

# Reflex to turn: the rise of turn-talk in International Relations

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## Abstract

The field of International Relations (IR) is being spun around by a seemingly endless number of ‘turns’. Existing analyses of turning are few in number and predominantly concerned with the most prominent recent turns. By excavating the forgotten history of IR’s earliest turns from the 1980s and tracing the evolution of turn-talk over time, this article reveals a crucial yet overlooked internalist driver behind the phenomenon: the rise of reflexivity. Rather than emerging in the 21st century, turn-talk began at the end of the 1980s as a series of turns away from positivism and towards reflexivity. Cumulatively, this first wave of turns would denaturalise IR’s state-centric ontology while enshrining reflexivity as a canonical good among critical scholars. By the mid-1990s, however, these metatheoretical critiques of positivism had produced a substantial backlash. Charged with fostering an esoteric deconstructivism, a new generation of reflexivists set out to demonstrate the feasibility of post-positivist empirical research. As a result, IR’s turning also took on a different form from the 2000s: whereas the first wave of turns had mounted an epistemological and methodological attack against the positivist mainstream, the second wave set about bringing new ontological objects under the scrutiny of reflexivist scholars. This shift from anti-positivist to mostly intra-reflexivist turning was facilitated by the institutionalisation of critical IR as a major subfield of the discipline. It is the privileged position of reflexivity among critical IR scholars that is the condition of possibility for endless turning, accentuated by mounting pressures to demonstrate novelty in an increasingly competitive environment.

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‘For many years, the international relations discipline has had the dubious honour of being among the least self-reflexive of the Western social sciences’, Yosef Lapid wrote in 1989. Even as he penned these words, however, Lapid could already observe ‘a slow but progressive loss of patience with this posture of intellectual hibernation’ (Lapid, 1989: 249–250). In the ensuing decades, reflexivist work has progressed in leaps and bounds, with reflexivity becoming a cornerstone of ‘post-positivist’ or ‘critical’ International Relations (IR) scholarship (e.g. Alejandro, 2019; Amoureux, 2016; Amoureux and Steele, 2016; Eagleton-Price, 2011; Guzzini, 2013; Hamati-Ataya, 2012; Neumann and Neumann, 2015). In tandem with their newfound proclivity to reflexivity, these critical scholars embarked upon a series of self-proclaimed ‘turns’ that have begun to occur with such frequency as to leave commentators feeling ‘dizzy’ (Epstein and Wæver, 2021: 1).<sup>1</sup> We contend that these two trends are intimately connected: it is the privileged position of reflexivity among critical IR scholars that has served as the condition of possibility for endless turning.

The proliferation of ‘turn-talk’ has belatedly started to attract critical scrutiny both within IR (Baele and Bettiza, 2021; Epstein and Wæver, 2021; McCourt, 2016) and among scholars in neighbouring disciplines (Surkis et al., 2012; Vasileva, 2015). In 2014, sociologist Mark Carrigan counted 47 turns across the humanities and social sciences – ranging from the ‘linguistic turn’ to the ‘insect turn’ – and worried whether ‘the hyperactive proclamation of new turns stands in for cumulative progress’ (Carrigan, 2014). To help make sense of this phenomenon, we proceed via an inductive historical approach that reconstructs the emergence and proliferation of the turn metaphor in IR, going back to the field’s earliest turns in the late 1980s. In doing so, we broaden the historical parameters of existing analytical forays, which have focused on only a handful of IR’s most prominent recent turns (most notably, the ‘constructivist turn’ and the ‘practice turn’). By excavating IR’s forgotten turns, we demonstrate a vital yet overlooked link between turning and reflexivity: when turn-talk first came to IR in the late 1980s, it went hand-in-hand with reflexivist critiques of positivist philosophy of science. Furthermore, our historical analysis points to an important shift in the nature of turn-talk from the 2000s: whereas the first wave of turns had mounted a philosophical attack against the positivist mainstream, the second wave has been more interested in bringing new ontological objects under the scrutiny of post-positivist scholars. Instead of impacting IR as a whole, therefore, the second wave of turns mostly consists of post-positivist scholars jostling for position within IR’s increasingly competitive critical subfield. In other words, the last two decades have seen not only a quantitative accumulation of more and more turns over time, but also a qualitative shift in their form and function. The catalyst behind this shift, we argue, was the positivist backlash against the metatheoretical deliberations of the reflexivists in the mid-1990s, which spurred critical scholars to demonstrate the feasibility of post-positivist empirical research. The growing frustration with turns today,

we suggest, might not only be a function of their endless supply and accumulation over time, but also a result of the peculiar genre of ontological turning that has taken off since the 2000s.

The remainder of the article is organised into four sections and a conclusion. Section one surveys the existing literature on IR's turns using a modified version of the internalist/externalist heuristic, and proposes 'mezzanine' as a useful term for categorising those institutional incentives that operate between internal theoretical development and external events. We identify the rise of reflexivity as an especially significant yet overlooked *internalist* driver behind the proliferation of turns, and conclude the section by presenting our methodological approach for tackling the history of turn-talk. Section two dives into the historical analysis by exploring the emergence of IR's earliest turns in the late 1980s and 1990s. This first wave of turns, we show, consisted of a series of turns *away* from positivism and *towards* reflexivity, and would lead to the canonisation of reflexivity among post-positivist IR scholars. Section three surveys the subsequent backlash against post-positivist work, with reflexivist scholars accused of fostering a nihilistic deconstructivism and being unable to make positive statements about the 'real world'. Faced with this backlash, we show how the articulation of a systematic post-positivist empirical research agenda around the turn of the millennium paved the way for a new and potentially endless wave of ontological turns *within* reflexivity. Section four is where our analysis catches up with the existing literature on turn-talk. Building on Stephane Baele and Gregorio Bettiza's (2021) sociological analysis, we suggest that the proliferation of turns is partly driven by mounting pressures to demonstrate novelty and generate citations in an increasingly competitive field. Taken by itself, however, such a sociological analysis can explain neither the specific ontological quality of the recent turns nor the confinement of the turn metaphor to the post-positivist wing of the discipline (positivist turns are exceedingly rare). Rather, these features must be understood as downstream consequences of the first wave of turns and the internal theoretical debates they engendered. Faced with the seemingly endless accumulation of reflexivist turns, we conclude by reflecting on the consequences of critical IR's embrace of reflexivity.

