

‘Near-to-Medium Term’ Practices in the European Union’s Governance

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Long-term thinking is one of the most difficult tasks that States, and their policy-makers, face, and the European Union (EU) is no exception. This article examines the long-termist literature and the EU’s governance’s practices infused with power. It addresses the following question: does (and how) the practice approach make it possible to capture the practices of the European Union’s governance that give rise to contrasting directions when encroaching on social interactions? The findings highlight how the practices of the EU’s governance lead to different and opposed outcomes when interact with the social sphere, and how the outcomes are connected to the future. The findings might serve policy-makers to remind the importance of considering the effects of their policies on the future. The article fulfils these tasks by applying the practice approach to three short illustrative examples that are inherent within the EU’s governance: the Covid pandemic, Afghanistan, and China. The issue of how the practical implications of this paper might inform the ‘near-to-medium term’ policy-making or international relations strategies is discussed in the conclusion.

Key words: European Union’s governance, long-termism, practices, Covid-19, Afghanistan, China

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper revisits the article on practices in the European Union’s governance (Marchi 2024) by linking it to a further theme, the tension of bearing in mind the future while we opt for policies that might impact on upcoming life. It extends that study to include the long-termist literature, and helps thinking in terms of outcomes that might derive from policies. It addresses the following research question: does (and how) the practice approach make it possible to capture the practices of the European Union’s governance that give rise to contrasting directions when encroaching on social interactions? The findings highlight how the practices of the EU’s governance lead to different outcomes when interact with the social sphere. They emphasise how policies might simultaneously lead to ‘cooperation’ and ‘disentangling from it’; to adopting ‘innovative practices’ and ‘rejecting innovative practices’; and to opting for ‘openness to new political engagements’ and ‘rejecting new political engagements’. Three short illustrative examples will confirm this. The circumstance of the opposing outcomes might call policy-makers, the European Union and the member states, to pay attention to the policies they enact, particularly in consideration of the effects that they might bear on the future. This is the claim that is argued throughout this paper’s attention to long-termism, a claim that some believe contributes to the European Union’s better governance. A theory combining the practice approach with longtermism, and how the EU develops its long-term interests are subjects outside the scope of this empirical paper.

Scholars who are focused on the global priorities argue that the long-term future matters more than we currently realise (Samuel 2022). They suggest that the primary determinant of the optimum actions is their effect on the very long-run rather than on more immediate considerations (Greaves et al. 2019, 4). Scientists express concern about the possible effects of the available options on the distant future by acknowledging that ‘countervailing constraints’ are the most important initiative that presses on our desired goals (Tarsney 2020; Greaves and MacAskill 2021, 30). They justify the intentions behind the long-term rationale with the purpose of generating positive opportunities to affect the future (Greaves et al. 2019). In particular, they vindicate a moral priority that is rooted in the search for better prospects for future generations (p. 7), and ask us not to remain indifferent to the moral calls to support people’s wellbeing. Greaves and MacAskill (2021, 30) argue that it is appropriate to study long-termism in the field of applied political science and sociology, and sociologist Bourdieu would respond that it would be questioned whether international practices, as political action, are related to future options. Bourdieu would compare the geographical space to the social space where interactions materialise, and would

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suggest that the ‘truth’ of any interaction is never entirely to be found within the interaction: it requires observation (Bourdieu 1989, 16).

The discourse of the ‘social space compared to the geographical space, and of any interaction that is never entirely to be understood within the interaction’ itself, leads us to distinguish practices. That discourse supports the interpretation that actors’ governance, such as the governance of the European Union, may be conceived as having been built on practices that give meaning to action and make strategic interactions possible (cfr Pouliot and Therien 2018). The EU’s politics largely remain defined by the institutional architecture; however, when the official norms lack specificity or, in specific situations, policy-makers are left with experimental actions, a myriad of practices hang together to facilitate political activity (Sending 2015). At the same time, when long-term thinking is regarded as relevant (and concern about the possible effects of our present choices on the future is real (Tarsney 2020, 7)), seeing the future as part of the present should be politicians’ aim. By studying tension, Pouliot and Therien (2018) found that the politics of governance are imbued with power. This power, they argue, produces dynamics that, when confronting the social dialectic, generate complex effects that often point in opposite directions (p. 164). These effects might have consequences or important influences on the future of institutions (such as the European Union), or states (such as the EU’s member states), and also consequences for the wider region. They might offer the perception of incoming changes, the suspension of cooperation, detrimental policies and other impediments, in a way that draw our attention particularly to ‘medium-to long-term prospects or thinking’ (cfr. Greaves et al. 2019, 3; 2021; Tarsney 2020; Vercelli 1998).

