



## Mundane diplomacies for the practice of European geopolitics



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### ABSTRACT

This paper offers a practice-based account of diplomacy given that diplomats are central to the production and circulation of geopolitics. We contend that there is a changing geography of diplomacy underway from state-centred to “integrative diplomacy”, prompting the need for reorganisation of the modalities that shape and regulate state presence. Such reorganisation brings with it the challenge of fashioning new pathways of diplomatic engagement to counter the disordering of routinized mundane diplomatic practices, alongside new possibilities for diplomatic space to be used by various actors and interests. In sum, the move to integrative diplomacy commands closer academic attention to the contemporary geographies of diplomatic practice, and how these practices are transacted in diverse spatial settings, sites and domains, under conditions of multiple contestation of state authority and legitimacy. Using extensive European empirical materials, we argue that the ways in which diplomats devise, trial, make claims and counter-claims about geopolitical representations are ripe for practice-based analysis. We do this through an exploration of diplomacy’s geographical dimensions, that is, its everyday spaces and places, orderings and transactions and show how practices can go awry in the move to integrative diplomacy.

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### Introduction

Growing interest across the social sciences has emerged in the practices underpinning world politics. This work has highlighted the oft-overlooked everyday routines that structure international interactions and their ubiquity (Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1984; Neumann, 2002; Huysmans, 2002; Kratochwil, 2007; Bueger, 2011, 2012, 2013; Gould-Davies, 2013). Thus, Adler and Pouliot (2011, 1) comment that “World politics can be conceived as structured by practices, which give meaning to international action, make possible strategic interaction, and are reproduced, changed and reinforced by international action and interaction”. Consequently, this ‘practice turn’ is seen as providing “added value for the study of global politics” (Bueger and Gadinger, 2007, 4). Geographers have also made some contribution to this emerging field (Barry, 2013a, b; Kuus, 2014) with some arguing for “geographers to engage more seriously” with it (Everts et al., 2011, 324). Engaging with practice offers a social relational perspective that “does justice to... ‘little things’ without neglecting the ‘big things’” (Weisser, 2014, 47).

In this vein, there have been recent calls to extend practice-based perspectives in critical geopolitics from the ‘big things’ of

“imaginings, visions, narratives, representations” (Mamadouh and Dijkink, 2006, 349) to the ‘little things’ that Foxhall (2012, 236) argues, are the everyday practices of those who “construct, embody, and narrate... geopolitics”. In effect, the terrain of critical geopolitics should shift away from its emphasis on texts and images to embrace linguistic and behavioural aspects of the production of geopolitics. Such practice-based accounts also propose a reorientation of critical geopolitics towards the everyday life of everyday people (Paasi, 2000, 2001; MacDonald, 2006), thereby offering the potential to address critically “the ways in which world order space is imagined, represented and resisted in both geo-political struggles and everyday life...” (Painter, 2007, 384). Nonetheless, so far this refocussing of critical geopolitics upon the everyday appears for the most part not to include the quotidian experiences of those employed to construct, promote and represent geopolitical productions: that is, diplomats themselves. Seen as ‘off-piste’ by some, “everyday people” clearly does not include diplomats. Yet, at the same time, recent writings in critical geopolitics continue to argue for more practice-based accounts, with Coulter (2011, 951) contending “what is needed is further attention to practice”.

Here we present a practice-based study of diplomacy, given that diplomats are central to the production of geopolitics – they make and project geopolitical representations, and in doing so make claims, try to convince others of their veracity, and expend

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considerable efforts in sustaining these representations. Indeed, they are, as one author describes, “the plumbers” of geopolitics (Gould-Davies, 2013, 1460). Yet surprisingly, the study of diplomacy has received scant attention from geographers, and some of this work often conflates diplomats with bureaucrats in geopolitical knowledge production and its circulation (Van der Wusten and Mamadouh, 2010 cf. Vogeler, 1995; Mamadouh, 2010; Neumayer, 2008; Beauguitte and Didelon, 2012). This has led to the practices of the everyday sitting uncomfortably with diplomacy, even in most recent accounts of the state of critical geopolitics (Klinke, 2013). Hence while the overall picture is that “there is something of a dearth of geographical research that attends to the practices and legitimizing role of diplomacy *per se*”, there appears to be palpable uneasiness to explore what some geographers consider to be “a world of protocol and ambassadors...within the closed society of states” (McConnell et al., 2012, 804–805; see also Shimazu, 2012).

Moreover, debates on the geographies of state power have neglected the crucial role of diplomats in maintaining the chimera of state permanence and solidity in an era of profound change in politics globally (cf. Painter and Jeffrey, 2009). The alleged ‘hollowing out’ of the state, where complex networks of relations among institutions and actors are constantly being made and remade, provokes fundamental questions of how diplomatic practice is implicated in creating this illusion of state presence, and in ordering and legitimising state identities nationally and transnationally. Research on this topic is particularly needed as “national territories become more open to trans-sovereign contacts and para-diplomacy...enormously complicating the delivery of [state] mechanisms and practices” (Jessop and Sum, 2006, 118). Diplomacy in this situation is becoming “more and more about complexity management...[characterised by] a progressive ‘hollowing out’ of traditional diplomatic duties” (Henrikson, 2013, 130). Thus, as diplomacy now cuts across complex nested scalar arrangements of organisations and practices, diplomats are no longer guardians of the “borders of the foreign, [but instead] boundary spanners integrating the different landscapes and actors of the diplomatic environment” (Hocking et al., 2012, 5).

