

Microanalysis as ideology critique: the critical potential of ‘zooming in’ on everyday social practices

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Abstract

Microanalysis – understood as the ‘zooming in’ on the details of everyday social practices and situations – is an increasingly popular tool of academic study in the discipline of International Relations (IR) and beyond. However, the critical potential of so-called micro-moves is today largely ignored. This chapter seeks to revive this potential. It elaborates four different strategies for using microanalysis as a tool for criticizing theory as ideology.

Quote as:

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Introductionⁱ

In recent years, microanalyses have gained increasing traction in the discipline of International Relations (IR) and in political science more generally. This popularity is reflected in a wealth of different theoretical approaches and labels, ranging from practice theory (Adler and Pouliot 2011) to relationalism (McCourt 2016), from ‘micro-moves’ (Solomon and Steele 2017) to ‘micro-politics’ (Chakravarty 2013), from political ethnography (Neumann 2012) to ‘performances of agency’ (Braun et al. 2019). The turn to microanalyses is commonly associated with two distinct promises (cf. Esguerra et al. 2017, 16). On the one hand, microanalyses are seen as complementary of grand theory, substantiating macro-theoretical claims and enabling exchange among different grand theories (Adler and Pouliot 2011). On the other hand, microanalyses are often cast as a (more or less radical) alternative to macroanalyses, bringing to the fore that which is ignored by grand theory – that which ‘escapes, overflows and exceeds’ macro-theoretical assumptions (Solomon and Steele 2017, 270). Yet while these two purposes – complement and alternative – seem to exhaust the possible uses of microanalyses, there is a third purpose that is less often acknowledged. This purpose is, in short, ideology critique – the critique of extant theory as ideology.

The critical potential of ‘zooming in’ on everyday social practices is today largely ignored. This observation is particularly obvious for what is arguably the largest and most prominent field of microanalysis in IR today, namely practice theory. Originally the case for studying practices was associated precisely with the purpose of studying theory in a critical manner (cf. Wille 2018). Consider the article by Iver Neumann that is widely heralded for introducing practice theory in IR: Neumann (2002) explicitly linked the turn to practices to an earlier critical literature in IR championed by scholars such as R.B.J. Walker (1993), Richard Ashley (1987) and Robert Cox (1981). Cox had argued that one important purpose of critical study was the examination of how ‘problem-solving theory’ was enmeshed in the reproduction of social order (Cox 1981, 128), and Walker famously claimed that IR theory was indeed more interesting as an object of explanation rather than for what it explained. The main point of Neumann’s intervention had been that a focus on the details of everyday politics was able to make a crucial contribution to this critical project. By zooming in on ‘how politics is actually effected’, we would gain, Neumann argued, a better understanding of ‘how our own analyses of international relations may preserve a certain state of affairs’ (Neumann 2002, 627, 638). However, in current debates, practice theory is no longer associated with this endeavor, and is

instead framed – indeed also by Neumann himself – as an analytical rather than critical project (see for instance Adler and Pouliot 2011; Neumann and Pouliot 2011; critically, see Schindler and Wille 2019). This makes not only practice theory, but also other so-called micro-moves vulnerable to objections by theorists that have either claimed the research programme lacks theoretical specification (cf. Ringmar 2014) or are concerned that attention to the small and contingent comes at the price of losing sight of the nature of social domination (Koddenbrock 2015; Schmid 2018).

