Praxis as a Perspective on International Politics

Steffek, Jens, Hellmann, Gunther

Published by Bristol University Press

Steffek, Jens and Gunther Hellmann.
Praxis as a Perspective on International Politics.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/100386.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/100386
The Praxis of Change and Theory

Mathias Albert

Introduction

The present chapter discusses the account of historical change and the (seeming) rejection of theory in Friedrich Kratochwil’s *Praxis* (Kratochwil, 2018). It argues that Kratochwil’s sophisticated account both of historical change and of theory leads him to treat them as different sides of the same coin, resulting in the fact that when tossing that coin, usually only one side can be seen in the end, but not the other. The argument to be made in the following is that this conceptualization of historical change and theory as basically mutually exclusive is not necessary, although at first glance it might seem to follow from some of Kratochwil’s basic assumptions. Of course, making an argument in order to show that one would have arrived at different results if only one had started out on the basis of different assumptions would be fairly superfluous. However, the point to be made here is a different one: I argue that the conclusions drawn by Kratochwil would not be necessary were he to add a few ingredients to his account and become a little more relaxed regarding the use of others – a few tablespoons of theories of social differentiation and social evolution in order to describe modern society and its development, a little less baking time in the oven of law, and a consideration of how the dish should best be presented if it were to be sold where it rightfully belongs, that is, in a Michelin-starred restaurant rather than the eclectic mix of fast-food fare so often savoured around the International Relations (IR) campfires. This is another way of saying that probably one of the issues with *Praxis* is that when it comes to theory, its biggest problem might be that it mainly has in mind that special fare called ‘IR theory’ – but that this is exactly the fare not to Kratochwil’s liking, that is, the one that might have filled generations of IR students
with academic carbohydrates, but which often doesn’t even pass muster for a decent home-cooked meal (*Hausmannskost*).\(^1\)

Kratochwil’s *Praxis* is a great book. This needs to be mentioned because the present chapter will only recount those parts of it that are required for making the argument about historical change and theory.\(^2\) In doing this, it might thus appear far more critical of the entire work than it is intended to be. As proof of the latter I am relieved to be able to refer to a review of the book that I wrote a while ago (Albert, 2019). Before proceeding with the argument, two caveats are in order: firstly, in the following the argument will be limited to a reading of *Praxis*. Although it does not ignore Kratochwil’s previous work, it is not an exegesis of how that work has developed and fed into *Praxis*. Rather, it engages with *Praxis* largely on its own, and in this sense it is hoped that it also avoids delving into a ‘Festschrift’ mode.\(^3\) Secondly, much of the argument to be developed engages with Kratochwil’s extremely ambivalent relation to particular parts of social theory, and most notably systems theory. However, it will not fall into the trap of arguing that this is a basic flaw in Kratochwil’s work but will strictly limit itself to some substantive points that can be developed in an imagined dialogue between *Praxis* and aspects of systems theory as they pertain to the issues of historical change and theory.

The argument of this chapter is structured as follows: a first section will provide a highly condensed, and possibly highly parochial, summary of change and theory in *Praxis*. As the role of change in particular can hardly be understood without reference to the basic assumptions regarding the constitution of the social, chapters 2 and 3 (on ‘Constituting’ and ‘Changing’) will play the main role in this context. The status and location of ‘theory’ are probably less easy to pin down, which already points to the deeply ambivalent use of the term in *Praxis*, an ambivalence that is probably due to a lack of distinction between ‘IR theory’ and other uses and concepts of ‘theory’. The second section will then question the explicit or implicit accounts of social constitution, particularly with a view to social differentiation as a defining characteristic of social systems. It will be argued that while Kratochwil’s account is quite clear in this respect, there seems to be a bias towards the

---

\(^1\) It should be mentioned that Friedrich Kratochwil has a reputation for being an excellent cook.

\(^2\) *Praxis* is also a book that touches upon so many issues and literatures that each of its arguments could be dealt with by referring to a bibliography of many pages. I deliberately develop the argument here without doing this, but also – and hoping to not come across as presumptuous by doing so – deliberately point to a number of my own works where I think they mark productive similarities and differences to the arguments made in *Praxis*.

\(^3\) Again, I am relieved to be on the safe side here again as the Festschrift contribution was provided, together with Yosef Lapid, quite a while ago; see Albert and Lapid (2010).