## Theorising turn-talk

The proliferation of turns across the social scientific landscape has generated considerable debate and sometimes lament in the hallways of academic conferences, yet the phenomenon has been subjected to relatively little theoretical reflection. In IR, the earliest effort to theorise turning is David McCourt's analysis of the 'constructivist', 'practice' and 'relational' turns from 2016, subsequently extended into a book-length study. Drawing on Andrew Abbott's work on the evolution of scientific disciplines across generations, McCourt theorises the emergence of the practice and relational turns as a 'fractal distinction' within the constructivist paradigm. When constructivist ideas were first introduced into IR during the 1980s, McCourt recounts, they encompassed a broad constellation of post-positivist approaches exploring intersubjective meaning in the constitution of international politics. Over time, however, the dominant version of constructivism became aligned with the positivist mainstream and its remit was restricted to exclude the more 'critical' or 'postmodern' strands (McCourt, 2016: 476–78; see also McCourt,

2022). Thus, by the time the constructivist *turn* was proclaimed in the late 1990s, it was framed as a ‘middle ground’ (Adler, 1997) or ‘via media’ (Wendt, 1999) that had ‘rescued the exploration of identity from the postmodernists’ (Checkel, 1998: 325). It was in response to this narrowing of constructivism into a complement to the mainstream, McCourt (2016, 2022) argues, that the ‘practice’ and ‘relational’ turns emerged as a way of broadening constructivism’s boundaries once more.

McCourt’s internalist theory of turn-talk is an important reminder of the processual, dialogical and potentially antagonistic nature of disciplinary evolution. It also offers significant insights into the development of three of the best-known turns in IR: the constructivist turn, the practice turn and the relational turn. Unfortunately, it tells us nothing about the more than sixty other turns that we have been able to identify and that do not fit the model of a fractal distinction. Indeed, the turns have multiplied far more rapidly than the generational intervals that Abbot’s theory suggests (Abbott, 2001: 17; McCourt, 2016: 475, 2022: 12). The proliferation of new turns also does not conform to the expected pattern of ‘split, conflict, and ingestion’ (Abbott, 2001: 21). Following a theoretical debate, Abbott claims, the victorious side is faced with the task of ‘ruling an alien turf’ (Abbott, 2001: 19). For the majority of IR’s turns, however, there seems to be no such common ground and very little evidence of ‘ingestion’. If anything, the multiplication of turns reflects the *failure* of ingestion. Rather than fighting over the same empirical turf at generational intervals, as Abbott’s approach would imply, the proliferation of turns seems to be producing disparate groupings of scholars, each huddled around their own ‘campfire’ (Sylvester, 2007: 562).

A sociological analysis of the institutional drivers of turn-talk has recently been provided by Stephane Baele and Gregorio Bettiza. Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, they conceptualise IR not only as a scientific endeavour, but also as a social ‘game’ where participants jockey with one another for position in a hierarchy of standing. In the bounds of this academic game, Baele and Bettiza contend, declaring a turn represents a bid to become an ‘established heretic’ within IR’s critical subfield (Baele and Bettiza, 2021: 316). Baele and Bettiza also helpfully differentiate between three different kinds of turns. First, there are ‘retrospective’ turns, which ‘enhance the credibility of the claimant by associating him or her with the superior intellectual ability to have a bird’s eye view of the field’. Second, there are ‘prescriptive’ turns, which construct the claimant ‘as someone who is able to offer radically novel insights intended to and capable of re-orienting the field’. Third, there are ‘descriptive’ turns, which ‘bring the benefits of both retrospective and prescriptive turns, yet in a less powerful way’. In each case, declaring a turn allows the claimant to accumulate academic capital and scientific authority (Baele and Bettiza, 2021: 325).

If McCourt offers an internalist perspective that focuses on the presumed value of theoretical claims in debates among IR scholars, then Baele and Bettiza’s analysis might be conceived as a ‘mezzanine’ approach that highlights the career incentives generated by the academic milieu more broadly. We find the term ‘mezzanine’ appropriate here since Baele and Bettiza’s approach falls somewhere between the familiar internalist/externalist divide that structures debates in disciplinary histories and sociologies of knowledge (e.g. Kelley, 2002; Schmidt, 2019; Shapin, 1992). Whereas internalists focus on intellectual debates in spurring disciplinary developments and externalists emphasise

the impact of exogenous events and processes, the mezzanine approach instead explores how broader social logics are filtered through the academic field and guide scholarship in particular directions, often unconsciously. A similar line of argument has been put forward by Charlotte Epstein and Ole Wæver, who draw our attention to ‘the broader structures of economic production’ within which the field of IR and its manifold turns are nested (Epstein and Wæver, 2021: 24). In particular, Epstein and Wæver suggest that ‘our constant desire for new turns’ may be reflecting and reinforcing ‘the subject-position prescribed by capitalism itself’ (Epstein and Wæver, 2021: 25).<sup>2</sup>

This article makes two key contributions to the budding literature on IR’s turns. First, we offer a much-needed historical reconstruction of the emergence and proliferation of the turn metaphor in IR. We show that existing arguments about turning have relied on a truncated and presentist history of the phenomenon that overstates its novelty while overlooking the widespread use of the turn metaphor since the late 1980s. Thus, McCourt’s analysis is narrowly focused on only three of the most prominent recent turns, while Epstein and Wæver (2021: 8) claim that it was the practice turn that ‘installed the turning’ in IR during the 2000s. Baele and Bettiza’s (2021: 317) brief history of turn-talk is not much better, omitting numerous early turns entirely and missing IR’s first turn by almost a decade: Jeffrey Checkel was not the first to proclaim a ‘constructivist turn’ in 1998, let alone was it ‘IR’s first own turn’ as Baele and Bettiza claim. Significantly, the forgotten turns that our analysis recovers were numerous enough to prompt explicit commentary from scholars at the time. Just like Epstein and Wæver today, Duncan Bell (2001: 124) was already feeling ‘dizzy’ from IR’s turning over 20 years ago.

Second, our historical reconstruction highlights the rise of reflexivity among IR scholars as an overlooked internalist mechanism behind IR’s manifold turns. Even as Baele and Bettiza underline the confinement of turn-talk to the critical wing of the discipline, they leave open the question of whether critical IR’s turners share any substantive philosophical commitments that enable or encourage turning. Our claim is that they do: a commitment to reflexivity. Whereas McCourt’s internalist theory views disciplinary evolution as a dialogical competition between seemingly timeless categories such as ‘qualitative’ versus ‘quantitative’ approaches, our analysis emphasises the specific impact of reflexivity. Thus, the emergence of IR’s earliest turns in the late 1980s was inseparable from the rise of reflexivist approaches that challenged the hegemony of positivism, while the subsequent proliferation of the metaphor has much to do with the dilemmas surrounding the conduct of systematic empirical research in a reflexivist spirit. We contend that one cannot understand the form, frequency or trajectory of IR’s subsequent turns without recognising this reflexivist inheritance.

