On War and Practice Theory: Difficulties, Dangers, and Unease

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Abstract

In this short piece for the Columns section of the journal, Torik Holmes considers war as under-explored terrain and asks what the potential might be for a practice theoretical analysis of armed conflict. In doing so, he discusses how a conceptual focus on practices rather than individuals unsettles conventional narratives of blame and responsibility and raises difficult ethical questions about the uses and consequences of social theories.

Author Biography

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One hundred and fourteen – that's the estimated number of wars, or armed conflicts, unfolding across the world at present, according to the Geneva Academy website. This number goes up and down and has likely never, nor never will, hit zero. Like death and taxes, war is a perennial feature of social life. Despite this, practice theory has remained relatively absent from the theorisation and related analysis of war. Where has practice theory been? Typically elsewhere – visiting and reshaping arguments over environmental sustainability, education, entrepreneurship, management, innovation, design, and health.

Should practice theory be more involved in the analysis of war? Undoubtedly, it would contribute a new approach, as it has on other subjects, challenging conventional wisdom and fundamentally reframing debates. War is not, however, a pleasant subject. It is unsettling and rouses thought on both the difficulties and dangers, with ontological and ethical roots, that practice theory would face if it turned to war.

While these difficulties and dangers are not unique to the analysis of war, they appear more acute when war and all that can come with it - pillage, plunder, displacement, murder, genocide, rape, physical and psychological scaring, biodiversity loss, the list goes on - are in the crosshairs of theorisation and analysis. The overarching sense that arises from contemplating war as a topic of study is one of ethical unease. This unease, in turn, provokes a more encompassing reflection on the functions and duties of social theory and whether it is the role and responsibility of practice theory to condone and condemn and not simply to provide understanding and explanation. Practice theory has tended to be more comfortable with explaining, focusing on how

matters come to be than identifying what or who is to blame. War and the difficulties and dangers that come with studying it, together with the overarching shadow of ethical unease provoked by the subject as a potential focus of practice-oriented theoretical enquiry, call this tendency into question by spotlighting tensions between ontological commitments and ethical quandaries. These tensions are a useful reminder that ontologies cannot escape ethical questions, judgements, and resultant feelings of uncertainty, which provoke critical reflection.

The difficulties practice theory faces in getting more involved in the analysis of war arise from the strength of grip individualism holds on such analyses and the related and very understandable ethical impulses to attribute blame and responsibility, which strengthen this hold. The force of this grip is evident in the long-held, prevailing fascination with *who* is at war. While the discussion of armies and troops features, it is the individual heads of state and organised groups that tend to come into focus most sharply when war is the subject of analysis.

Mentioning Hector, Paris, and Helen brings the Trojan War of Greek history to mind. Mention of the Napoleonic wars brings their namesake into view. Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelenskyy - the ongoing war in Ukraine and Russia. As I am writing, I am hearing talk over the radio of Mahmoud Abbas lamenting Donald Trump for suggesting the United States will take over Gaza following the destructive invasion undertaken by Benjamin Netanyahu's Israel that resulted in an estimated 64,260 deaths, according to a 2025 paper in *The Lancet*, between October 2023 and June 2024.

This figurehead framing makes perfect sense for those who consider the world to be

comprised of individuals, be these people, groups or states, and construe war as armed conflict between them and their competing interests. This makes no sense from a practice theory perspective. It's antithetical to the shared bedrock of practice theory, which is to take practices, not individuals, as the basic units of social life. Based on this, the *who* of war is decentred according to practice theory by questions concerning *how* conflicts materialise. The different ontological starting points assumed by those in the individualist and practice theory camps also mean that shared questions concerning what war involves and how wars unfold will be explained in divergent terms.

This division is not unique to the analysis of war. Practice theory is regularly at task with individualism. Compared to more popular areas of study, the difference in the present case lies in the heightened ethical dilemmas provoked by war, thanks to the dire consequences of armed conflict. These dilemmas promise to stress test practice theory's commitment to challenge individualistic accounts of cause and effect – and the attribution of roles and responsibilities that come with them.

Maintaining the position that practices are the bedrock of social life instead of individual people, who practice theorists frequently characterise as 'rule followers', 'carriers', and 'crossing points', is arguably hard to maintain in the face of the monstrosities of war, which push for the identification of individual monsters who can be put to trial and held to account for their actions. This is troubling for those practice theories that see actions as belonging more to practices than —if at all—to the individual people who carry on practices. By extension, individual people are not to blame

for war and what tends to come with it, for example, murder, interrogation and incarceration – instead, practices must be assumed to be largely at fault. The challenging implications of this view of action and responsibility become even clearer when threaded through the issue of rule-breaking.

