly link performances to other aspects of communication. For all the differences in the arguments they put forward, this similarity applies to Dewey, Alexander as well as Boltanski and Thévenot.<sup>109</sup> While picking a certain aspect of communication at the expense of others is fully in line with current IR theorizing,<sup>110</sup> we are not sure whether it is entirely in sync with a social theory of cognitive evolution.

Authors taking the multiple aspects of communication seriously have long pointed out the importance of liminal spaces. This applies especially to Bakhtin.<sup>111</sup> His work provides important clues for how

<sup>107</sup> Adler and Greve 2009, 83.

<sup>108</sup> Adler 2019, 212. Note that even the label “social theory of cognitive evolution” suggests bridging the gap between cognitive psychology (“cognitive evolution”) and constructivism (“social theory”). Recent works trying to do so include Lebow (2008), Hymans (2010) and Kornprobst (2019).

<sup>109</sup> Dewey 1925; Alexander 2004; Boltanski and Thévenot 2006.

<sup>110</sup> For a critique, see Kornprobst and Senn 2016. <sup>111</sup> Bakhtin 1986.

communication and liminal spaces hang together. Indeed, another promising starting point for developing a fuller understanding of communication is Adler's own previous work, for instance, when he engages with Deutsch and his transactionalist understanding of communication,<sup>112</sup> writes about narratives<sup>113</sup> and does empirical work on seminar diplomacy.<sup>114</sup>

Sixth, more work remains to be done about what triggers the seven mechanisms of cognitive evolution that Adler theorizes. Following Elster, mechanisms are conceived of as propensities and potentials, which need to be sparked in order to produce their effects. In Adler's theory, it is not always clear what exactly these triggers are. We know that crises give "cognitive punches," but we do not know how to specify crises *ex ante*, that is to say, prior to becoming an opening for change. For example, there are four agentic mechanisms of cognitive evolution: (1) practice-driven changes in dispositions and expectations; (2) transactions, negotiation and contestation processes; (3) socially generated reflection and judgment and (4) practitioners' usage of material and sociocultural environments (deontic power). The connections and overlap between these agentic processes are not always easy to pin down, especially when it comes to empirical operationalization.

The same goes, although perhaps to a lesser extent, for the "three sociocultural mechanisms" of cognitive evolution: (1) endogenous collective learning within communities of practice; (2) competition among them and (3) innovation of communities ("invention of new actors"). How do these structural, macro forces interact with the processes of agency? More to the point, how do they connect to what Adler calls the mechanisms of socio-cognitive evolution – epistemic practical authority of communities of practice and meaning fixation by practices? In this overabundance of social mechanisms, the empirical researcher is a bit at loss in order to trace changes in international orders.

Seventh, there are normative issues awaiting further reflection. Throughout his writings Adler explored the power of ideas in their various facets and mechanisms. As a constructivist, he is keenly aware of the relationships between ideas and power, so much so that he develops the notion of epistemic security, "the validity of what we can collectively consider as knowledge." Yet Adler spends less time pondering the complementary critical sensitivity of the obverse

<sup>112</sup> Adler 1992. <sup>113</sup> Adler 2010, 204–05. <sup>114</sup> Adler 1997a, 268–71.

relations: that between power and ideas. For instance, how do hegemonic actors influence the working of epistemic communities, and even more deeply the constitution of ideas, intersubjective knowledge, background knowledge and knowledge as being manifested in practices and in communities of practice? It is not that Adler is oblivious to the possibility that ideas create wrong and even evil. He knows history well enough to be aware of this possibility (and this is another source for his attempt to weave together normative and explanatory theories). But the development of ideas and the selection process – that is, cognitive evolution – at points glosses over the many ways in which power and interest meddle in the life of ideas.

