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Ideas All the Way Down: From the Practice Turn to the Theory of Contestation

Introduction

As Antje Wiener correctly stated back in 2014, contestation had become a buzzword, and as a result the concept lost much of its analytical teeth. More than a decade later, this is no longer the case; nevertheless, the adoption of her theory of contestation remains surprisingly limited. In the field of the Theory of International Relations, it is viewed mostly through the lens of the practice turn and associated concepts. Like its constructivist predecessors, it suffers from the same problem – they are based on an idealist ontology and an idealist epistemology, which, when paired together, exemplify concepts where ideas go “all the way down.” The aim of this paper is to explore the relations between the practice turn, communities of practice, and Wiener’s theory of contestation through a theoretical analysis grounded in the ontological and epistemological positions found in Gałganek’s (2021) work on the philosophy of IR, with additional input from Wendt (Wendt, 1999).

The main argument of the paper is that the scientific programme resulting from the practice turn in IR theory offers a much – needed processual and practical ontology. It is, however, paired with an interpretive and normative epistemology, which means it lacks a tangible root. Contestation, as a product of this programme, shares the same problem and would benefit from adopting a materialist ontology. If it did, it could be reconciled with other materialist approaches, grounding the concept and potentially enabling contestation to be recognised as an organising principle not only in global governance but in international relations across most, if not all, paradigms.

Practice Turn in IR Theory

The conceptualisation of contestation in its present form has its roots in the constructivist theorising of the late 1990s, mostly associated with the so-called “practice turn” in International Relations theory. The basic premise of that scientific programme is (as the name suggests) a shift of scholarly focus away from the motivations and ideas of particular agents (as in much of FPA) and away from structures (as in neorealism) toward “concrete and observable processes and patterns of activities that shape inter-



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national outcomes, or the norms that underline such activities” (Drieschova, Bueger, 2022, p. 8). The practice turn itself entered IR through cultural studies and sociology. By now, there is widespread consensus on its origins: it is often traced to a paper by Iver Neumann, who argued for supplementing the then – popular linguistic turn by refocusing on practice through the lens of culture (Neumann, 2002, p. 627). It is also widely recognised that the idea was properly introduced into the discipline by Adler and Pouliot (2011), which Hopf aptly called a “field – defining manifesto” (Hopf, 2022, p. 44).

Ontologically, the practice turn introduced a processual and more dynamic communitarian ontology which, like constructivism itself, is idealist in nature. What has become normal practice in practice – turn theorising is selecting one of the sources of inspiration (usually associated with a political theorist or sociologist) and then building an interpretive epistemology around it, although there is no evidence that ontology necessarily enjoys primary status vis-à-vis epistemology. The most popular ontological sources are derived from the works of: (1) Bourdieu; (2) Foucault; (3) Wenger; (4) Schatzki; and (5) Boltanski (Drieschova, Bueger, 2022, p. 17). It is not entirely clear where the theory of contestation fits among these – Drieschova and Bueger place it in group 5; because of Pouliot’s work, it could belong in group 1 (Pouliot, 2016); and Wiener herself drew on a thinker from outside any of these lists, namely James Tully.

To sum up this part: the practice turn is based on an anti-naturalistic and anti-realistic processual ontology and an interpretive epistemology grounded in the principle of understanding. It shows a strong preference for holism and contextualism, which is consistent with post – positivist methodology. The problem with this pairing, despite its internal coherence, is that it lacks any form of material bedrock, making it “ideas all the way down.” The same problem is evident in the concept of the Community of Practice and, as a result, in Wiener’s theory of contestation. This becomes especially visible when one examines the list of contemporary and historical strands informing the theory: (1) pragmatism (in its idealist version); (2) constructivism (associated with the linguistic turn); (3) Wendtian constructivism; (4) neo-institutionalism; (5) post-structuralism; and (6) feminism (Drieschova, Bueger, 2022, p. 18). Equally telling is what is absent from the list: the English School, realism (except elements of classical realism), all liberalist paradigms except neo-institutionalism, and various forms of Marxism and related theories. What all these excluded approaches share (with the partial exception of the English School) is precisely what is missing in the practice turn: a materialist ontology.