183
legal system being primary among others under the condition of functional differentiation. The third section argues that such a privileging of the legal system might not necessarily be legitimate from a view of ‘pure’ functional differentiation but could indeed be upheld as an empirical argument about social evolution. For that purpose, Kratochwil’s arguments about change would need to be twisted in the direction of a theory of social evolution. The fourth section will argue that such a twist would in fact equip him with theory but would also remove him quite a bit from the shallows of IR theory – the latter probably being the place from where his theory aversion stems in the first place.

Constituting and changing

For the purposes of the present argument, the chapters on ‘Constituting’ and ‘Changing’ provide the key to understanding some of the basic underlying concepts of Praxis, and indeed to Kratochwil’s thinking in general. While the reading of these underlying concepts necessarily will be somewhat parochial, it needs to be emphasized at the outset that such parochialism is not simply an aberration on the side of the reader, but rather something that is invited by some basic characteristics of Kratochwil’s writing in general, and of Praxis in particular. As professed by Kratochwil (2018: 5), his mode of presentation is close to that of a complex monumental painting. This makes it more difficult for the reader to digest than a ‘standard’ IR text, the latter often resembling more a technical drawing than a monumental painting, in that it invites aesthetic judgement in addition to critical reasoning. The present reading thus also at least partially proceeds on the grounds of judging what is to some degree a work of art rather than an argument geared towards coherence!

When it comes to the constitution of the social in Praxis, two things stand out as largely unquestioned: firstly, ‘the social’ is society; secondly, society is not defined through its normative integration. These two things need to be emphasized since the first has consequences for Kratochwil’s conceptualization of change and order, while the second is somewhat counter-intuitive given Kratochwil’s focus on the pre-eminent role of norms and law in society. Seeing the social as society puts Kratochwil’s work squarely in the rather particular German tradition of Gesellschaftstheorie. While also a form of social theory, the difference is remarkable in that it assumes that society constitutes a meaningful social whole. Where Kratochwil, following the Luhmannian trait, parts with classical sociology is in not seeing society

4 But then: where Alexander Wendt in his book on Quantum Mind and Social Theory claimed his argument to be too elegant not to be true (2015: 288), Kratochwil’s is probably too true in order to be elegant.
as an integrated whole where integration is accomplished through common norms, a collective identity, a *Gemeinschaft* and so forth. Rather, society is not about the integration of a ‘unit’, but about drawing boundaries. ‘Such an approach owes much to Luhmann’s Modern System Theory (MST), although I shall not simply adopt it, because important parts of the political problematique disappear if one makes that choice’ (Kratochwil, 2018: 48).

The difference between ‘owing much’ and ‘not simply adopting’ because of the ‘political problematique’ will be the subject of the remainder of this chapter. Before expanding on this difference, however, it is worth noting that Kratochwil avoids further specifying society, most notably as ‘national’, ‘international’ or ‘world’ society. This is particularly noteworthy in contrast to Luhmann’s understanding, where society includes every communication and thus everything social: in this sense society cannot be anything else but world society, and its boundaries are between the system of society constituted by communication, on the one hand, and natural and psychic systems in its environment, on the other hand.\(^5\)

In contrast, Kratochwil’s account is certainly about *society*, but it remains unspecific as to whether this should be seen as a world, an international or a national society. Ultimately, this seems to be taken less as an issue stemming from a theoretical consideration (as in Luhmann), and more as one that derives from empirical considerations of what constitutes a relevant framework of reference: society’s boundaries in this sense are drawn by the interrelated validity claims of norms. This is a point that merits some consideration: indeed, Kratochwil parts with the classical sociological image of society being *normatively integrated* and adopts an image in which society is differentiated from its environment on the basis of its constitution by norms.\(^6\) The latter, however, does not imply that society would be socially integrated by norms. Rather, the integration on the basis of norms is a systemic one at best: ‘society is entirely a symbolic construct and, this being so, no simple deitic procedure or observation will do … the meaning of a concept is not a function of its reference but of its use’ (Kratochwil, 2018: 54). In that context, the function of norms merely consists in the permanent processual relating of ever shifting elements, and not in establishing ‘*order as a result of an overall design in which various parts are harmoniously related to*…

---

\(^5\) Psychic systems, that is, meaning-processing systems of individual consciousness, are *not* part of society, as they are not directly accessible for communication; individuals are relevant only as addresses of communication – this is the background of the often ill-understood idea in systems theory that persons are not ‘part’ of, let alone constitutive of, society. For an overview of Luhmann’s extensive works, the most accessible main ones translated into English are probably Luhmann (1995) and Luhmann (2012).