Before we proceed, a note on methodology is in order. Our analysis ‘triangulates’ a close reading of peer-reviewed articles and books that refer to turns within IR (which we treat as primary sources), secondary literature pertaining to the history, sociology and philosophy of IR, and our experience as participant observers doing IR (as students, teachers and researchers). To identify turns, we drew upon the small but growing body of secondary literature on turning and our background knowledge before conducting Google Scholar searches. We adopted a nominalist approach, meaning that we counted something as a turn only when it was explicitly described as such, whether by its advocates or critics. For example, the publication of numerous books and articles on the role of aesthetics in IR does not constitute an ‘aesthetic turn’ unless it is actually labelled as

such. Although the nominalist approach gives us a relatively low threshold for identifying a turn – just one reference to a turn is technically enough for us to include it, even if the vast majority of the turns we identify have been invoked many times – the bar remains set at published works, which means that turns cannot be merely talked into existence but require a degree of institutional recognition. Proceeding in this way, we were able to identify more than sixty turns in total.<sup>3</sup> While we suspect that our list is not exhaustive, we are confident that we have identified the majority of IR's published turns. Certainly, we contend that we have identified enough to conduct the qualitative historical and theoretical inquiry into the origins and development of turn-talk in English-language IR.

A major advantage of our nominalist approach is that it avoids relying on current narratives or memories of past events for the historical reconstruction, which would risk drawing our attention to the more prominent turns and thus risk pre-structuring our analysis. In particular, it has allowed us to excavate the forgotten turns of the 1980s and 1990s, decentring the recent debates surrounding the practice turn and recontextualising them as part of a much longer series of turns. Even if many of the turns we identify were coined unthinkingly, or failed to garner much traction, this makes them no less significant. Scholars who refer to turns are implicated in the reproduction of new discursive conventions, as well as the practices that these conventions enable, whether they are conscious of it or not. Talking about 'turns' has different implications compared to alternative metaphors such as 'paradigms' or 'schools'. Each organising metaphor, as Epstein and Wæver (2021: 3) write, 'evinces a different set of shared choices and a common code'. Whereas paradigms imply bundles of adjoining theories and schools invoke geographical particularities, turns are generally associated with claims to novelty and criticality (Baele and Bettiza, 2021; Epstein and Wæver, 2021). Such discursive conventions are also temporally, spatially and sociologically bounded. Adopting a nominalist approach thus allows us not only to reconstruct the emergence and proliferation of a new organising metaphor across IR, but also to trace the outer limits of this proliferation.

Nevertheless, stopping at merely identifying nominal turns would not provide sturdy grounds for understanding their significance. Rather than simply counting the turns (an exercise better suited for computational methods), our analysis also interrogates their substance: who the turners are, what philosophical commitments they share, what they seek to accomplish, in relation to whom or what they are turning and how such patterns change over time. From this, it becomes apparent that turning has been co-constitutive of broader debates and intellectual currents within the discipline. Specifically, we demonstrate how the spread of the turn metaphor went hand-in-hand with the spread of reflexivist IR scholarship since the late 1980s. While the turns do not exhaust critical work, they provide a valuable window into what has counted as pioneering work within this subfield. Exploring continuity and change in the uses of the turn metaphor thus also allows us to trace continuity and change in post-positivist IR.

## **Turning away from positivism: the rise of reflexivity in the 1980s**

Contemporary metaphors of turning in IR can be traced back to philosophy's 'linguistic turn' (Baele and Bettiza, 2021: 316; Epstein and Wæver, 2021: 8). As an expression, the



linguistic turn was coined in the 1960s and initially referred to the work of logical positivists and analytic philosophers (see, e.g. Bergmann, 1964; Rorty, 1967). The phrase found little traction in other fields prior to the 1980s, by which time it had become aligned with 'postmodern' continental thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida (see, e.g. Dear, 1988; Giddens, 1987; Toews, 1987). The belated popularisation of the linguistic turn across multiple disciplines reflected a range of intellectual and societal developments that had taken place in the interim, including the critique of structuralism, the demise of modernisation theory, the crisis of the post-war economic order, and the attack on modernist architecture. Suffice to say that the 1970s marked a major rupture in the modern Western imaginary, a rupture that scholars have retrospectively sought to conceptualise through labels such as 'the postmodern turn' (Hassan, 1987) and 'reflexive modernity' (Beck et al., 1994). Among the key consequences of this break was an increased reflexive awareness of the limits and contradictions of modern universals, including the scientific quest for value-free knowledge.

The new reflexivist spirit penetrated IR in the 1980s, when the so-called 'third debate' pitted the reigning positivist philosophy of science against a range of feminist, poststructuralist, neo-Gramscian and other critical approaches. By the time Robert Keohane delivered his presidential address to the International Studies Association in 1988, he could already observe the division of IR between 'rationalists' and 'reflectivists' (Keohane, 1988). Surveying these developments a year later, Lapid identified 'enhanced reflexivity as the most important contribution' of the third debate (Lapid, 1989: 238). The reflexivist challenge gained further momentum from the failure of mainstream theories to comprehend let alone predict the end of the Cold War (Kratochwil, 1993). As the Berlin Wall came tumbling down, the leading poststructuralist scholar Richard Ashley (1989: 279) called upon IR to embrace an 'openness to criticism at every turn'. Little could Ashley have foreseen how many turns would follow.

It is against this backdrop of intellectual turmoil and geopolitical change that IR's first wave of turns emerged at the end of the 1980s. These early turns operated mainly at the level of metatheory and were concerned with the merits of competing philosophical epistemologies and methodologies. What united the first wave of turns was that they were all turns *away* from positivism and *towards* reflexivism.<sup>4</sup> In challenging IR's positivist mainstream, many prominent reflexivist scholars claimed for themselves the role of translators or mediators bringing into IR the insights of turns that were unfolding in neighbouring disciplines. These included, most notably, the 'linguistic turn' (e.g. George and Campbell, 1990: 272; Jacquin et al., 1993: 376; Onuf, 1989: 38), the 'postmodern turn' (e.g. Cochran, 1995: 239, 245, 246, 248, 250; Krishna, 1993: 388; Linklater, 1990b: 250; Walker, 1993: 14) and the 'poststructuralist turn' (e.g. Brown, 1994: 10; Walker, 1988: 18).

Even as IR was importing a variety of turns from other fields, it also began to manufacture its 'own' turns. In 1989, Nicholas Onuf (1989: 43) coined the 'ontological turn' to describe the growing realisation that there was no Archimedean point for the IR theorist to occupy: 'We are always within our constructions, even as we choose to stand apart from them, condemn them, reconstruct them'. The following year, Andrew Linklater (1990a: 27, 166) wrote that IR's belated 'discovery' of critical theory during the third debate amounted to a 'critical turn' within the discipline. The focal point of Linklater's

argument was the distinction between ‘problem-solving theory’ and ‘critical theory’ formulated by Robert Cox in 1981. Whereas problem-solving theory was in the service of the *status quo*, Cox had argued, critical theory recognised itself as embedded within the social world and strove to become ‘more reflective upon the process of theorizing itself: to become clearly aware of the perspective which gives rise to theorizing, and its relation to other perspectives (to achieve a perspective on perspectives)’ (Cox, 1981: 128). Like Onuf’s ontological turn a year prior, Linklater’s critical turn amounted to a reflexive recognition of the social embeddedness of the scholar.