Communities of Practice

One of the most fruitful conceptualisations emerging from practice – oriented theorising is the concept of Communities of Practice, championed by Emanuel Adler. The origins of this programme are typically traced to four foundational works. The first is Wenger’s (Wenger, 1998) original conceptualisation of the Community of Practice; the second is Ruggie’s 1998 paper; the third is Cox’s (Cox, 2004) comparative analysis of concepts of CoPs; and finally, Adler’s own work (Adler, 2005), published well before

his co-edited volume with Pouliot (Adler, Pouliot, 2011). The most straightforward way to weave these works into a coherent narrative is as follows: Wenger introduced the concept itself, which Adler then adopted for use in IR theory. Cox's work offers commentary on the four major treatments of CoPs and resulted in one of the earlier systematisations of the term. Ruggie is explicitly cited by Adler and others as a pioneer of the practice turn in IR, as he advocated for a systematic merging of the two sides of the fourth great debate – represented by neo-utilitarians and social constructivists – who, according to Ruggie, had complementary strengths and weaknesses (Ruggie, 1998, p. 856). The main issue with this approach, as it turned out, was that the more materialist neo-utilitarian voices were overwhelmed by social constructivists, to the point that the latter came to dominate the programme both ontologically and epistemologically. Adler's refined definition of a Community of Practice (not the original 2005 version) is as follows: "Communities of Practice are domains of knowledge that constitute communities of engaging practitioners bound by an interest in learning and performing shared practices. Sustained by a repertoire of communal resources, these practices embody the community's knowledge and confer its practitioners the dispositions and expectations necessary to cultivate shared values, legitimize authority, and thus engage in mutually negotiated evolving joint enterprises. CoPs do not refer to individual members arranged in a network, a group or a field; they *are social fabric of relations in action* [original editing]" (Adler et al., 2024, p. 2).

This definition reflects Ruggie's intentions – both constructivist and neo-utilitarian elements are clearly identifiable – Wenger's emphasis on learning and performing, and Adler's own innovation: taking the concept and refining it for use in explaining international politics, especially in its communal and transnational dimensions. What is also evident is that constructivist idealism ultimately overpowered the materialism of the neo-utilitarians. This is further illustrated by Adler's explicit rejection of the most structural and most critical approach in the discipline – the Bourdieusian perspective, which itself has a clearly recognisable Marxist lineage.

Adler's epistemology is based on identifying other communitarian categories as communities of practice (epistemic, security, and so on), with which not all authors agree (Bicchi, 2021, pp. 36–37). In his own work, the epistemology of the CoP programme involves blending normative theory of IR with constructivism to arrive at the ontological basis (exclusively idealist), and then blending rationalist epistemology with normative epistemology, which results in a tacit liberal epistemology, but one void of any material basis (Adler, 2005, p. 28). What's most ironic here is that CoPs are said to represent an attempt to "de-reify social ordering," which not only is impossible with this meta-pairing, but also at odds with Wenger's approach towards reification (Wenger, 1998, p. 52). All this is visible in Adler's 2010 work.

To conclude, the CoP programme shares an ontology with the practice turn, and the differences are mainly visible in the epistemological layer. The epistemology of the CoP programme, just like the turn, is based on the principle of understanding, contextualism, holism, and a preference for abductive reasoning, although not as strong as in the turn in general. Despite its mixed roots, today CoP is an almost exclusively constructivist research programme. Just like the practice turn, it shies away from materialist ontology, and wherever causality is found it is attributed to ideas. The rejection

of said ontology is seen in a dismissal of critical and potentially neo-Marxist elements and an embrace of liberal teleology, noticeable throughout Adler's work.