\(^6\) See Schimank and Volkmann (1999) for a good overview of the difference between the integration and the differentiation view of society.
each other’ (Kratochwil, 2018: 55). Society, thus understood, only exists and can only be disclosed ‘through its “archeology”, not through a definitional exercise’ (Kratochwil, 2018: 55). While it remains unspecified as to whether, and to what degree, such an archaeology primarily involves, for example, the study of historical power relations or of historical semantics, or of how these are bound together, there is at least one distinct consequence of this understanding: that only that is treated as society which has attained some degree of historical-structural relevance (and that can be observed, and observes itself, accordingly). This probably explains why society is not specified further as, most notably, ‘international’ or ‘world society’, as these composite terms arguably play only a limited role historically, their use mostly being confined to academic discourse. It is, however, somewhat surprising that after its stage appearance in chapter 2, save some supernumerary appearances, ‘society’ drops out of Praxis almost completely. This, at least, is how it seems at first glance: as will be argued at the end of this chapter, in fact it remains hidden in the background and forms the theoretical bond within and behind Praxis. Kratochwil’s failure to bring it to the foreground might actually create an impression of an argument that seems to have scripting issues.

The dropping out of society as a ‘social whole’ (Albert and Buzan, 2013) also relieves the argument of having to come up with more abstract accounts or theories of change. In fact, it finds indulgence in referring to Weber when stating that while ‘transformative changes are part and parcel of our social world and … cannot and should not be neglected in our analysis’ (Kratochwil, 2018: 75), ‘it seems significant that Weber has no entry for “society” in his discussion of the basic concepts of sociology’ (Kratochwil, 2018: 75). This reference, however, serves the function of a relief operation that allows the entire chapter on ‘Changing’ to proceed without further specifying the accounts of social change that are contained in the preceding chapter, instead jumping right to an account of specific processes of transformative change, grouped under ‘On “Sovereign Authority”’ (chapter 3, section 2) and ‘Jurisdiction and Organization’ (chapter 3, section 3). This creates the impression that these are the most important processes of transformative change in the context of Kratochwil’s argument. However, while the most important processes of transformative change have been identified, there remains a big elephant in the hallways of this argument, namely the question of what exactly it is that is undergoing change. The remainder of this chapter will attempt to identify this ‘what’.

7 The exception here might be international society, which – in seemingly defying the conventions of sociological thought – makes frequent appearances in political language as ‘international community’.
Constitution and social differentiation

Probably one of the main critical issues with *Praxis*, and one that provides grounds both for fertile debate as well as for some of the difficulties in following the argument, is that it does not follow a simple, two-step approach, that is, one that proceeds from the more general to the more specific. The argumentative figure is not one in which a more general point would be made about the constitution of society, only then to ask where and how something like an ‘international system’ might fit in there. Rather, the more general points are always interspersed with points about application and applicability to international relations broadly speaking. This is the case for a systematic reason: it is what is ultimately required by a view that does *not* see itself as being about specific social systems ‘only’, let alone about world society as the highest-order social system, but a view that *wants* to be about praxis understood as the inclusion of agency into a systemic view. It remains the big undecided question in Kratochwil’s book, and probably in all his works, whether this particular desire represents a world view that lies at the bottom of its author’s thoughts, or whether it could rather be seen as the *result* of all these thoughts taken together. My strong suspicion is that it is the former, but towards the end of the present chapter I will also outline to what degree it could be seen as the latter, although that move probably requires a bit of salvaging of Kratochwil from Kratochwil.

Regarding the constitution of society, the main points made in *Praxis* are that society must be understood not as an integrated whole in and for itself, but rather as something always reproduced in distinction to an environment; and that society historically has been characterized by forms of social differentiation. Social differentiation is where Kratochwil explicitly draws on Luhmann (see Luhmann, 1982, 2013: 1–108): (a) he adopts his characterization of the historical succession of forms of social differentiation; (b) he parts with him regarding the conclusions to be drawn from the notion that functionally differentiated society has no function ‘at the top’, so to speak; and (c) he is in good company with him regarding some lack of clarity regarding the relation between different forms of social differentiation in terms of their historical evolution.