The year 1991 saw the birth of another two turns. One was Richard Little’s (1991) documentation of a ‘methodological turn’, the origins of which he located as far back as 1919 but which he claimed had been ‘revivified’ at the end of the 1970s. The other was Mark Neufeld’s (1991, 1993, 1995) proclamation of a ‘reflexive turn’. According to Neufeld (1993: 55), the reflexive turn was defined by three core commitments: ‘(i) self-awareness regarding underlying premises, (ii) the recognition of the inherently politico-normative dimension of paradigms and the normal science tradition they sustain, and (iii) the affirmation that reasoned judgements about the merits of contending paradigms are possible in the absence of a neutral observation language’. The first of these commitments, Neufeld noted, was also a feature of positivism, which after all derived its generalisations from clearly defined starting assumptions; it was the second and third commitments that were unique to reflexive IR.

The remainder of the 1990s witnessed a gradual accumulation of new turns, including the ‘postpositivist turn’ (e.g. Booth, 1996: 332, 333, 337; Jabri, 1995: 131), the ‘ethical turn’ (e.g. Shapiro, 1996: 39), the ‘rhetorical turn’ (e.g. Beer and Hariman, 1996), the ‘interpretivist turn’ (e.g. Samhat, 1997: 350), the ‘historical turn’ (e.g. Hobden, 1998: 1) and the ‘epistemological turn’ (e.g. Leander, 1999: 90, 100, 106, 110, 118), among others.<sup>5</sup> By the turn of the millennium, turn-talk had proliferated to a point where it was generating explicit commentary. ‘If various scholars are to be believed, IR must be spinning in dizzy circles due to the number of turns that it has experienced in recent years’, Bell (2001: 124) wrote in a review essay on the ‘historiographical turn’ in 2001. ‘The turns are all linked’, Bell continued, ‘and take their lead from the increasing awareness of methodology, and the subsequent rise in “second-order thinking,” of thinking about thinking’. Another name for ‘second-order thinking’ is, of course, reflexivity.

## **Taming reflexivity: the constructivist turns of the 1990s**

The common denominator of the first wave of turns was the commitment to reflexivity. Despite their manifold differences and nuances, all of the early turns were, to greater or lesser degrees, turns *away* from positivism and *towards* reflexivism. By the mid-1990s, however, the wave of reflexivist critiques had also generated substantial backlash: there was widespread concern that the critical and deconstructive impulse of the early turners had little to contribute in terms of positive statements about international politics. The reflexivist attack on scientific objectivity was castigated as a ‘retreat from basic norms of science and professional scholarship’ (Østerud, 1996: 389) that too often resulted in ‘bad IR’ or remained on the level of ‘meta-babble’ (Halliday, 1996: 320, 327). In an especially striking statement, Stephen Krasner described the rise of ‘post-modernism’ as an ‘evil



development' that 'provides no methodology for adjudicating among competing claims' and 'leads directly to nihilism' (Krasner, 1996: 125; Zalewski, 1996: 344). Unsurprisingly, many scholars sympathetic to reflexivist insights felt compelled to respond to such damning allegations. While some would develop a watered-down version of reflexivism to sell to the positivist mainstream, others were determined to demonstrate the feasibility of robust post-positivist empirical research. In this section, we trace how these two routes were reflected in the two faces of the 'constructivist turn' that unfolded around the turn of the millennium: confronted with the charge of endless deconstructivism, the defence was some version of constructivism.

Constructivist IR emerged in the 1990s at the interstices between the positivist mainstream and its post-positivist, reflexivist critics. Its liminal position was reflected in the splitting of the constructivist research agenda into two strands: 'conventional' versus 'critical' (Hopf, 1998: 172), 'neo-classical' versus 'postmodernist' (Ruggie, 1998: 881), 'thin' versus 'thick' (Wendt, 1999: xiv). For the 'conventional' or 'neo-classical' wing, constructivism represented a 'middle ground' (Adler, 1997) or 'via media' (Wendt, 1999) capable of reconciling the divide between positivist and post-positivist IR. Simply put, the goal of the conventional constructivists was to take on board the post-positivist emphasis on the role of identities in shaping international politics, while rejecting the more fundamental epistemological and methodological challenges presented by reflexivism (McCourt, 2016). As far as we can tell, the earliest publication to refer to a 'constructivist turn' in this context was an article by Thomas Risse-Kappen from 1996, which equated constructivism with rationalist analyses of how norms and ideas influence state behaviour (Risse-Kappen, 1996: 54, 59, 60, 69). Two years later, Jeffrey Checkel's widely-cited review essay on 'The Constructivist Turn in International Relations Theory' triumphantly proclaimed that constructivism had 'rescued the exploration of identity from the postmodernists' (Checkel, 1998: 325). 'It is important to note that constructivists do not reject science or causal explanation', Checkel (1998: 327) explained: 'their quarrel with mainstream theories is ontological, not epistemological'. Over the following years, the work of Alexander Wendt (1999) in particular proved instrumental in cementing the status of constructivism as a third theoretical paradigm alongside realism and liberalism: the 'turn' metamorphosed into an 'ism'.

The rapid success of 'thin' constructivism came at a cost: as a new generation of conventional constructivists began to explore the influence of norms and identities in international politics, the reflexivist ethos of third debate critical theory was largely forgotten. Jörg Friedrichs (2004: 105) has aptly described the constructivist strategy as 'a sneak rapprochement towards the mainstream and a corresponding estrangement from the post-positivist challenge to that mainstream'. This development was especially marked in the United States, where the dissemination of reflexivist scholarship was hampered by various structural factors, such as the ancillary status of IR as a subfield of Political Science with its 'methodological monoculture' of positivist research (Jackson, 2018: 330). For American IR, the constructivist turn effectively served as the turn to end all turns. This was, to all intents and purposes, a turn *against* reflexivity.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond the United States, by contrast, the 'constructivist turn' remained more closely coupled to post-positivist reflexivity. The difference becomes plain when we juxtapose Checkel's aforementioned review essay to a working paper on 'The Constructivist Turn'

produced by Christian Reus-Smit in 1996. For Reus-Smit, the ‘constructivist turn’ was not limited to the study of norms and ideas, but captured a much broader ‘reorientation of critical theory toward ontological concerns’ (Reus-Smit, 1996: 2). Reus-Smit’s conception of constructivism was a broad church indeed, encompassing not only Wendt’s social constructivism, but also the genealogical inquiries of Jens Bartelson and the post-structuralist investigations of Cynthia Weber, among others. ‘Together, these scholars have reoriented critical theory, replacing the metatheoretical and quasi-philosophical focus of the 1980s with an emphasis on ontological questions and analysis’, Reus-Smit (1996: 7) explained. Whereas Checkel’s programmatic article would seek to align the constructivist turn with the positivist mainstream, Reus-Smit insisted that the newfound emphasis on empirical work ‘has not violated the broad intellectual commitments of Third Debate critical theory’ and underlined the importance of retaining ‘a high degree of reflexivity’ (Reus-Smit, 1996: 15–16). The argument presented in the working paper was restated for a wider audience in an article that Reus-Smit co-authored with Richard Price for the *European Journal of International Relations* in 1998 (Price and Reus-Smit, 1998). Two years later, Stefano Guzzini (2000: 150) would likewise characterise ‘reflexivity’ as ‘perhaps the central component of constructivism, a component too often overlooked’.