Theory of Contestation

Contestation as an analytical category in contemporary practice – oriented research was introduced by Antje Wiener in her 2014 work entitled “A Theory of Contestation” (Wiener, 2014), which was widely noticed and appreciated in the field. The monograph, however, is not the only source by the author on the theory, as she also wrote two additional papers addressing specific issues within it. The first is the 2015 conference paper entitled “A Theory of Contestation: A Concise Summary of Its Argument and Concepts,” where, as the title suggests, she presents a more concise version of her work (Wiener, 2015), and the second is a 2017 paper entitled “A Reply to My Critics,” where she addresses some of the criticisms but also continues to explain some of the core elements of her work (Wiener, 2017). On top of that, her work has been cited in numerous other editorials, monographs, and papers.

Without a doubt, contestation as an analytical concept introduced by Wiener remains a core element of the utilitarian theory of IR, and it is tightly connected, or even a part of, the CoP subfield. Adler et al., for example, see contestation as a tool to explore CoPs “as instruments for cultivating global governance's norms and values from the bottom up,” which is an excellent summary of Wiener's theory. The authors also conclude that Wiener's work is based on the Rosenbergian idea of multiplicity, putting her at the avant – garde of contemporary IR theorising (Adler et al., 2024, p. 7). Just like Adler himself, Wiener can be categorised as a representative of the culturalists within practice – oriented research, which is visible in her work and which she openly adheres to in numerous places. Wiener's work has been mentioned multiple times in the most authoritative editorials on the practice turn to date – by Bernstein and Laurence, Gadinger, Drieschova and Bueger, and Bueger and Gadinger (Bernstein, Laurence, 2022; Gadinger, 2022; Drieschova, Bueger, 2022; Bueger, Gadinger, 2018) – and contestation itself is acknowledged as an even more integral part of the programme (Bueger, Drieschova, 2022; Hopf, 2022; Adler, Faubert, 2022; Walters, 2022). It is without a doubt that Wiener's work has become one of the core elements of the practice – turn programme within IR. Her theory is widely acknowledged as part of the programme in general and sometimes as part of CoP research in particular. Adler et al. even altered his definition of International Community of Practice to include contestation: “We propose a definition of international CoP as the social fabric of learning and contestation that makes social order possible in world politics” (Adler et al., 2024, pp. 2, 7).

It is, however, not clear if the author herself would appreciate that. In her monograph, she uses the term “community of practice” only a handful of times and only when she discusses the works of others (Wiener, 2014, p. 28), and in her later commentaries, she either does not use the term at all (2015), or she seems to be critical of it: “For it raises the central question, what does a theory that centres on the «community of practice» have to offer, if it cannot explain the origin of its community through practice?” (2017, p. 181).

With all that being said, even a quick glance at the literature on contestation reveals that, although Wiener's conceptualisation of the term is widely recognised within the practice – turn research community, it has not been as broadly adopted outside of the theoretical literature as one might expect. Deitelhoff and Zimmermann detect two strands in contestation research – first, treating contestation as a sign of norm decay; and second, where contestation strengthens international norms (Deitelhoff, Zimmermann, 2020). They also point out that the interest in international norms in IR theory started in the 1990s (Deitelhoff, Zimmermann, 2020), which coincides with the practice – turn. A. Androine-Moylan et al. identify four contemporary meanings of contestation: 1) sign of norms decline or renegotiation; 2) counter – institutionalism and the rise of new frameworks; 3) opposition towards the status quo or norm – creation and consolidation; 4) rise of populist narratives testing democratic values, but also empowering underrepresented groups.