Regarding (a), there is little disagreement between Kratochwil and Luhmann (or other theorists of social differentiation, for that matter) that historically three forms of social differentiation emerged one after the other: segmentation was followed by stratification, which was in turn followed by functional differentiation (with some argument remaining as to the role of centre–periphery differentiation as a distinct form in this context) (see Albert et al, 2013). There is also, following Kratochwil’s acknowledgement that society must not be seen as an integrated unity per se, agreement that social differentiation is not something that somehow ‘happens’
to a pre-existing unity. Rather, the unity of society appears as such only through its internal differentiation. This is the main difference from concepts of society in classical sociology, most notably up until Habermas’s insistence on the integrative function of the ‘lifeworld’ (Habermas, 1981: 173–294), which cannot think of functional differentiation as anything but a process that drives society apart – a tendency that, then again, has to be countered by a collective identity or a Gemeinschaft. While not denying that the operative autonomy of functionally differentiated social systems causes all kinds of problems, however, the main gist of an emergence view of social differentiation is that particularly modern society appears as such only because it is functionally differentiated. The problems that emerge are addressed through complex mechanisms of coordination, which in Luhmann’s thinking are achieved through the rather difficult form of ‘structural coupling’, which describes the way in which operatively autonomous function systems are tied together (Luhmann, 2013: 108–15): ‘structural coupling sets the parameters for evolution. The operationally closed systems can innovate, or fail to do so, as long as their own reproduction remains possible. To that extent the occupation of niches and differentiation, not general homogenization or simple adaptation, are the results of evolution’ (Luhmann, 2013: 72). Yet this is the point where Kratochwil parts company with Luhmann.

Regarding (b), the parting mentioned is aptly summarized in one central sentence: ‘it becomes obvious that the autonomy of functional systems always presupposes the existence of law. Law protects the autonomy of the systems by “ruling out” certain challenges to the legitimacy of their operations’ (Kratochwil, 2018: 72–3). This is a fundamental point, yet also one which requires a quite detailed reading: Luhmann usually criticizes the view, quite common in most Western social and political thought, that the political system is somehow more important than other function systems, given its function to provide the capacity for collectively binding decisions (cf Luhmann, 2000). It might seem that Kratochwil makes a similar claim, with the difference of claiming precedence for the legal rather than the political system. However, this is not what he actually says: he does not strictly say that the legal system is ‘more important’ than other functionally differentiated social systems; what he says is that it is functional differentiation as a central characteristic of (modern) society that ‘presupposes’ the law. I argue that this is not so much a systematic claim contra Luhmann, but rather a historical one, and that systematically it would only be a problem to the most devout orthodox reader of systems theory. However, in order to make this point, a little detour – via (c) – is required.

Regarding (c), as mentioned, what Kratochwil shares with Luhmann is the general account of an historical sequence of segmentation, stratification and functional differentiation as the main characteristic forms of differentiation of society. The difference from Luhmann seems to pertain to the further
internal differentiation under the condition of a primacy of one form of differentiation. Here, Kratochwil claims that ‘Luhmann’s systems theory … still has to come to terms with the fact that some of the most important organizational features of our social life function on the basis of territorial limits, or according to membership criteria’ (Kratochwil, 2018: 73). On this level of abstraction, this amounts to either a misreading of Luhmann by Kratochwil, or possibly an ignorance of important parts of the former’s work by the latter: Luhmann would not claim that territorial limits, understood as an expression of segmentation, are unimportant. Quite to the contrary, he repeatedly emphasizes that both the political and the legal systems internally are primarily segmented territorially (cf Luhmann, 2000: 69–139, 189–227). However, in Luhmann’s reading, this segmentation pertains to the internal differentiation of function systems: in order to function and be recognized as such, they first require the functional differentiation of society. What Kratochwil, in other words, seems to be questioning might in the end be nothing but the very primacy of functional differentiation. This conclusion, however, may not be a necessary one. What saving the argument about the particular role of law in spite of functional differentiation might require, however, is a criticism of Luhmann’s account that is different from Kratochwil’s, and one that rather pertains to what might, for lack of a more elegant phrase, be called the ‘pure sequentiality of forms of social differentiation’. The diagnosis of the consecutive appearance of segmentation, stratification and functional differentiation is both a diagnosis of nothing less than world historical proportions, and a diagnosis that very much relies on the underlying figure of, firstly, the emergence of modern society as the characteristic feature of Western modernity, and, secondly, the global expansion of that society. While the gist of the argument can hardly be disputed on the basis of either anthropological or historical evidence, its problem is that it is in danger of ignoring, or at least sidelining, the complex historical multiplicity and a-synchronicity of evolutionary dynamics that point us to an ongoing ‘competition’ of forms of social differentiation: while for the sake of theoretical purity it might be nicer to have one form of social differentiation rule as ‘primary’, history often begs to differ from theoretical purity. Segmentation, stratification and functional differentiation all exist, and there could be reasons to claim that the historical ‘newcomer’, that is,