With this chapter, I seek to resuscitate the promise Neumann recognized in the move to studying the small and seemingly irrelevant details of everyday politics. I want to demonstrate that microanalyses are able to deliver a profound understanding of how precisely theory is practical and political. The ‘zooming in’ on the details of everyday practices can make obvious that specific theories reflect just one perspective among many. They can help us gain what Robert Cox termed a ‘perspective on perspectives’ (1981, 128). A case in point that substantiates this claim can be found precisely in Neumann’s early intervention on practice theory (2002). Neumann’s study concretely showed that IR theories were premised on a questionable notion of the international system, since this notion made IR theorists blind for ‘the key drama of present-day global politics’, namely ‘to what extent state actors increasingly have to grapple with other actors in or even outside the system of states’ (2002, 639). In an in-depth examination of how sub-state actors in the border region between Russia and Norway tried to establish cross-boundary cooperation, Neumann showed how the Norwegian ministry of foreign affairs attempted to police the boundaries of the international state system, trying to prevent the sub-state actors from acting on their own. Zooming in on a seemingly unimportant struggle over who got to have a say in the construction of inter-regional cooperation, Neumann revealed that the larger question of who could claim to be a legitimate actor in the international system could not be defined on the level of theory but instead was deeply political. Struggles such as the one Neumann studied might look unimportant if judged by IR theoretical assumptions, but they actually had the potential to challenge and transform the very categories on which IR theory was based (for microanalyses that follow the spirit of Neumann’s early intervention, see Schindler 2014; Braun et al. 2019).

Microanalysis is a useful tool for thinking critically about theory as ideology. I use the term ‘ideology critique’ here with the meaning of demonstrating that a certain kind of (theoretical) knowledge is false yet nonetheless productive.ⁱⁱ Microanalysis can show that there is, on the

one hand, something false and delusional about theory; its claims of validity are more contested and less certain than assumed. On the other hand, microanalysis shows that theory is performative and productive of reality. Microanalysis achieves this double aim by zooming in on the fact that theoretical claims are constitutive of concrete social practices and situations. Theories are the thinking tools not only of academics, but also of ‘lay’ participants in social life. In this chapter, I introduce four concrete strategies that use the examination of ‘lay’ theories for the purposes of ideology critique. I take these strategies from an in-depth discussion four seminal interventions in different disciplines – one authored by a sociologist (Donald MacKenzie), two by anthropologists (Marshall Sahlins and Lila Abu-Lughod), and one by a historian (Paul Schroeder). All four interventions demonstrate that a focus on seemingly small and unimportant details is able to speak in a critical manner to broad and general theoretical questions – neither by underwriting abstract hypotheses, nor by theorizing an alternative to them, but by raising direct questions about the uses, limits, and effects of macro-theory. In each text, macro-theory is itself a direct object of critique, and a distinct feature of macro-theory is subjected to critical attention: its translations into practice (MacKenzie), its cultural limitations (Sahlins), its conceptual inadequacies (Abu-Lughod), and finally its problematic effects (Schroeder). In sum, what is gained through this discussion is a view on four viable strategies of critique that can add in a useful manner to the repertoire of micro-moves in IR today. The subsequent sections of the chapter introduce these four strategies one after the other; the first section begins with an exploration of the general and basic condition that enables the use of microanalysis as ideology critique – the so-called ‘double hermeneutic’.

1. Criticizing translations of theory

Anthony Giddens’ classic *The Constitution of Society* begins with a reflection on the distinct characteristics of the social sciences. Giddens makes a strong case for seeing the enterprise of social science as different from (classical) natural science. The key difference, Giddens argues, is that the objects of social science are themselves subjects who interpret and explain what they and others do. There is, in other words, a ‘double hermeneutic’: ‘a mutual interpretative interplay between social science and those whose activities compose its subject matter’ (Giddens 1984, xxxii). In social science, the boundary between scientific observer and observed phenomena is not usefully conceptualized as one between subject and object.ⁱⁱⁱ The subject matter of social science is itself composed of reflexive agents with interpretations and thoughts. Interpreting and thinking about what these agents do in this sense *doubles* what the

agents themselves already do (cf. also Adorno 1997). This is why Giddens criticizes an objectivist understanding of social science that he ascribes to, for instance, Talcott Parsons.