In the field of European Studies, with some exceptions (Groen, 2020; Biedenkopf et al., 2021), contestation is strongly associated with Euroscepticism (Pejovic, 2022; Roch, 2019; Juncos, Pomorska, 2024; Michailidou, 2015; Costa et al., 2024; Börzel et al., 2023). Some papers, despite extensive use of the term contestation and recent publication dates, do not cite Wiener's work at all (Lake et al., 2021; de Witte, 2018; Ekman, Everts, 2024; Börzel, Zürn, 2021; Escartin, 2020), some of these are literature reviews (Lovato et al., 2021), which is surprising, since Wiener's concept seems to be uniquely tailored to this exact field.

Contestation as an analytical tool

The main concern of Wiener is to provide a conceptualisation of the term contestation and to salvage it from ad hoc usage so that it becomes a useful analytical tool instead of essentially a buzzword. The author provides the following definition of contestation: “a social practice that entails objection to specific issues that matter to people; in international relations, contestation involves the range of social practices which discursively express disapproval of norms” (Wiener, 2015, p. 3).

According to the author, since it is a discursive practice, it can be observed in speech and language and understood as a “contestatory practice,” the fundamental condition which allows “citizens to critically engage with norms that govern them.” This leads to the formulation of the so-called bifocal approach, which “explores the conditions of contestation in international relations and how access to contestation should be justified” (Wiener, 2015, p. 4). These are later operationalised into two analytical concepts: contestation and contestedness. The concept of contestedness is defined as a “meta-organizing principle of global governance” and a result of the differences in the “meanings in use” of international norms, which, under the premise of diversity, will always be interpreted in different ways. These are examples of anti-naturalist ontology.

Three comments should be made here. First, the term used here, although clear, is likely a bit unfortunate, as it points to the work of Waltz (Waltz, 1979), which doesn't have much to do with the theory. Second, the usage of “meaning-in-use,” said to emerge “and change through everyday practice,” places Wiener's work squarely with-

in the practice turn. Third, however, diversity here is understood as cultural diversity, and not as diversity of interests, which creates an interesting gap that a critical approach should address. Wiener only pays more attention to this in her third paper about the theory and essentially leaves this apparent contradiction largely unsolved. The idea that differences in meanings-in-use result from practice in an environment of cultural diversity is defensible and somewhat necessary to explain the changes in these meanings. However, equating these differences to differences at the level of culture is an example of essentialism, which sounds naive, because the differences might as well come from the deliberate manipulation of the substance of certain norms for some political purpose, and the cultural aspect would only mask the true intentions of the contesting party. That gap is the direct result of the liberal, and not critical, epistemology used in that conceptualisation. Placing contestedness as a meta-organising principle of global governance is a result of that. If it were founded on critical grounds, power or interest would take its place. It does not, however, take away from the validity of the claims made using these concepts. Contestation might be a meta-organising principle of global governance, regardless of the proposed ontology and epistemology, because it might be the very basis on which multiplicity is itself founded. The main hypothesis of the work, namely that “the principle of contestedness reflects the global agreement that, in principle, the norms, rules and principles of governance are contested and that they therefore require regular contestation in order to work,” reflects the same sentiment visible in many theoretical works of IR, where change is conceptualised, albeit in a different way (e.g., Modelski 1987; Gilpin, 1981; Gałganek, 1992; Keohane, Nye, 1977).

The legitimacy gap

Contestation is defined operationally as a contingency of social practices within a defined context, here a domain of practice (but not explicitly in the community of practice). These domains yield four modes of contestation: “arbitration (in courts), deliberation (in international organizations and regimes), contention (in societal protest), and justification (in epistemic communities)” (Wiener, 2015, p. 4). The legitimacy gap mentioned below is located by Wiener between the three layers of norms: fundamental norms, standards, and regulations. The reason for this is that while major fundamental norms are usually accepted, their full implementation (through adherence to standards and regulations) may be lagging or outright rejected: “For example, in the area of security actors recognise the meta norms like civilian inviolability, non – intervention and sovereignty, but could be reluctant to recognise the principle of responsibility to protect and therefore would be opposed to put it in the UN Charter. That in a nutshell is the legitimacy gap” (Wiener, 2015, p. 6).