This “boundary spanning” allegedly requires a shift from state-centred to “integrative diplomacy” (Hocking et al., 2012, 1) to address the need for reorganisation of the modalities that shape and regulate state presence. This recognises the different stakeholders and ensembles of actions and things that constitute the state, and enable its projection through diplomacy, nationally and internationally. Such reorganisation brings with it the challenge of fashioning new pathways of diplomatic engagement to counter the disordering of routinized diplomatic practices, alongside new possibilities for diplomatic space to be used by various actors and interests. In sum, the move to integrative diplomacy commands closer academic attention to the contemporary geographies of diplomatic practice, and how these practices are transacted in diverse spatial settings, sites and domains, under conditions of multiple contestation of state authority and legitimacy. Consequently, the ways in which diplomats devise, trial, make claims and counter-claims about geopolitical representations are, in our view, ripe for practice-based analysis.

The paper is organised by “zooming in” (Nicolini, 2009, 1391) on practice using a conceptual structure based on the ordering and transaction of diplomacy in particular spaces and places and following the chronology of Iceland’s recent bid for membership of the European Union (EU). First, we examine recent social science contributions on the nature of practice, and specifically consider how diplomacy might be conceptualised as an instantiation of practice. We then weigh up some of the methodological challenges of accessing the places and pathways of contemporary diplomacy. The third section examines the role of diplomatic activities in the

production of a “big-picture” (Dalby, 1994, 595) that is, new positionings, arrangements and strategies for the projection of state identities. Our focus is upon the geographical representations and practices that produce these “spaces of world politics” (O’Tuathail and Dalby, 2002, 2), based on the case of Iceland’s engagement with the EU.

“Big-pictures” have analytical qualities in that “all social and material practices emerge around an object or prospective outcome... that motivates and directs activities, [and] around which [such] activities are coordinated [and] crystallized” (Kaptelinin and Nardi, 2006, 66). We examine how “big pictures” are ordered and transacted across space and time through diplomatic practices. The study of these practices enables important insights to be gleaned on what is actually “done in the doing of work and how those doing it make sense of their practice” (Orr, 1996, 439). Given that, as Nicolini (2009, 1392) confirms, “Practice is often characterised by the unspoken and sometimes scarcely notable background” of mundane everyday life, it therefore needs to be “drawn to the fore and made visible”. This zooming in on the patterns of social and material practices of diplomacy ordered across time and space thus enables a detailed study of the discursive nature of “big-pictures” and their material accomplishment. Moreover, it reveals how all practices “embody different interests and are hence internally fragmented, subject to multiple interpretations, and open to contradictions and tensions. This in turn, makes all practices necessarily tentative and ever-changing” (Nicolini, 2009, 1393). Critically, “big-picture” outcomes stand or fall on diplomatic practices.

Our analysis enables exploration of the challenges to Icelandic diplomatic practice posed by the transformative context of integrative diplomacy – that is, how diplomatic claims about Iceland were contested, and the ways in which geopolitical knowledge production and circulation were dependent upon diplomats’ ability to manage increasingly mutable diplomatic spaces, their proficiency to persuade others, and their capacity to retain legitimacy among publics. What emerges is that practices are critical to geopolitical representations. Yet, grounded interrogation of their failure remains largely overlooked in the literature. This paper serves to correct this omission.

## Understanding practice

The analytical neglect of the everyday activities in which people engage has motivated a diverse disciplinary range of scholars to turn to the study of practices (Neumann, 2002; Reckwitz, 2002; Rouse, 2006; Schatzki, 1996, 2006; Shove et al., 2012; Archetti, 2013). This growth in practice-based accounts has produced a welter of different theories and definitions, prompting comments that practice studies have created an academic terrain “hopelessly fragmented and distinctly non-cumulative” (Ringmar, 2014, 3). Geographers have also contributed to this work programme and, by definition, its fragmentation (Thrift, 1996, 1997; Simonson, 2007; Pain and Smith, 2008). One conclusion that has been drawn recently is that “There is as yet no detailed engagement with what is at stake for geographers when building on these recent developments in practice theory” (Everts et al., 2011, 324).

This diversity in approach is reflected in Reckwitz’ (2002) assessment that practices consist of interdependencies between diverse elements including forms of bodily activities including ‘things’ and their use, as well as background knowledge be it understanding, know-how or various states of emotion. Human geographers, drawing considerably upon Bourdieu’s work, have acknowledged that the task is to “reveal the interests that are served by the banality of practice” (Cresswell, 2002, 381), and called for analyses of the “mundane everyday practices” (Nash,

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