If there is a double hermeneutic, then academic concepts and ideas are not fully separated from ‘lay’ concepts and ideas. In fact, Giddens argues that ‘reflections on social processes (theories, and observations about them) continually enter into, become disentangled with and re-enter the universe of events that they describe’ (Giddens 1984, xxxiii). Social science has an influence on – and is itself transformed by – the subject matter it studies. In more recent research, this specific phenomenon has been captured with the expression ‘performativity of theory’. For instance, in his celebrated *An Engine, Not a Camera*, economic sociologist Donald MacKenzie (2006) demonstrates how theories of financial markets that were originally developed in university departments came to have an influence on trading practices in these very markets. The theories transformed the world they claimed to explain, because the inhabitants of this world themselves began to use the theories to orient their own actions. This performative effect either made the predictions of the theories more adequate, since social actors began to act precisely in the manner that theoretical assumptions expected of them, or it had the adverse consequence of making the theories less adequate, since agents began to attempt to trick the theory, for instance by using it to predict the decisions of other traders and then preventing these decisions from becoming effective. For the latter case, MacKenzie speaks of ‘counter-performativity’, an effect that made the academic theories less useful and ultimately led to further theoretical innovation.

One implication of the double hermeneutic is that the tracing of how academic concepts travel into practice (and vice versa) yields considerable potential. In IR, such tracing is undertaken for instance in studies of the ‘translations’ between science and practice (Berger and Esguerra 2018; Schindler 2018) or of the ‘trading zones’ between academic and international practices (Holthaus and Steffek, this volume). The examination of these translations is a critical enterprise in that it demonstrates the performative effects of analytical constructs, or shows how these constructs stem from specific societal concerns and ideas and are thus historically contingent. The study of translations is, however, not the only way in which the double hermeneutic allows for critical studies of theory as ideology. By pointing out alternative perspectives on the social that are ignored by the most widespread forms of theorizing, inquiries into lay theories can uncover the cultural limitations of extant theories.

2. Criticizing the cultural limitations of theory

The enterprise of studying other forms of making sense of the world is associated notably with the study of other ‘cultures’, other social contexts in which different cultural categories order the world and interpret actions and events. One example can be found in the work of historical anthropologist Marshall Sahlins. The central topic of Sahlins’s research is the history of Polynesian islands in the Pacific Ocean. In many writings and books, Sahlins has developed a deep, ethnographic understanding of this history – an understanding of Polynesian culture, and of how it was transformed through the encounter with European discoverers and colonizers. In one much cited essay, entitled *Other Times, other Customs: The Anthropology of History* Sahlins (1985, ch. 2) shows that Polynesian peoples had their own sense, their own theory, of this encounter with the Europeans.

Sahlins’s essay focuses on a Maori uprising in New Zealand, during which a Maori chief, of the name Hone Heke, resisted British colonization. Hone Heke and his warriors’ resistance against the British was not primarily directed against British settlements and fortresses. Instead, it was directed in particular against a British flagpole, a pole that the British had erected somewhere on the coast, with the Union Jack on it. Hone Heke and the Maori rebels tried, time and again and with considerable success, to cut down this flagpole – and, to quote Sahlins: ‘Heke’s persistence in downing it was matched only by the British insistence on resurrecting it’ (1985, 60). How can one make sense of this fight against a flagpole? Had the Maoris understood that it symbolized, for the British, their sovereignty over the land? In a sense, they had understood it, but as Sahlins shows, in a sense quite different than the British. The flagpole had a meaning within the concepts of Maori culture, and in particular within a Maori and Polynesian theory of history. For the Maori rebels, the fight against the flagpole reproduced a fight that had been going on for many generations, and actually, since the creation of the world, when the God of the Heaven penetrated Earth and thus created life. The flagpole symbolized, or rather *was*, a penetration of the Earth, a seizure of the land – and indeed the Maori rebels were much more interested in downing the pole than in getting the flag.