To classify contestatory practices, Wiener introduces three levels of norm validation: 1) formal (“entails claims with regard to formal documents, treaties, conventions, or agreements. [...] It is expected in negotiations involving committee members of international organisations, negotiating groups, ad hoc committees, or similar bodies involving high – level representatives of states and/or governments”); 2) social validation (“entails validity claims that are constituted through interaction within a social

environment. The higher the level of integration among the group, the more likely becomes uncontested social recognition of norms"); 3) cultural validation ("expression of individual expectation that is mediated by individually held background experience"). The author notes that "access to these three dimensions is not equally shared among all stakeholders" (Wiener, 2015, p. 10). The circular movement through these layers of validation – from formal, through social, to cultural, and back to social and formal – represents the so-called cycle of validation, which makes the point of unequal access more pronounced: while at the level of formal norms stakeholders can contest the norms because of their privileged access, at the lower levels the access to contestation varies, as the negotiating space is much narrower, usually resulting in a choice between acceptance and rejection. This is indeed a very useful concept to explain the clashes around norms on different levels and the relations between them.

Practical ontology and the question of normativity

It is also interesting how exactly her work is embedded in the practical ontology dealing with a normative issue. The most straightforward answer to this is found in one of her papers: "Norms research in international relations theory holds that norms have a dual quality, evolve through social interaction, entail validity claims, and are by and large re-enacted as part of the normative structure of meaning-in-use of any given society" (Wiener, 2017, p. 173).

The author suggests that the meaning of a norm is visible mostly through social interaction. This position was already noted in her previous works by other researchers in the discipline. Bernstein and Laurance, for instance, point out that in Wiener's works (prior to "A Theory of Contestation"), the relationship between norms and practices is inseparable (or, as they later clarify, embedded in), to the point where "the changes in the latter define changes in the former" (Bernstein, Laurance, 2022, pp. 77, 85). Gadinger reiterates a similar point, stating that the idea that the meanings of norms are embedded in social practice is now considered "a major reference point in the debate" (Gadinger, 2022, p. 110). In the same place, he states: "for Wiener [...], norms are «contested by default», which reveals the intersubjective, contingent, and invisible dimension of this «duality» as «actors operate within a context that is structured by the interplay between structures of meaning-in-use and individuals» enacting of that meaning." It is a clear relationalist ontological position.

The author confirms this by claiming that her theory is located in the constructivist tradition, and more specifically in the "critical variant of constructivist norm research," which suggests a critical epistemology and a constructivist (idealist) ontology. The preferred term used by the author is agonistic instead of critical constructivism (Wiener, 2017, pp. 166–167). Agonistic here is synonymous with contestatory and comes from her engagement with political theory, especially the work of Tully, which she quotes multiple times in her work: "[...] while also advancing a cosmopolitan approach, Tully's philosophical contestation insists on firmly bringing cultural practice back in order to democratise contemporary governance" (Wiener, 2014, p. 8). However, it does not seem that liberal – idealist elements are absent: "[...] according

to this approach, cultural experience, and the multiple identities generated thereby, are considered as equally foundational for generating substantial normative values and principles of governance as Kantian political practice” (Wiener, 2014, p. 8).

Liberal teleology?

The main issue seems to be the critical part of the theory, which seems to have (at least on the surface) a tacit liberal – idealist element, visible in the brief discussion about the erosion of the liberal world order. The author places it within the dichotomy of state/international system, which allows her to point out that mechanisms that allow for “bridging the gap between universal norms and daily practice with constitutional frames to regulate participation and norm implementation” are not available in international relations. She also states that this gap (the lack of this bridge or conveying belt) is caused by uneven globalisation and “enhanced cultural diversity,” stopping just before arriving at a materialist conclusion (Wiener, 2015, p. 12). So, while the author points out that the mechanisms that allow bridging different levels of norms are available in constitutional democracies, at the same time she fails to explicitly state that, conversely, they are also lacking in any other domestic systems, implicitly circling back to the very basis of the liberal theory of IR – democratisation as a solution. She instead argues that uneven globalisation and the push for cultural diversity make contestation of fundamental norms more contested than before, which is a valid holistic epistemological claim, but the democratic deficit also fits.