What we are pointing to here is a second, largely unacknowledged ‘via media’ taken by some scholars in the reflexivist camp: faced with allegations of irrelevance and lack of systematicity, mainstream rapprochement was not the only option. Instead of following Checkel and Wendt into the positivist fold, these critical constructivists responded to such allegations by demonstrating the ability of post-positivist scholars to conduct robust empirical analysis and produce ‘real-world’ insights. One manifestation of this trend was the proliferation of methodological guides on how to ‘do’ systematic, post-positivist, empirical scholarship. Indeed, these guides were often *explicitly* justified and framed as a means of responding to the mainstream’s demands for systematism but without accepting the positivist demands for hypothesis-testing. To use a seminal example, the goal of Lene Hansen’s *Security as Practice* – cited over 3000 times on Google Scholar at the time of writing – was to dismantle the ‘rationalist consensus that poststructuralism is defined by its incapacity for epistemological and methodological rigor’ (Hansen, 2006, xvi; see also Milliken, 1999).

The difficulty that the critical constructivists faced was reconciling their desire to produce systematic empirical analyses, on the one hand, with their epistemological and methodological commitment to reflexivity, on the other. Whereas the positivists’ faith in a mind-independent world ensured that they could take a first-order object of analysis for granted, their reflexivist counterparts enjoyed no such ontological security. By the close of the 1990s, the familiar conceptual distinction between the sovereign state and the anarchical international system – the dichotomy that had provided IR with its own object of analysis – had been unveiled as a contingent effect of discursive practices that IR scholars themselves were implicated in (Ashley, 1988; Walker, 1993). These discursive practices, moreover, had resulted in an impoverished understanding of international politics by, among other things, marginalising women and non-Western subjects (e.g. Darby and Paolini, 1994; Enloe, 1989; Krishna, 1993; Sylvester, 1992). However, even as reflexivist scholars rejected the mainstream’s problematic ontology, they never could

offer a solid alternative. After all, one of the defining features of reflexivity is a rejection of the view ‘that it is sensible to refer to a mind-independent world as the ground upon which to place valid knowledge-claims’ (Jackson, 2010: 156). But if there is no mind-independent world to orient the post-positivist scholar, what could be the ground for empirical analysis?

This is where what Patrick Thaddeus Jackson (2010: 158) calls ‘the mind–world hook-up’ plays a crucial role: ‘a focus on reflexivity has to center on the level of the mind–world hook-up, a level that necessarily precedes any particular empirical observations’. Simply put, reflexivist scholars who want to go beyond metatheoretical critiques of positivism and make positive statements about the social world need some kind of supplementary lens or mediating concept through which they can hook themselves up to that world. Yet precisely because this supplementary lens is not pre-given but generated by the mind of the self-reflexive IR scholar, each and every lens remains open to critique. Reflexivist scholarship is only too aware that each and every lens that we impose on the world is, as Michel Foucault (1971: 22) writes of discourse, ‘a violence that we do to things’. We can always add another lens, discover another angle, find another perspective – each of which inevitably proves as unsatisfactory and limiting as the next. Each new lens that is inserted between the self-reflexive theorist and the social world does not merely join them together, but also keeps them forever apart. The persistent turning of post-positivist IR is the logical consequence of the endless search for new lenses to bridge the unbridgeable gap between the self-reflexive mind and the social world.

This critical constructivist attitude towards knowledge production became a background assumption among post-positivist scholars, structuring the terrain upon which the later turns would turn. Indeed, it was post-positivist IR’s rejection of a pre-given first-order object of analysis that paved the way for both the proliferation and the peculiar genre of ontological turning that would take off from the 2000s. Whereas the neorealism of Kenneth Waltz (1986: 329) had sought to explain a ‘small number of big and important things’, the turners self-consciously refused to impose *a priori* limits upon their objects of inquiry. This was no doubt liberating, as David Campbell reflected in the second edition of *Writing Security*:

Where once we were all caught in the headlights of the large North American car of international relations theory, now the continental sportster of critical theories has long since left behind the border guards and toll collectors of the mainstream – who can be observed in the rearview mirror waving their arms wildly still demanding papers and the price of admission – as the occupants go on their way in search of another political problem to explore. (Campbell, 1998: 215)

The heirs of Campbell would inherit this hard-won freedom; but what would they do with it? In many ways, the results have been incredibly positive. As Beate Jahn (2021) documents in a recent article, critical IR scholarship has produced innumerable successes within and beyond academia, radically transforming the shape of the field while empowering social movements to challenge the *status quo* of world politics. Yet freedom can be both a blessing and a curse. As anyone who has observed the customers at an all-you-can-eat buffet can attest, people left to their own devices do not always make optimum choices. Absent men, states or war to orientate their theorising, post-positivist

IR scholars set about theorising social life *in toto*, which licenced turners to investigate an infinite number of big, small, important and some would complain, esoteric things.

## Turning within reflexivity: the proliferation of turns since the 2000s

As the metatheoretical concerns of the 1980s began to fade, the turn metaphor took on a life of its own and calls for greater reflexivity among IR scholars took a back seat: reflexivity became a background condition facilitating turning rather than an explicit driving force thereof. Even a few rogue positivists began to turn, as evidenced by the ‘public administration turn’ in European Union integration research (Trondal, 2007) and the ‘domestic politics turn’ in foreign policy analysis (Kaarbo, 2015). By 2011, Helge Jordheim and Iver Neumann (2011: 180) could write that ‘IR scholars have staked out enough turns for an entire downhill slope: the linguistic turn, the aesthetic turn, the practice turn, the sociological turn, and the relational turn’. The length of this downhill slope has been greatly extended since then. All told, we have been able to identify more than forty turns since the turn of the millennium.<sup>7</sup>

It is at this point that our analysis catches up with existing work on IR’s turns, which tends to begin with either the constructivist turn at the end of the 1990s or the practice turn in the 2000s. Building on Baele and Bettiza’s (2021) seminal analysis, it is possible to identify a number of sociological functions served by the turn metaphor that help to explain its unending appeal in the 21st century. Arguably, the most benign function of proclaiming a turn is collegial: raising a flag to rally and organise followers around. Proclaiming a turn can thus bring disparate scholars apparently working independently from one another together for the greater academic good. Yet being the scholar to hold the flag, while others turn towards it, also offers considerable career advantages. First, it enables a scholar to brand themselves and thus helps them climb the ladder in their field. In Bourdieusian terms, successfully christening a turn provides the critical scholar with ‘academic capital’ (Aradau and Huysmans, 2014: 599) that allows them to make a name for themselves as ‘established heretics’ within the discipline (Baele and Bettiza, 2021: 314). Second, with the growing use of key performance indicators in research, there is also increasing pressure to generate as many citations as possible. Successfully christening a turn – and successfully rallying followers – is a surefire means of racking up ‘salutary citations’ (Beaumont, 2017). Finally, beyond rallying followers and racking up citations, the turns are predicated upon a claim to novelty. Publishing pressures and the ‘fetishization of novelty’ (Varadarajan, 2012: 96) provide a powerful incentive to declare a turn, which has come to constitute a claim to novelty *par excellence*.