The specific practices of the Maori rebellion against the British become intelligible only within this Maori theory of history, a theory that explains and links together many past historical events – including the creation of the world, the first landing of the Maori on New Zealand (when, according to myths, a pole was erected), as well as many subsequent battles

in which the erection of poles again played a crucial role. The theory made possible a reproduction of these past events in present action, in the fight against the British colonization. The encounter between European colonizers and Polynesian people is an encounter between two different cosmologies, two different ways of sorting the world and theorizing what goes on within it. Crucially, Sahlins argues that an adequate understanding of the Maori cultural consciousness can make us more aware of the limitations of our own. By understanding how other people theorize the world, we can better understand that also our own theories are culturally and historically formed. He argues:

‘Capitalist society does have a distinctive mode of appearance, therefore a definite anthropological consciousness, pervasive also in the theoretical dispositions of the Academy. The native theory is that social outcomes are the cumulative expression of individual actions [...] The impression is given that the whole culture is organized by people’s businesslike economizing. This impression is doubled by the democratic political process in which Everyman counts as ‘one’ (vote), so representing the governing powers as ‘the people’s choice.’ The prevailing quantitative, populist, and materialist presuppositions of our social science can then be no accident – or there is no anthropology.’ (Sahlins 1985, 52)

The presuppositions of social science are, Sahlins argues, ‘no accident’. They are derived from and play a role in a specific cultural consciousness – the capitalist, individualist consciousness of our own time. This critical, reflexive awareness is created through a ‘micro-move’, through Sahlins’s in-depth grasp of highly specific acts, such as the setting up – and the cutting down – of a flagpole in New Zealand in the 18th century. By revealing that the erection of this flagpole doesn’t simply mean a taking possession of the land according to rituals of European rules of sovereignty, and that the Maori are not fighting the Union Jack but rather the pole itself, Sahlins creates an awareness that inter-cultural encounters are not simply about different but compatible interpretations of the same world, but that instead two quite different ways of theorizing the world are in disagreement, and that the same acts thus are explainable in quite different terms, with different consequences.

3. Criticizing conceptual inadequacies of theories

In 1990, the anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod published an essay on ‘The Romance of Resistance’ in the *American Ethnologist*. The starting point of this essay is the observation that the relationship between power and resistance had become a central concern in the

human sciences, and that there was a tendency in many studies to celebrate resistance – a certain ‘romance of resistance’, in Abu-Lughod’s words. Her essay shows that the conceptual distinction on which this attempt was based – the one between power and resistance – is difficult to establish when one begins to understand the perspectives of participants in social situations. Abu-Lughod’s case is the role of women in a Bedouin society in Northern Egypt, between Alexandria and the Libyan border.

Abu-Lughod at first points out that the traditional Bedouin, patriarchal society leaves spaces for resistance by women. While men officially have certain decision-making powers, such as the decision on whom to marry their daughters to, this does not mean that no resistance is possible. Resistance takes the form of songs, poetry, and jokes, in which certain male attributes are ridiculed. It takes also more active forms, such as direct interventions by mothers and aunts, or daughters who appear to get crazy as the marriage date approaches, thus preventing the marriage from taking effect. Abu-Lughod concludes that this situation poses certain ‘analytic dilemmas’ (1990, 47). Notably, it implies that several analytical categories are difficult to apply. Thus, one cannot attribute a feminist consciousness to these women, since theirs is clearly not a struggle for emancipation, but it is equally inappropriate to simply treat their practices as ‘prepolitical, primitive, or even misguided’ (Abu-Lughod 1990, 47). The Bedouin women both support and resist the extant system of power; they accept for instance the practice of veiling, but they do not unquestioningly accept male power. In this situation, analytical concepts such as ‘false consciousness, which dismisses their own understanding of their situation’ or ‘impression management, which makes them cynical manipulators’, are misleading, since they cannot grasp the simultaneous presence of resistance to, and support for, existing power hierarchies (Abu-Lughod 1990, 47).