8 In addition, it should be mentioned that Kratochwil here also inserts an explicit reference to organizations and their membership criteria: for Luhmann, organizations are a specific type of social system (in addition to interaction systems and society). And they are differentiated against their environment through membership (cf Luhmann, 2013: 141–54). While certainly such membership criteria themselves could be territorially defined (e.g. only people who live within the boundaries of a specific community can become part of the Gesangsverein), this is by no means necessary.
functional differentiation, is the main characteristic of modern society that otherwise could not have appeared (to itself) as such. However, this does not necessarily mean that the other forms of differentiation could always be relegated to some form of secondary differentiation within function systems only. They often also ‘compete’ with functional differentiation. In order to see how such a view on social differentiation might actually take us quite some way in terms of thinking about the role of law in a way similar to, but theoretically also somewhat different from, Kratochwil, it is necessary to take a closer look at accounts of change in that context. Before doing so, however, it should be emphasized that the following argument will also be about something that might appear to be a mere detail at first, but which upon closer inspection might actually have a crucial role to play in terms of historical-systematic argument: Kratochwil does not dispute that society is functionally differentiated, nor does he claim that law as a functionally differentiated realm or system in that capacity is somehow more important than other function systems such as politics or the economic system; but what he claims is that law works on an entirely different plane of the structuring of social reality, in that functional differentiation – as the difference through which only a unity of society appears as such – somehow presupposes the law.

**Change: ‘of what?’ and ‘how?’**

One could argue that there is a big rupture between the chapters about ‘Constituting’ and ‘Change’ in *Praxis*. Whatever its relation might be to concepts such as ‘world society’, ‘international society’ and so forth, it is clear that ‘Constituting’ is about society as an embodiment of the social on a high order of structuration, as well as about an extremely long-term perspective. It is, as insinuated by the title, about the constitution of the social world in a quite basic sense. This is not the case with ‘Change’: it is not a chapter that takes up the issue of how to conceptualize change in the social world in a general way. It is not a chapter, for example, about the comparative merits or disadvantages of various motives of *Geschichtsphilosophie*, of theories of social evolution, of event history, of historical semantics and so forth. It is a chapter that, first of all, gives an account of change of *something specific*, and it

---

9 A quite telling point here is Luhmann’s difficulties in coming to terms with the conditions of people living in *favelas*, which to him appeared to exist outside of function systems. His solution was to think about another form of a ‘meta-’social differentiation in addition to segmentation, stratification, and functional differentiation (cf Luhmann, 2013: 24–7), a move probably prompted by a desire to keep the primacy of functional differentiation in relation to the other two forms of social differentiation intact in a situation where one arguably could otherwise just claim that it is stratification and segmentation combined, pure and simple.
is a chapter that entails at least hints of an account of how change takes place in that context. Particularly the former account provides some additional information in concreto as to the conceptualization of social differentiation discussed earlier.

Clearly, what changes in ‘Change’ is not society as a whole, and it is also not an account of change spanning the millennia. What changes is what, with all due reservations, can somehow be called ‘the international’, the ‘international system’, ‘world politics’ and so forth – it seems quite telling that this is nowhere spelled out explicitly. This is not at all surprising given that Kratochwil’s account of change is an account ex negativo: it is primarily about the avoidance of a more or less standard, state-centric IR journey from Hobbes and Machiavelli, over the Peace of Westphalia, to a structurally static (structurally realist) view of an international system. It seems crucial to note, and I will come back to this point, that while (a) Kratochwil narrates the standard IR story very differently, (b) in an important sense he shares with that story something about which he largely remains silent as well.