Although we have managed to identify a couple of positivist turns, the turn metaphor is especially apposite for the critical wing of the discipline precisely because it entails a challenge to the *status quo*. Declaring a turn, as Baele and Bettiza write, entails ‘the rhetorical display of a radical critical stance on a “mainstream” diagnosed as flawed at its core’ (Baele and Bettiza, 2021: 328). Another factor that helps to explain the appeal of the turn metaphor for critical scholarship is its link to the revered ‘linguistic turn’ of the 1980s. Coining a turn thus serves as ‘a bid to enhance the legitimacy credentials of a specific claim and to categorize one’s own attempt in the same class of a major and

successful past theoretical innovation' (Baele and Bettiza, 2021: 324). It is worth noting that the display of critical ambition and theoretical novelty associated with turning operates not only among individual scholars, but also on the level of journals. Thus, self-proclaimed 'critical' journals such as *Millennium* and *Review of International Studies* have been at the forefront of the turning phenomenon, while mainstream journals such as *International Organization* have enjoyed a turn-free existence (Baele and Bettiza, 2021: 333).<sup>8</sup>

Baele and Bettiza (2021: 327–28) note a clear and recurrent pattern in the form of novelty claimed by the turns. They characterise this 'anatomy of a turn' as follows:

1. X is everywhere in or deeply constitutive of world politics;
2. But X has been completely ignored by IR and therefore the discipline needs a *turn* to X;
3. Yet, taking X into account fundamentally overturns IR's core axioms and theoretical points of reference, if not even putting into question the boundaries of the discipline as a whole.

For the practice turn, the 'X' that the existing literature had been missing was practices. For the religious turn, it was religion. For the temporal turn, it was temporality. And so on and so forth. In each case, the missing 'X' offers a new lens through which IR scholarship can orient itself, bringing a hitherto bracketed or reified object under its gaze. Epstein and Wæver add further nuance to this anatomy by specifying two distinct kinds of turn. First, echoing Baele and Bettiza, they suggest that there are those turns that identify 'a thing "X" in the world (images, sound, emotions, religion, everyday life) that has been ignored by the mainstream'. The goal of this type of turn is to carve out an intellectual space for analysing an overlooked dimension of world politics, with far-reaching implications for the discipline as a whole (Epstein and Wæver, 2021: 11). The second type of turn is more ambitious: rather than just adding a new object into IR's repertoire, these turns introduce 'a world-recoding concept' through which 'everything is recoded or translated into a common language spawned by the turn's central category' (Epstein and Wæver, 2021: 9–10). The practice turn is the obvious example of this second type of turn, suggesting that all kinds of different phenomena ought to be conceived in terms of practices.

Both Baele and Bettiza and Epstein and Wæver present their respective anatomies as general models applicable to all turns. However, this glosses over the important differences between the first and second waves of turning that we have identified. Whereas the recent turns have indeed sought to name the ontological building blocks of world politics – either to identify the missing 'X' of existing theories, or to re-code the entirety of the field through a new lens – IR's early turns were far more interested in challenging the metatheoretical presuppositions of the positivist mainstream. The epistemological and methodological orientation of the first wave can be seen in the very names given to the early turns: rather than naming a neglected ontological dimension of world politics, the turns of the 1980s and 1990s were 'post-modern', 'critical', 'reflexive', 'postpositivist', 'ethical' and so on. It is only since the 2000s that the turners have largely ceased their

metatheoretical dialogue with the positivist mainstream and that turning has become a primarily additive endeavour.

The heightened ontological emphasis of the second wave of turns is, we contend, a downstream consequence of the first and thus amenable to an internalist explanation. Two key internalist factors are at work here. First, there is the institutionalisation of post-positivist IR scholarship since the 1980s: whereas the early turners adopted a ‘dissident’ positionality vis-à-vis the positivist mainstream (Ashley and Walker, 1990), the subsequent decades have seen ‘critical IR’ establish itself as a major subfield within the discipline. In many ways, this subfield has begun to function as a ‘mainstream’ in its own right, complete with its own gatekeepers and status hierarchies backed by a self-sustaining ecology of journals and book series welcoming reflexivist scholarship (Michelsen, 2021). The label ‘critical’, as Philip Conway (2021: 341) notes, has become ‘a flexible point of compromise between radicalism and respectability’. With the post-positivist and pluralist identity of critical IR firmly established, there is no longer an obvious epistemological and methodological ‘other’ for critical scholars to turn against: whereas the first wave consisted of a series of turns *against* positivism and *towards* reflexivity, the second wave has mostly unfolded *within* reflexivity. Rather than impacting the discipline as a whole, therefore, the second wave of turns has mainly consisted of post-positivist scholars jostling for position within IR’s newly institutionalised critical subfield – a subfield increasingly crowded with turns of yore.

A second and related internalist factor was the aforementioned backlash against philosophical ‘meta-babble’ – to recall Fred Halliday’s (1996: 327) uncharitable phrase – which spurred the critics of the mainstream to demonstrate the feasibility of empirical research in a post-positivist mould. The result was a refocusing of the reflexivist research agenda from epistemological and methodological critiques of positivism to bringing new ontological objects within the purview of IR. It is worth pointing out that this shift is not unique to IR, but seems to be a wider pattern across the humanities and social sciences. The same phenomenon has been identified in History, for instance, where the epistemological break inaugurated by the ‘linguistic’ and ‘cultural’ turns of the 1980s was subsequently neutralised by a headlong dash towards new empirical objects. As Gary Wilder puts it, ‘new optics were transformed into routine research topics that reaffirmed traditional historiographic assumptions’. IR’s recent turns, we contend, have been marked by a similar retreat ‘from optics to topics’ (Surkis et al., 2012: 723). Having swept away IR’s first-order object of analysis – which traditionally, if not exclusively, had been the anarchical system of states – post-positivist IR’s ‘international’ became a blank canvas that provides near limitless potential for ontological turning.<sup>9</sup> It is this epistemologically delimited but ontologically infinite space that has been the stage for the multiplication of turns since the 2000s.<sup>10</sup>

Given the large number of turns that have spun IR since the turn of the millennium, we lack the space here to dissect each of them individually. Instead, we zoom in on the ‘practice turn’ to unpack the peculiar genre of turning that has come to dominate the field. Singling out the practice turn to this end is especially useful for two reasons. First, it is by far the most (in)famous of all the recent turns and constitutes an important reference point for current debates about turning (e.g. Epstein, 2015; Epstein and Wæver, 2021; McCourt, 2016; Ringmar, 2014). Second, the practice turn provides an especially



salient illustration of how the focus of turn-talk has shifted from metatheoretical critiques of the positivist mainstream towards ontological concerns. Although the divide between the two waves is blurred and defies attempts to identify a clean break, the practice turn is unusually explicit in foregrounding its ontological contribution *vis-à-vis* existing reflexivist scholarship. Instead of launching an epistemological and methodological attack against positivism, the advocates of the practice turn have been more interested in identifying a new ontological grounding for IR.