The situation has become even more complicated with the entry of modern (Westernized) Egyptian society and values into the Bedouin context. These values imply a certain form of liberation for the Bedouin women, but they also bring with them new forms of domination. In particular, they threaten the bases of the forms of resistance just described, namely intra-gender support and in general the strong intra-gender ties among the women. Abu-Lughod illustrates this development through an examination of how marriage practices change, and in particular by analyzing the role of a ‘deceptively frivolous issue: lingerie’ (1990, 49). By buying lingerie for their weddings, younger women achieve a degree of freedom from their traditional role and from the control of elder women. Traditionally, marriage rituals stage a

‘dramatic contest between kin groups and between men and women’ (Abu-Lughod 1990, 51). They bring not only two individuals into a relationship, but they also create ties between groups demarcated by kin and gender, and that they do so is symbolized through staged contests between these groups. It is these ties that come under pressure through a different (Western) set of marriage practices that emphasize the uniqueness of the relationship between man and women. And, as Abu-Lughod points out:

‘In resisting the axes of kin and gender, the young women who want the lingerie, Egyptian songs, satin wedding dresses, and fantasies of private romance their elders resist are perhaps unwittingly enmeshing themselves in an extraordinarily complex set of new power relations.’ (Abu-Lughod 1990, 52).

Through their resistance against traditional society, the young women are not simply liberating themselves, but entering a new set of power relations. They are now bound to the Egyptian economy and to the Egyptian state, ‘many of whose powers depend on separating kin groups and regulating individuals’ (Abu-Lughod 1990, 52). And here, the elder women’s attempt to ridicule their younger’s lingerie becomes itself a form of resistance: resistance against the Egyptian economy and state and its attempts to control individuals.

By looking closely into how resistance unfolds in a social situation, Abu-Lughod becomes aware that certain analytical distinctions are less clear than they may appear at first sight. As she concludes, ‘if systems of power are multiple, then resisting at one level may catch people up at other levels’ (Abu-Lughod 1990, 53). Power and resistance cannot be clearly separated on a theoretical basis. The very acts that allow the young Bedouin women to emancipate themselves from the traditional ties to elder generations are simultaneously acts that immerse them in new relations of power, relations that, in turn, the elder women resist.

4. Criticizing problematic effects of theories

The historian Paul W. Schroeder is widely credited for having achieved a fundamental transformation of our view of European politics before and after the Congress of Vienna in 1814. In his monumental study *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763-1848*, Schroeder (1994) corrects a widespread misinterpretation of the ‘European Concert’ of Great Powers established at Vienna. The Concert period was – and still is – often associated with the notion of a balance-of-power. This association is not as such false: The term was used by

statesmen (they were basically all men) at the time of the Congress. However, the term does not imply that the practice of the Concert was predominantly one of balancing power, in the sense that state leaders were preoccupied with maximizing their own power in order to keep the power of other actors in check. Quite on the contrary, the Congress period was, as Schroeder shows, marked by a crucial departure from an earlier concept of balance-of-power according to which balancing power meant little else than furthering one's own interests.

Schroeder argues that leaders and diplomats in the 18th century had a tremendously destructive understanding of inter-state politics. To achieve a balance meant, for them, only to maximize their own share of the cake. This understanding led, for instance, to various partitions of states, such as the divisions of Poland in 1772, 1793, and 1795. Whenever one actor gained, the others sought 'compensations' for themselves, so that – allegedly – the balance was kept. The result was a period of unceasing conflict and war: 'Balance-of-power rules and practices were not a solution to war in the eighteenth century (if they ever have been) but a major part of the problem' (Schroeder 1994, 6). In order to overcome the condition of a nearly permanent threat of violent conflict, state leaders had to overcome their misguided theoretical understanding of the balance-of-power. Schroeder argues that this is precisely what they learned at Vienna.