Regarding (a), focusing on ‘Westphalia’ as something like the ‘founding myth’ of a (modern) international system of states, Kratochwil follows others who have pointed out that what might count as ‘international relations’ for a long time even after 1648 was still primarily just a complex dynastic feudal order. He notes that von Pufendorf, as ‘the first historian of the state system[,] writes his history as one of the “ruling houses” rather than that of states’ (Kratochwil, 2018: 88–9). His substantive account of change seems worth quoting here at length:

[I]n a way it is true that from the Westphalian settlement emerged a ‘state system’, but it was certainly not one in the form assumed by neo–realists. The order that came into existence did not consist of homogenous units facing each other in an anarchical arena. Rather, the res publica Christiana was highly heterogeneous and showed some interesting overlaps: At its core it consisted of a reconstituted loose association of entities of various degrees of independence, the Empire. In one of its decision–making bodies, the Diet, outside members such as Sweden and later – through the accession of the House of Hanover to the British throne – even the English sovereign played an important role. Some of the members of this association ‘contracted out’ their defense, quite contrary to the assumed generative logic of anarchy, but even de jure questions of sovereign equality remained highly contested. Here, Leibniz’s futile attempt to convince his contemporaries of a right of all sovereigns to send and receive ambassadors is highly instructive. Contrary to the logic of his argument this position was not even accepted by the most statist member: France. (Kratochwil, 2018: 89)
What is changing here are constitutive elements of political order particularly in relation to the concept of sovereignty. Of course, Kratochwil’s perspective is more comprehensive and long-term, rather than just a focus on the time around the Peace of Westphalia. What is most important, however, is that he clearly professes an understanding of the evolution of the concept of sovereignty over time that marks his account as one of transformative change. This is a history not of interacting sovereigns, where change only occurs in shifting distributions of capabilities (or the disappearance of old and the appearance of new units). Change is always transformative as it changes, or at least has the potential to change, both the constitution of society as well as the rules of the game.

Regarding (b), despite this concentration on transformative change, something interesting happens between the chapters on ‘Constituting’ and ‘Change’. While it is clear that change happens within a society that is not static, but that is both transformed and constituted by change, gone in the ‘Change’ chapter are reflections about the constitution of society in a larger sense, or about the relation between forms of social differentiation and change. Rather, ‘international relations’ appears as the main character at centre stage. It certainly does not make this appearance playing the part of the realist messenger who tells us that nothing has changed since the Peloponnesian War — but it does make an appearance with the quite remarkable self-confidence of someone not in need of any further introduction. What we get from Kratochwil is a clear sense that this appearance can only take place in the context of a performance during which the entire stage of the political is always in the process of being redesigned and rebuilt. Nevertheless, in the midst of this ongoing change, ‘the international’ miraculously seems simply to belong there, like some kind of institutionalized deus ex machina. The deliberations on sovereignty are used to address ‘transformative change in the international system’ (Kratochwil, 2018: 93), yet we do not learn how the latter managed to appear in the scheme of things. Rather, there are again only negative hints: the international ‘arena’ is not seen as a system in which states claim exclusive jurisdiction over their territory (Kratochwil, 2018: 93), and then, through its intimate link to the sovereignty principle, it somehow seems different from function systems that do not challenge that principle (Kratochwil, 2018: 93). What, then, is the ‘international’, or the ‘international system’, for Kratochwil?