The practice turn was brought to IR by Iver Neumann's (2002) article 'Returning Practice to the Linguistic Turn'. Locating himself in the slipstream of the linguistic turn, Neumann advocated for a reflexivist stance that recognised the complicity of IR theory in international political practice: 'one of the practices that upholds the existing discourse on global politics is the positivist practice of analyzing International Relations'. Neumann argued that it was necessary to challenge this positivist understanding of world politics, which 'limits our empirical investigation of this drama' and leaves out 'all kinds of other and arguably more interesting practices' (Neumann, 2002: 639). What is most significant for our purposes is that Neumann's turn *away* from positivism was accompanied by a turn *within* reflexivism. Even as he welcomed the linguistic turn's challenge to the positivist mainstream, Neumann also lamented the tendency of reflexivist scholars to succumb to 'armchair analysis' (Neumann, 2002: 628). In other words, Neumann was not only concerned with challenging the positivist mainstream, but also with highlighting a gap in the existing reflexivist literature: 'an elision of social practices' (Neumann, 2002: 629). The productive application of the linguistic turn to IR theory, Neumann (2002: 639) concluded, 'should be followed up by equally incisive reflexive applications of the practice turn'.

The practice turn took off with the publication of Vincent Pouliot's widely cited article on 'The Logic of Practicality' in 2007. Akin to Neumann before him, Pouliot framed the practice turn as an attempt to overcome 'armchair analysis' and minimise the gap between theory and practice: 'what scientists see from their ivory tower is often miles away from the practical logics enacted on the ground' (Pouliot, 2008: 261). The practice turn thus served to extend the gaze of the self-reflexive scholar in yet another way, shifting the attention from discourse and language to social and material practices. What the practice turn claimed to do was to bring under reflexive scrutiny those aspects of world politics which were otherwise considered 'nonreflexive' (Pouliot, 2008: 262) or 'prereflexive' (p. 267).

In many ways, the practice turn was a continuation of the reflexivist impulse that had animated the first wave of turns. Yet precisely because a space for critical IR scholarship no longer needed to be forged, but was already established, the epistemological and methodological critique of positivism that had animated the early turners now took a back seat. Instead, the central focus of the practice turn's leaders was on providing a new ontological foundation for IR scholarship. This was made explicit in Adler and Pouliot's introduction to the landmark edited volume *International Practices*. Drawing an analogy with quantum physics, Adler and Pouliot (2011: 8) posited practices as 'the "gluon" of IR – the ontological entity that cuts across paradigms under different names but with a related substance'.

The (over-)ambitious claims made by the proponents of the practice turn help to explain some of the backlash it has generated. To be sure, post-positivist scholars could be forgiven for feeling a little *déjà vu* when reading Pouliot's practice turn thesis. As Epstein (2015: 244) notes, 'in order to claim "practices" as a novel and discrete concept for the study of IR', practice theorists have had to 'artificially excise the discursive from the material' even though 'the concept of "discourse" by definition encompasses meaning-making practices, including material ones'. Indeed, even though the practice turners generally present themselves in opposition to constructivism, its basic tenets fall squarely within the remit of the early constructivist literature in IR. As McCourt (2016: 475) suggests, 'like constructivism, the true value of practice theory [. . .] is to keep IR scholarship sensitive to the social and cultural contexts in which international politics takes place'. While McCourt puts a positive spin on IR repeating itself, it is easy to see why this 'new constructivism' (McCourt, 2022) might give some scholars cause to doubt its added value. Echoing Epstein's aforementioned concerns, Erik Ringmar (2014: 2) has claimed that 'there is nothing truly new about this research. After all, practices of one kind or another are what scholars of international relations always have studied'.

Zooming out again, we find that most turns in the second wave have been much less ambitious than the practice turn. Whereas the practice turn has sought to establish 'practices' as an inter-paradigmatic bridge-building concept, most other turns in the second wave have limited themselves to adding a new concept to the existing repertoire of post-positivist IR. Nevertheless, the overall trend is a shift in emphasis from epistemology and methodology towards ontology – from metatheoretical debates about the philosophical presuppositions of IR scholarship towards analysing the 'stuff' that the world is made of. This ontological emphasis cannot be explained with reference to academic incentives and publication pressures alone, but stem rather from the internal disciplinary debates and theoretical dilemmas generated by the first wave of turns: the newfound commitment to reflexivity among post-positivist scholars and the counter-measures undertaken to defend it from the positivist backlash.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have traced the emergence and proliferation of turn-talk across IR's disciplinary landscape from the late 1980s to the present day. Through an historical reconstruction of the intellectual debates in which the turn metaphor has been deployed, we have demonstrated the intimate link between the rise of turn-talk and the rise of reflexivity in IR theorising. Significantly, this internalist approach has also enabled us to distinguish between two distinct waves of turns: a first wave of turns in the 1980s and 1990s, which essentially constituted a series of turns *away* from positivism and *towards* reflexivity, followed by a second wave of turns since the 2000s, which has been composed of a growing number of turns *within* reflexivity. This shift from anti-positivist to mostly intra-reflexivist turning mirrors the successful institutionalisation of critical IR as a distinct subfield of the discipline with an explicit commitment to some kind of reflexivity as a core value. Accused of fostering an esoteric deconstructivism that had nothing to say about the 'real world', the incipient critical subfield set out to demonstrate the feasibility of robust, post-positivist empirical research. As a result, the turns also took on a

new ontological emphasis: whereas the first wave of turns sought to problematise the epistemological and methodological tenets of the positivist mainstream, the second wave of turns has dedicated itself to identifying new ontological objects for IR scholars to explore. Recent decades have thus witnessed not only a quantitative accumulation of ever more turns, but also an important qualitative shift in their substance, indebted to the intra-disciplinary debates of the 1980s and 1990s.