War demands an explanation of rule-breaking as much as of rule-following, which practice theory tends to be more closely associated with. This is because war commonly involves the breakdown of international conventions of diplomacy and peace. An important issue is where this breakdown comes from. Conventionally, it is seen as the outcome of faltering relationships between figureheads of state and disagreements over land, resources, money, and expected behaviour. For many practice theorists, rule-breaking needs to be approached as an outcome of the details and dynamics of practice.

One way to view rule-breaking is as a consequence of certain practices winning out over others, with the ardent following of certain rules leading to the breaking of others. For example, pursuing the practical ends of statecraft and maintaining political power may involve breaking rules and related practices of international diplomacy, as in the case of the Iraq War, which saw United Nations Security Council resolutions transgressed. The suggestion here is that war results from practices breaking the rules of other practices. This signals a strong stance on the omnipotence of practice over individuals and also brings into question whether practices have a will of their own and the extent to which they can and should be treated as wilful transgressors.

Critics will argue that maintaining such a strong stance on practices indicates an

abdication of responsibility, leaving it difficult to hold anyone to account for war and what results from it. This criticism is hard to face. Practices cannot stand trial without people in the dock. A lingering issue here is whether people are responsible for the practices they enact and the related breaking of rules. In the face of war, and particularly in reply to questions concerning what's to be done in response to its ills, it's hard not to lay culpability in the hands of individual practitioners. This will no doubt leave many practice theorists with an uneasy feeling for which a remedy isn't immediately clear, other than avoiding the gritty details of responsibility and retribution that war provokes.

To turn to the dangers - there is a danger that the involvement of practice theory in the analysis of war could lead to its powerful schemas being taken up and mobilised as part of the enactment of armed conflict. The quandary here concerns the extent to which practice theory could end up being put to destructive ends, functioning as a means of fine-tuning machines of war. There is certainly a danger that practices of war could be sharpened if there was even greater sensitivity to the important roles that technologies, resources, meanings, messages, and skills play in the carrying out of armed conflict. This sharpening could disturb and disable the capabilities of practices carried out by adversaries, as well as upscaling and improving those of allies. Crucially, because practices travel and are taken to have lives of their own, honing sensitivities to the conduct of war would circulate and could contribute to the overall potency of destructive action irrespective of debates over right or wrong.

There's also a danger, again ethical, that the decentring of individuals that comes with much

practice theory could feed dehumanising approaches to conflict based on people being reduced to carriers, crossing points, materials and resources, which are there to be managed, manipulated and expunged as appropriate to the ends pursued. History has revealed the stark consequences of such ontological reductions and the relegation of humans to ways of being conventionally considered further down the pecking order of worth. The nagging ethical concern here is the extent to which the ontological equivalence and symmetry between humans and non-humans that practice theory sometimes calls for could be perversely used to justify dangerous and damaging treatments of human life.

Accordingly, the idea of practice theory getting more involved in the theorisation and analysis of war provokes difficulties, dangers, and an overarching sense of ethical unease. The latter is rooted in tensions between the ontological commitments of practice theory and ethical quandaries that the subject of war sharply spotlights.

As indicated, thanks to what it involves and brings to mind, war inevitably provokes thought on rights and wrongs, victims and perpetrators, injustice and justice. These thoughts signal ethical judgements regarding which practice theory has typically practised and encouraged agnosticism. A way to view this agnosticism is as an outcome of practice theory's analytical commitment to practices as the basic unit of social life, enquiry, and explanation. In its most potent form, this commitment sees all social matters, including those to do with ethics, as residing within and relative to practices. Just as practices are taken to change over time and to differ from one practice to the next, so too can the ethics that reside within them.

This understanding and the ontological and analytical commitment to practice it echoes calls the universal validity of any particular ethics into question. It also, relatedly, counsels the analyst to hold off from making judgments premised on the ethical considerations that they, as analysts, carry with them as carriers of particular practices. The ethical unease provoked by the subject of war thus needs to be approached and analysed as a product of the practices that elicit that unease, including those of doing practice theory. In this regard, war provides a potent reminder that there are ethical consequences to ontologies and associated views on the constitution of social life and that it is not always easy for analysts to suspend judgments premised on the ethics of practice they bring with them.

These implications linger however hard practice theories and practice theorists try to remain agnostic toward ethics. This is partly because social theorists and the social theories they help develop can be judged according to these theories' implications for ethics, whether such judgment is wanted or not. It is also because, relatedly, while social theories and the theorists that put them to work may seek to remain quiet on making ethical judgments, the silence proves deafening as trying to maintain the quiet can itself carry ethical implications. For example, that silence is an unethical act. It is thus arguably best to squarely face the difficulties, dangers, and connected, overarching feelings of unease that a subject such as war provokes about possible practice theoretical analysis and to reflect on the origins of these and what they suggest about the predilections and potentials – good and bad - of social theories.