Schroeder explicitly treats the 18th century balance-of-power doctrine as a 'belief system, an ideology' (Schroeder 1994, 9). He is critical of a specific understanding this concept as it manifested itself in historical practices before the Congress of Vienna. The main thrust of Schroeder's book is a detailed reconstruction, written in the style of classical diplomatic history, of who made a specific decision when and where, and for what reasons. Schroeder zooms in on event after event, war after war, battle after battle, from 1763, the end of the Seven Years War, to 1848. But Schroeder does so for a critical purpose. His argument is that decision-makers before 1814 lacked a conception of a durable peace. To structure and orient their relations to each other, they only had the notion of balance-of-power, which endured not only because of its 'surface plausibility and consistency' or its political advantages (Schroeder 1994, 10). Rather, Schroeder asserts, 'the chief attractive power of this balance-of-power doctrine, then as now, was its apparent inescapability, the absence of a practical alternative' (Schroeder 1994, 10). What Schroeder's study of a tremendous amount of specific political actions and decisions – his book is 894 pages long – shows, is that the balance-of-power doctrine worked as an ideology precisely in the sense Robert Cox has

described it: a theory that concealed its own standpoint in space and time (Cox 1981, 128). The doctrine made to appear something as natural and inevitable that was, in fact, not without alternatives.

Among IR theories, the concept of balance-of-power is often associated with the theories of realism and neo-realism. While the claim that the pursuit of power is rooted in human nature is indeed sometimes associated with classical realist thinkers, this does not imply that they understood the balance-of-power doctrine precisely as state leaders understood it in the 18th century. Still, there are textbook versions of realism that narrow it down to claims about the inevitability and permanency of the struggle for power and the resulting need to further one's own power in turn. Moreover, the neorealist Kenneth Waltz in particular has emphasized the inevitability of the pursuit of self-interest in an anarchical political system – not because of human nature, but because of systemic conditions. As Waltz emphasizes, 'self-help is necessarily the principle of action in an anarchic order' (1979: 111). Schroeder's study demonstrates the enormously destructive consequences of such a theoretical claim if it becomes an ideological belief held by political decision-makers. Take, as an example, Schroeder's analysis of the Austrian leadership's choice to abandon its 'longstanding principle of preserving Poland' (Schroeder 1994, 146). As Schroeder analyzes it, Austrian reasoning was guided by the idea that this measure would serve Austria best in securing its own existence and power – in other words, it would be its best strategy for 'helping itself': it would enhance its relative position vis-à-vis Prussia and Russia, by securing the acquisition of territory for Austria in Southern Poland and by bringing Prussia and Russia into an agonistic relationship. These aims exemplify, writes Schroeder, 'how balance-of-power thinking escalates conflicts' (Schroeder 1994, 147). Moving to the micro-level and analyzing in-depth specific justifications for a decision, Schroeder mounts a critical challenge to a specific theoretical idea, namely that in international politics, only the seeking of 'compensations' (self-help) will lead to survival and success. On the contrary, Schroeder argues, this theoretical idea leads not to survival, but to destruction.

The ideological character of the balance-of-power doctrine becomes apparent in particular through Schroeder's analysis of the transformation that was achieved in 1814. Schroeder claims that, through trial and error, and through the experience of enormous destruction, European political elites learned to value the existence of an international order in its own right. They 'managed to concentrate on creating a political coalition for the purpose of

lasting peace rather than victory' (Schroeder 1994, 581). The peace that followed the Congress of Vienna – a peace, it should be noted, that primarily concerned the relations between European sovereigns but ignored relations between them and their peoples and between them and extra-European polities – was neither the result of 'favourable circumstance, war-weariness, ideological uniformity, or other contingent factors' (Schroeder 1994, 577-8). Instead, it 'came by effort and design' and resulted from "consciously confronting structural problems and conflicts' (Schroeder 1994, 578). European decision-makers learned that peace required both action and effort, that it required the deliberate choice to focus on how to stabilize relations rather than pursue only one's victory – they learned, after all, what peace is, and that peace cannot exist as long as there is belief in the theoretical principle that everyone needs to help themselves.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed how microanalysis – by 'zooming in' on the details of specific social situations – can deliver a challenge to extant theoretical categories and assumptions. It can do so in at least four ways. First, it can show how theoretical models travel into practice, where they are used by practitioners to shape and change the world that is explained by the models. Second, it can create awareness about the cultural specificity of theoretical concepts by pointing out how the same events can be interpreted quite differently if different cultural categories are applied. Third, it can demonstrate that certain analytical distinctions or concepts deliver inadequate impressions of the complexity of social action. Finally, it can reveal concrete problematic political effects of specific theoretical assumptions.