The result of these disciplinary developments has been to let a thousand flowers bloom, or turns turn. While much of the recent literature on the state of IR laments its fragmentation, this need not be characterised as a problem, especially if the alternative is the quixotic and pernicious quest to establish a unified science of IR (Beaumont and de Coning, 2022: 18–22). Lamentations of theoretical fragmentation and lack of dialogue are as old as IR itself and should be approached with a degree of scepticism, as they often serve as a means of policing the porous boundaries of the discipline (Kristensen, 2012). Indeed, what our analysis of turning suggests is that behind the appearance of plurality and fragmentation lies a common philosophical ground and intellectual lineage, namely, the dissolution of IR's first-order object of analysis in the 1980s and the canonisation of a specific understanding of reflexivity as a core tenet of post-positivist IR theorising. The philosophical commitments associated with reflexivity produced an epistemologically delimited but ontologically infinite space where turn-talk can proliferate, setting in motion modes of theorising among critical IR scholars that collectively generate a very different structure of knowledge production compared to positivism. Put differently, the readily acknowledged fragmentation or pluralisation of critical IR's theoretical terrain does not signal the lack of a mainstream, but rather the emergence of a very different kind of mainstream, one built upon reflexivity rather than positivism. This reflexive mainstream is not structured around great debates or a grand dialectic of progress, but around a plurality of theoretical 'campfires' (Sylvester, 2007: 562) that burn bright but often briefly. The turn metaphor is by no means the only manifestation of these trends, but it is certainly among the most salient.

When the first wave of turns came to IR in the 1980s, they epitomised a dissident ethos that challenged the taken-for-granted presuppositions of positivist IR and advocated for greater reflexivity among IR scholars. Today, we seem to be in a position where in order to be dissident it is necessary to question reflexivity itself. Yet, crucially, this questioning of reflexivity does not require retreating back into a positivist shell. Faced with the institutionalisation of critical IR into a new mainstream and the proliferation of ever more reflexivist turns, what is required is not less reflexivity, but a reflexive interrogation of the limits and consequences of reflexivity. Instead of opposing reflexive scholars to their supposedly 'unreflexive' rivals, or competing over the title of most reflexive scholar, it is necessary to recognise how reflexivity comes with its own 'unreflexive' moments, how the 'unreflexive' is already encompassed within the field of reflexivity as its condition of possibility (Gasché, 1986). Indeed, despite unfolding within the remit of reflexivist IR scholarship, turn-talk itself has taken on an almost reflex-like quality, with new turns being declared in quick succession without much reflexive consideration as to the broader structural consequences of this practice for the field. More concretely, interrogating the limits of reflexivity would involve confronting the possibility that the pluralisation of perspectives might be masking an underlying homogeneity, that certain forms of critique might be upholding rather than challenging

the *status quo*, and that the proliferation of analytical lenses might be obscuring rather than illuminating the nature of world politics.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, what is needed is a reflexive critique of reflexivity itself. Otherwise, IR's turners may find themselves again 'out there on the plains somewhere, on horseback, galloping alone'.<sup>12</sup>

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### Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

### Notes

1. The version of Epstein and Wæver's paper that we cite in this article was presented at the Annual Convention of the European International Studies Association on 17 September 2022 (cited with permission). A revised version of their paper is currently under review.
2. It is worth noting that Epstein and Wæver's main concern is not to excavate the origins of the turns but to unpack their intellectual consequences. The contribution of their analysis is not a theory of turn-talk as such, but a diagnostic tool intended to curb it: a set of five 'slow-down test questions' that scholars should ask themselves before hailing a turn (Epstein and Wæver, 2021: 18–25).
3. A table listing all of the turns, as well as the earliest reference that we have been able to identify, is available as an Online Appendix.
4. There are only two early turns that deviate from this pattern, both of which were retrospective and served to define the 'other' of reflexivist scholarship. The first is Ashley's (1984: 227,

233, 254) characterisation of neorealism as a ‘structuralist turn’ within realist IR theory. The second is a handful of references to IR’s ‘scientific’ or ‘behaviouralist’ turn after the Second World War (Halliday, 1994: 29; Loriaux, 1992: 409n21; Tickner, 1997: 618). In 2008, for example, John Hobson and George Lawson (2008: 415) argued that the ‘historical (re)turn’ could redress the shortcomings of IR’s earlier ‘scientific turn’.

5. See Online Appendix.
6. The distinction between American and European IR is far from absolute. We recognise that the two geographical areas are neither internally homogeneous nor entirely isolated from one another, that important reflexivist outposts exist in the United States, and that positivist scholarship also has a notable presence in Europe. Nonetheless, the continental divergence is visible in empirical measures such as journal publication rates, with European journals accepting a higher proportion of post-positivist scholarship than their American counterparts (Kristensen, 2012; Wæver, 1998).
7. See Online Appendix.
8. In positivist scholarship, the pressures to demonstrate novelty manifest instead as the ‘salami slicing’ or ‘p-hacking’ of data, as well as the invention of ever-more-complex statistical models that are at least as esoteric and impenetrable to outsiders as any reflexivist turn (see Mearsheimer and Walt, 2013).
9. It is worth clarifying that while positivism has no necessary logical connection to any particular first-order object of analysis, its mind–world dualism enables scholars to settle on one. In mainstream IR, the anarchical states-system has proven durable both as a primary object of analysis and, to some, in defining the boundaries of IR itself (see Rosenberg, 2016; Zarakol, 2017). Conversely, while nothing in post-positivism precludes studying states or the states-system, the commitment to reflexivity does preclude post-positivist scholars from taking the states-system as a given and treating it as a necessary or even defining feature of the practice of IR.
10. The shift from epistemology and methodology to ontology is by no means absolute. Several turns in the second wave, such as the ‘critical methodological turn’ (Aradau and Huysmans, 2014) and the ‘decolonial turn’ (Zondi, 2018), entail important epistemological and methodological interventions reminiscent of the first wave. We are describing a general trend rather than a rigid divide.
11. Audrey Alejandro remarked to us in conversation that reflexivity, done properly, should make you uncomfortable. If questioning your own values and assumptions leaves you satisfied and feeling superior, then you are doing it wrong. Writing this paper, which involved reflexively questioning the reflexivity of post-positivist IR and its many turns, made us uncomfortable and will likely make some readers uncomfortable too. We concur with Alejandro that this is how it should be. Rather than ‘othering’ the turns, it is necessary to acknowledge that we are complicit, whether knowingly or unknowingly, in the problems we identify with turning as well as some of the processes through which the incentives to turn are reproduced. Indeed, the turning phenomenon can be read as an especially salient incantation of the practice of the modern academic: all published manuscripts necessarily make claim to novelty some would consider exaggerated, conjure away some who could have been cited, and all constitute part of the scholar’s career strategy. The discomfiting implication is that, in some sense, we are all turners, and that might be why the turns generate such ire.
12. Ashley (1996: 240) was quoting a colleague whose scathing critique of IR remains, to the best of our knowledge, anonymous.

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