The reason for greater contestation of the current international order than in the past could also be that in autocratic regimes, power is concentrated within a narrow elite, which is not accountable to the society it governs. The unique situation of developing state politics makes them act solely in the interest of extending their political survival, which can be achieved (as in the case of states in the Middle East) through posing as champions of traditional values and performatively rejecting some fundamental norms, while at the same time silently adhering to them due to pressure from international society and conditional aid from more powerful actors.

Tacit liberal teleology is also seen in her comments about future research, where she proposes to “address the challenge of accommodating diversity while maintaining fundamental norms with reference to practices of norm validation” through the identification of spaces of norm contestation, assessing stakeholders’ access to them, and examining validation practices in various societal contexts and at different levels of access (Wiener, 2015, p. 13). The goal here seems to be to demonstrate that the legitimacy of norms is proportional to the degree of access to contestation, which again points to democratisation as a solution, because how else could access to contestation as a “condition of justice” be upheld?

In a different place, however, the author explicitly agrees with the statement that the term agonistic constructivism is a way to differentiate her from both liberal and critical variants (Wiener, 2017, p. 177), and she tries to address this exact problem. She sees liberal constructivist methods of research as a dead – end road when it comes to norms research, because in this variant the liberal community is equated with the international

system. That makes researchers focus on “principles, procedures and practices of that community” (Wiener, 2017, p. 179), which, to her, is just one side of the coin. The other is the “constructive quality,” which points to the “norm – generative impact of social practice,” and as a result allows for explaining (and, perhaps, as the author argues, advancing) change. Here, Wiener makes the final cut, essentially equating the CoP programme with liberal community epistemology and detaching herself from it, because “A Theory of Contestation” explains norm generation without the need to use CoP, which, as pointed out earlier, cannot explain norm generation prior to the existence of a community. A truly critical aspect of her theory is spelled out later, when she argues for treating contestation as a truly critical tool, one that is able to show the power relations behind the norms: “In order to study this allocation of power, norms research needs to begin addressing the question of whose norms count – thus moving on from the mere identification of weak, strong, social, cultural, or legal norms and who follows them. The crucial point here is that norm following is a contingent practice throughout the three stages of norm implementation [...] At each stage, norm validation is conditioned by access to one of its three dimensions, and at all times, actors’ re-enactment of the «normative structure of meaning in use» is informed by previous experience” (Wiener, 2017, pp. 181–182).

That, of course, creates more challenges for future research, especially the tension between norms that enjoy “universal validity claims” and those that are the result of “local stakeholders’ experience,” but it also connects the concept with other critical concepts in the discipline.

Wiener successfully distanced herself from the problems connected with tacit liberal teleology, associated mainly with the CoP programme, but another problem remains: how to close the identified legitimacy gap if not by democratisation? As she states in her 2015 summary: “constitutional democracies bridge the gap between universal norms and daily practice with constitutional frames to regulate participation and norm implementation. This bridge is, however, unavailable in international relations, where sustainable normativity depends on international organizations, treaty regimes, and political advocacy” (Wiener, 2015, p. 12). The issue is that this bridge is not available in authoritarian and totalitarian systems as well.

Conclusions and a Materialist Critique

The theory of contestation remains founded on a visibly more critical ontology than both the practice – turn and CoP. It is clearly anti – naturalist and anti – realist, strongly relational, and strongly anti – causal, which are necessary conditions for a normative stance. Epistemologically, Wiener’s theory is based on understanding, a holistic view, abduction, and a textual approach – again consistent with critical and constructivist epistemology – which validates her choice to call the approach she represents agonistic constructivism.