From a more critical perspective, a perspective committed to the emancipatory potential of ideas, ideas need not be some neutral apparatus, fitting and serving a universal purpose. Interestingly enough, Adler argues with Bernstein that authority is involved in the constitution of epistemes.<sup>115</sup> Add this to his correct observation that constructivism lacks a theory of politics,<sup>116</sup> and what we get is a major gap to be filled. One way would be to embrace the full potential of critical theory and explore in depth the constitutive relations of ideas and power, which are reciprocal and mutual. Theorizing these relations would open the door to a fruitful constructivist theory of politics and to a fuller understanding of the relations between multiple potential progresses and cognitive evolution.

## Chapter Overview

The contributors to this book explore different vistas for researching world ordering by engaging with Adler's work at the meta-theoretical, conceptual and/or analytical-normative level(s). In Chapter 2, Stefano Guzzini zooms in on power, observing some inconsistencies in the way that Adler borrows from John Searle's and Jeffrey Alexander's respective social theories. Because he equates power with agency rather than with structural domination, argues Guzzini, Adler ends up overburdening what the concept of power can deliver, especially in light of his communitarian political theory and process ontology. In Chapter 3, Alena Drieschova looks into the nexus between the material and the ideational. Linking New Materialism to cognitive evolution, she seeks

<sup>115</sup> Adler and Bernstein 2005, 297–98.    <sup>116</sup> Adler 2005, 5.

to move beyond the New Materialism's fixation on macro-historical theorization of changes of international order on the one hand, and the social theory of cognitive evolution's heavy reliance on ideas and practices on the other. Drieschova's chapter elaborates on how functionality and aesthetics can operate as material criteria for selective retention, and highlights the relevance of network memory for the kinds of information that are stored and, therefore, retained.

In Chapter 4, Simon Frankel Pratt criticizes Adler's social theory of cognitive evolution for the lack of an explicit phenomenology. Pratt addresses this lacuna by drawing on the philosophy of John Dewey and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, thus moving Adler's theory from strict pragmatism to one more informed by phenomenology. Pratt's reasoning is that a phenomenological elaboration of cognitive evolution makes significant contributions to several debates in the field of IR, including those on micro-foundations, ontological security and materiality. Chapter 5, by Maïka Sondarjee, looks for clues about discourses in Adler's theoretical framework. Fully agreeing with Adler's meta-theoretical focus on evolution, Sondarjee criticizes the theory for sidelining the meaning-making repercussions of discourse. In order to make a case for the salience of narratives, she develops an argument for how narratives could be included in the social theory of cognitive evolution, using the World Bank and participatory development practices as a case study. In Chapter 6, then, Peter M. Haas starts by asking the question of where the agents are in Adler's theory. His vehicle for answering this question is comparing the social theory of cognitive evolution with their past collaborative work on epistemic communities. Haas, empirically focusing on global environmental governance, concludes that cognitive evolution is heavily shaped by epistemic communities.

In the final two substantive chapters, Beverly Crawford Ames and Christian Reus-Smit engage with an analytical-normative theme that has always been crucial for the discipline of IR in general and Adler's work in particular, that is, progress. Is progress possible in international politics? If so, how? Crawford's chapter focuses on the evolution of the refugee regime. Applying the theory of cognitive evolution, she contends that there has been, despite some setbacks, an overall pattern of progress for much of the twentieth century. At the same time, however, she cautions that post-truth undermines what Adler refers to as "epistemological security" and identifies as

a driving force for progress. Reus-Smit also engages with the issue of progress but his means for doing so are different. Looking back to Adler's often-cited 1997 article "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics,"<sup>117</sup> he asks whether Adler succeeds in holding the middle ground that he advocates. Applying English School theorizing on interpreting the middle ground, Reus-Smit contends that there are notable tensions between how Adler used to pursue the middle ground in his past work and how he does so in the social theory of cognitive evolution. Reus-Smit also contends that both avenues struggle to arrive at a sound normative account.

The book concludes with a commentary by Emanuel Adler, which engages with the vistas for studying world ordering that are explored in this book, as well as with the criticisms raised by contributors. In a new and exclusive extension of his thinking, Adler then develops a rough sketch of what a theory of politics looks like, from a cognitive evolution perspective, using the concept of practical democracy as an anchor, and the case of artificial intelligence as an illustration.

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<sup>117</sup> Adler 1997b.

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