While there is no straightforward — at least no explicit — answer within Praxis itself, it seems clear that Kratochwil does not go down the pure path of a theory of differentiation that would identify the system of world politics as a subsystem of the political system of world society. It is somehow more and bigger than that: it is iminically linked to the foundations of authority, and, through that, to law. I would in fact go so far as to say that although for Kratochwil the international is certainly not the same as
society, it is co-extensive to it. The lack of a more systematic demarcation notwithstanding, his account of change of the international is always also an account of change of, and within, society. Without doubt, for how change occurs, law (and how it changes) is central in this account, but the exact figure of that ‘how’ lies hidden behind the fireworks of dense argumentation. There is a theoretical account of change here, but it is not in the form of a substantive motive of Geschichtsphilosophie: there is no meaning of history that would be given through the enactment of law (or, as a possible alternative in Praxis, through the virtues of those that ‘do’ praxis). What there is, however, is some kind of constitutive social evolution of and through law, and I would argue that this account of change actually – without Kratochwil being anywhere close to acknowledging this – is an account that at its core conjoins a theoretical argument about change with an empirical argument. The theoretical argument about change is that change occurs as social evolution – that is, change without any reference to any Geschichtsphilosophie whatsoever, but also change that is more than an enumeration of historical events. The empirical argument is that for quite some time already – and at least since before the massive onset of functional differentiation – it is law that has provided the most important boundary conditions for social evolution. This argument shares a lot with Brunkhorst’s social evolutionary account of legal revolutions (Brunkhorst, 2014), and it would certainly be worth entering into a more detailed dialogue between Kratochwil and Brunkhorst. At this stage, I can only sketch why such a dialogue makes sense in the present context: Brunkhorst argues that all great revolutions have been legal revolutions. Starting with the Papal Revolution with its beginnings in the 11th century, these legal revolutions created the conditions for the emergence and later prospering of functional differentiation. However, legal revolutions setting important boundary conditions of social evolution in no way prohibited the evolution of law in the context of an operatively autonomous legal system which in that operative autonomy is functionally differentiated from politics, the economy, science and so forth. It is such a reading that probably shows a way to salvage Kratochwil’s thesis that functional differentiation presupposes the law, and to reconcile it with Luhmann’s ideas about autopoiesis, a theory of historical change, and the important empirical observation about the evolution of authority, sovereignty, the law and the international in that context: law partakes in functional differentiation as much as everything else in society (pace the observation that segmentation still trumps everything else in terms of an internal differentiation of legal systems). But the great legal revolutions of the past one thousand years or so set the boundary conditions for the evolutionary trajectories of society that are deeply characterized by the emergence of functional differentiation as probably the most important form, yet in the end merely one of three coexisting and co-struggling forms, of social differentiation.
Conclusion: Praxis and theory

The preceding observations ascribe a coherence to the arguments in Praxis which they might not appear to have when taken literally. Of course, it is completely open for discussion whether such a coherence, particularly in the terms proposed here, is in fact there or not, or whether it might not simply be the result of a highly parochial Albertian quest for harmony and coherence. But if one follows that route of argument, then it seems safe to say that for all its wanderings hither and tither, Praxis ultimately qualifies as an important piece of Gesellschaftstheorie.

This is a reading that would probably be resented by Kratochwil as far as it seems to put him in bed with theorists, that is, exactly the type he wants to get rid of in order to pursue the virtues of practical judgement and of acting. But I think it is also exactly here where he might need to be salvaged just a bit from himself (whether he likes it or not): Kratochwil is absolutely right, both in Praxis and in his previous writings, to criticize the many vices and shortcomings (both substantively and, alas, more often than not also intellectually) of what is labelled as ‘IR theory’. His lamentation about the fashionable literature on practices in IR can probably be read as a verdict about the entirety of IR theory as well: ‘What one sorely misses in the contemporary debate is precisely the critical examination of the silent and not so silent presuppositions of thought’ (Kratochwil, 2018: 392). This is the basic motive that leads him to discount theory and emphasize that what is needed is exactly the critical examination mentioned in the interest of studying praxis. However, the details of the wording are again very important here. When Kratochwil professes that he does ‘not believe that theory-building is what we should be doing when we study praxis’ (Kratochwil, 2018: 441), what he does not say is that one should not be studying praxis on the basis of theory. What he says is that theory-building is not the purpose of studying praxis – and what he likely primarily means is that it is particularly the exercise of IR theory-building that should not be done (or possibly only by some aficionados in the private sphere of their own basement; after all, by Kratochwilian standards most IR theory resembles less a thorough exercise of theory-building than an exercise in theoretical pottering).

For all it might claim to the contrary, Praxis is also a book of theory, and Kratochwil is a theorist. Yet it is about complex social theory served as a multi-course meal and prepared by a great chef. While the present chapter might have come across at some points as an attempt to ‘correct’ or ‘better’ Kratochwil, there actually is no issue of right or wrong involved here. Presented here are ideas about how Kratochwil’s argument could be framed or constructed in a slightly different yet highly consequential fashion. The point made, really, is in pointing out the differences between how he
proceeds in making his argument, on the one hand, and the consequences if he were to make this argument by taking my proposed modifications on board, on the other. But still: all this not only plays on a difference between Kratochwil’s argument and mine, but also points to that persistent ambiguity, that simultaneous lust and deeply embedded reluctance on the part of Kratochwil himself, when – throughout all his works – it comes to engaging with systems theory. Why this is the case I have given up trying to find out. But then I guess that probably Fritz himself couldn’t come up with the answer.

References

I owe this very ‘pragmatist’ point to Gunther Hellmann.