Critiquing the assumptions is easy enough; serious conceptual problems start when one tries to find a satisfactory answer to the question of closing a legitimacy gap. Wiener frames it as a tension between diversity and universality, which is consistent with the culturalist background – useful when dealing with examples like the EU – but

misses the point when applied on a truly global scale, because pointing to culture as a differentiating factor yields an essentialist solution. According to Wiener's proposition, a legitimacy gap becomes visible when the implementation of a norm is delayed or rejected. It is difficult to speak of a legitimacy gap in both liberal and electoral democracies, since people have access to contestation by default. The real deficits exist in other political systems. Since the national stakeholders of these states also have continuous access to contestation by default, the only agents without it are the people. However, it is not culture that separates them, but the material consequences of the implemented norms. Legislation on fisheries is not a cultural problem, after all.

If enhanced recognition were the answer, the gap would have vanished long ago, since all existing states enjoy recognition by the international community, despite differences in culture, politics, and economy. The only factor left is the material conditions. The legitimacy gap cannot be addressed without worldwide democratisation, but democratisation is not going to take place without a change in the global division of labour. If it persists, the interests of the leaders of non – democratic states remain at the core, while the populations of these states remain in the peripheries, without the chance to change that situation. Paradoxically, then, recognition is the source of the legitimacy gap, which vanishes altogether when the focus is shifted from legitimacy (idea) to interest (matter).

The conceptualisation of contestation remains one of the most fruitful endeavours of contemporary IR theory, with the potential to become a widely accepted meta-organising principle of international relations, but it shares some of the problems identified in adjacent areas (practice turn and CoP). By shifting attention from an ideal ontology to a material one, contestation becomes a practical process rooted in material preferences and interests in future political, economic, and social outcomes, which allows the theory to achieve its primary aim: whose norms count – and, more importantly, why? Without considering the material structure of world politics, for example through Wallerstein's or even neo-Gramscian concepts, it is difficult to answer that question definitively. Engagement with theoretical concepts that already exist in the field could potentially benefit the wider use of the concept of contestation, not only by reflexivists but, more crucially, by rationalists as well (who, according to Ruggie, were also the founders of the practice turn).

The concept of contestation is a welcome addition to IR theory; however, it represents yet another example of importing rather than exporting concepts to and from IR to other fields, in the spirit of Rosenbergian multiplicity.

One thing is certain: contestation as a concept is much more important and useful than it is presented in a substantial portion of contemporary literature, which uses it in its literal sense, merely to describe various confrontational acts toward authorities, especially in Western states. Engaging with the concept as intended would likely enrich this analysis.

The shift toward a more ontologically heavy approach, as argued by Wright and visible at least nominally in the practice turn, is a welcome evolution in IR theory. Nevertheless, as long as practice is not rooted in a truly materialist ontology, the entire programme will remain entangled with the problem Wendt pointed out in his work, namely ideas "all the way down."

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Summary

One of the most interesting outcomes of the rationalist vs. reflexivist debate in the theory of International Relations has been the so-called practice turn which dates to the first decade of the XXI century and seems to be in full swing today. This already mature research programme is mostly an attempt to shift focus from the static, structural theorising characteristic of the previous debate towards more processual approach. The programme itself involves vast body of literature, multiple themes and diverse claims, transcending established boundaries within IR theory – providing a fertile ground for both brilliant insights and troubling contradictions.

My aim in this paper is to explore the placement of A. Wiener's conceptualisation of contestation in the theory of international relations. To achieve this, I explore the genealogy of related concepts, especially the practice turn in IR theory and the concept of Communities of Practice, which both consider work on contestation as part of their research programmes. Although the paper is primarily explorative and descriptive, it employs the tool developed for theoretical analysis, rooted in the recent work of Gałganek (2022), where philosophical positions that he identified in the field I have connected with existing paradigms (with his approval) for theoretical closure. To this, I also add Wendt's (1999) division of existing paradigms into materialist and idealist ontology. The provocative title is meant to reflect a materialist critique of both the programme and contestation theory, while at the same time recognising the growing interest in IR ontology in contemporary IR theorising – a shift away from epistemology-heavy approaches of the late twentieth century.