The motivation for this intervention is to encourage those scholars who are interested in the details of social situations – in the detailed unfolding of very specific happenings and events – to think about how their own research relates to certain broader, more general assumptions, ideas or hypotheses that are held in streams of social science. The study of politics engages with a matter that is difficult to predict or fashion into boxes. From the viewpoint of Hannah Arendt (1958), politics deals with the *unpredictable* as such; one cannot predict what happens when people act in common, since in their acting they appear in their uniqueness. This appearance is, for Arendt, the very purpose of political action, and it may be one reason why theories must fail to predict what will happen in the future. Events make their own theories – this is a view that Marshall Sahlins would also subscribe to, and we have witnessed the

phenomenon in IR, where social constructivism took a specific turn and gained influence only when the Cold War ended.

The point here is that we need to better understand what theoretical assumptions do in the world they aspire to explain. Given the inevitable double hermeneutic of social science, there is no way to isolate practice from (social) science. Practitioners think about what they do and interpret their own and others' behavior. This is, of course, no new insight. However, IR would much benefit from studies that inquire into the practical and political role of certain basic ideas that are widely held to be 'merely' or 'purely' theoretical (Schindler 2014). Most fundamentally, this has implications for macro theory's claim to be able to identify the main driving forces of international history, a claim that Kenneth Waltz indeed formulated in his famous book *Theory of International Politics* which still yields considerable influence in the discipline, if not for its contents then for its style of theorizing. Waltz describes abstraction – the moving away from reality – as the fundamental task of theory, and he attempts to identify propelling principles and driving forces that are invisible to the 'naked eye' (Waltz 1979, 10). But this very attempt stands in an uncanny relationship to the conspiracy theories that proliferate today, which are equally based on the premise that the conspiratorial forces they identify are invisible to the naked eye, but nonetheless enormously powerful (Fluck 2016; Aistrophe and Bleiker 2018). Understanding this kind of macro-theory which claims to know forces that nobody can see or perceive with her own senses, but that allegedly has enormous 'explanatory power' (Waltz 1979, 7), is a pressing political concern today.

We need to understand the historical origins and the political uses of specific theories. We need to make theories the subject matter of our studies, in order to understand how they impact the world when people begin to use their assumptions and operations. This does not imply a renunciation of our own engagement in theory. The implication of this specific 'micro-move' is, rather, that theorizing is a continuous task and that this task is not conducted in an ivory tower. The link to practice is not only that theorists educate students, the link is also that we – academic theorists – gain our insights by reflecting on experiences we share with others who equally live in this world. No wonder, then, that we can use an analysis of the structures of our own thinking for a diagnostic of the world. It is R.B.J. Walker who famously argued that IR theories may be more interesting as 'phenomena to be explained than as explanations' (Walker 1993, 6). Walker himself never considered studying everyday practices and 'lay' theories to achieve this goal, but this is the promise Neumann clearly

recognized – a promise that is, it seems to me, still largely unfulfilled when it comes to the study of international relations.

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ⁱⁱ Ideology is a complex and contested theoretical concept (see in particular the contributions by Herborth and Edelman in this volume). For this understanding of ideology critique, see for instance Jaeggi (2009); Lepold (2018).

ⁱⁱⁱ Also in the natural sciences, and notably in physics, this understanding has been questioned with the emergence of quantum science. See Wendt (2015).