The main argument of the paper is that the scientific programme resulting from the practice turn in IR theory provided a much-needed processual and practical ontology. It is, however, paired with an interpretive and normative epistemology, which leaves it without tangible foundation. Contestation, as a product of the programme, inherits the same problem and would benefit from adopting a materialist ontology. In doing so, it could be reconciled with other materialist approaches, which would ground it and potentially allow contestation to be recognised as an organising principle not only in global governance, but in international relations as a whole.

Key words: International Relations Theory, rationalist, reflexivist, conceptualisation of contestation

Bezdenny idealizm: od zwrotu ku praktyce do teorii kontestacji

Streszczenie

Jednym z najciekawszych wyników debaty między racjonalistami a refleksywiściami w teorii stosunków międzynarodowych jest tzw. zwrot ku praktyce (ang. practice turn) którego po-

czątki sięgają pierwszej dekady XXI wieku. Ten dojrzały już program badawczy jest przede wszystkim próbą przeniesienia punktu ciężkości z charakterystycznego dla poprzedniej debaty statycznego, strukturalnego teoretyzowania na podejście bardziej procesualne. Sam program obejmuje obszerny zasób literatury, wielowątkowość i zróżnicowane twierdzenia, wykraczając poza utarte granice teorii stosunków międzynarodowych, co stanowi podatny grunt zarówno dla błyskotliwych spostrzeżeń, jak i niepokojących sprzeczności.

Moim celem w niniejszym artykule jest zbadanie miejsca koncepcji kontestacji A. Wiener w teorii stosunków międzynarodowych. Aby to osiągnąć, badam genealogię powiązanych pojęć, zwłaszcza zwrotu ku praktyce w teorii stosunków międzynarodowych oraz pojęcie wspólnoty praktyki (ang. *community of practice*), które uwzględniają teorię kontestacji jako część swojego programu. Chociaż artykuł ma charakter przede wszystkim eksploracyjny i opisowy, wykorzystuje w nim narzędzie opracowane do analizy teoretycznej, oparte na pracy Gałanka (2022), w którym zidentyfikowane przez niego stanowiska filozoficzne zostały sklasyfikowane (za jego zgodą) jako paradygmaty w celu teoretycznego domknięcia. Dodaję do tego również podział istniejących paradygmatów na ontologię materialistyczną i idealistyczną, zaproponowany przez Wendta (1999). Prowokacyjny tytuł ma odzwierciedlać materialistyczną krytykę zarówno obu programów, jak i teorii kontestacji, jednocześnie zwracając uwagę na rosnące zainteresowanie ontologią stosunków międzynarodowych we współczesnej teorii stosunków międzynarodowych, stanowiące reakcję na dominację epistemologiczną w XX wiecznych teoriach SM.

Głównym argumentem jest założenie, że program naukowy wynikający ze zwrotu ku praktyce w teorii stosunków międzynarodowych dostarczył bardzo potrzebną procesualną i praktyczną ontologię, jest ona jednak połączona z interpretacyjną i normatywną epistemologią, co oznacza, że nie ma ona materialnych podstaw. Kontestacja jako produkt tego programu, dziedziczy ten sam problem i skorzystałaby na przyjęciu ontologii materialistycznej. W ten sposób można by ją pogodzić z innymi podejściami materialistycznymi, co prawdopodobnie sprawiłoby, że kontestacja jako zjawisko mogłaby zostać uznana za najważniejszą zasadę organizującą nie tylko w globalnym zarządzaniu ale w stosunkach międzynarodowych jako całości.

Słowa kluczowe: teoria stosunków międzynarodowych, racjonalizm, refleksywizm, konceptualizacja kontestacji

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