The practice approach will help to debate on long-termism. In particular, it helps us to recognise the opposing effects of the EU’s governance’s practices taking shape while simultaneously encroaching on the social dynamics, which is when the practices impact on real life. This dynamic facilitates the comparison of contrasting positions, and their relationship to the future. To grasp how practices offer features to observe, we employ three short examples drawn from this author’s research, ‘The Pandemic’ (Marchi 2022a), ‘Afghanistan’ (Marchi 2022b), and ‘Micro Communities of Practice’ (Marchi 2021). The three cases are substantively different as different are the EU bodies involved there within, and are subject to different temporal frames. We pay attention to these narratives, and draw the information that serves the argument of this paper. Through these concise evidences we will indicate the opposed practices that hint at diverse prospects if projected into the future. How the practice approach connects to longtermism is given by the link that the former provides by bringing in the social dynamics interrelating with the EU’s governance. The practice approach’s supports of the claim of respecting the future, or the ‘near-to-medium term’ future, by managing today’s choices, is the contention argued throughout this paper. This article might be of interest to policy-makers from the EU, the member states, and states in general, and more broadly to the people caring about the future of our existence.

This investigation is organised into six sections. In the following section, we offer an insight into the literature on long-termism that helps to construct this article, then explain in the next section how the practice approach is employed here. Section four outlines the short illustrative examples, and includes four sub-sections, with the first highlighting the sources employed and providing general information; each of the other sub-sections is structurally organised to introduce the context under observation, describe the puzzle of the opposed effects (of the EU’s governance’s practices interacting with the social sphere) and demonstrate how the contrasting effects lead to very different outcomes, particularly when projected into the future. Section five presents the findings, and is followed by the conclusion section. The findings show how the practices of the EU’s governance infused with power lead to contrasting outcomes when encroaching on the social sphere, and show how the outcomes are related to the future. This paper uses several resources including the primary sources from official documents from the European Union and its institutions and interviews, discourses from meetings held at the European Commission, at the European Council and European Parliament levels, as well as secondary sources and media reports.

II. LONG-TERMISM

An argument that scientists within the long-term field of research debate claims that the politics of global governance should consider that many more people will inhabit the globe in the future and that ‘far-future societies ethically matter’ (Barrett and Schmidt 2022, 2). Prospective people cannot advocate for their own interests, so sustaining human life becomes a vital principle (Ord 2020, 20), with the moral instinct ingrained here (p. 2-3). Based on these premises, the ideal of ‘avoiding dramatic

scenarios' invokes a series of practices that long-termists defend, among which escaping pandemics, equipping for protection, and cooperating against insecurity in its various aspects stand as relevant arguments (Barrett and Schmidt 2022, 3).

Within the long-termist paradigm, global prioritisation normally relies on dense philosophical thoughts (Greaves et al. 2019, 22). There is 'utilitarianism, decision theory and eternity', where discussion concerns the possibility of 'infinite worlds', i.e., worlds whose histories include infinite beings whose lives have 'non-zero utility' (Frank 2014). Another stream of theory, and interest, deals with the concept that several of the long-term programmes prompted by the current policy-makers are susceptible to modification or dismissal by the upcoming generations. This is consistent with positing that the worth of future human civilisation will possibly depend upon future policy decisions. Some long-termists believe that, when assessing the long-term effects of our action, we must understand how to inspire the conduct of future policy-makers, and how to 'harmonise' in the case of possible constraints impinging on that action (Greaves et al. 2019, 14). Within this trend, interesting questions arise, such as whether 'a common set of broad factors' exists, that, if encouraged to advance, steadily leads to better future (Beckstead 2013); in this regard, Beckstead's current list encompasses social coordination, group capability, and motivations. Another question concerns whether, in history, 'big wins' have derived from agents who have addressed the challenges that humanity faced in the distant future (and here we think of the Marshall Plan), or from people who sought to improve humanity's ability to come to terms with future challenges in general.

Long-termists make claims about at what sort of future we should try to aim (Greaves and Ord 2017; MacAskill 2018). They compare 'long-' and 'short-term' projections, and discuss the logic that, as we look further into the future, the effects of any present intervention become gradually more difficult to foresee (Tarsney 2020, 1). Those who argue that the standard case for long-termism is more robust when applied to institutions (rather than to individual action) express their support for 'institutional long-termism' (Barrett and Schmidt 2022, 1). Others argue about the need to combat imbalances because they challenge subsistence (Schmidt and Juijn 2024, 67). Some philosophers state that, if people ponder about 'how good a state of affairs their actions would support', then their attention will truly be directed towards the far distant future (Curran 2022, 1). Political philosophers have debated what role 'social practices' should play in normative theorising, and considered whether the theories should be practice-independent or practice-dependent (Schmidt 2023). To us, practice-independent practices would entail formulating principles independently of the real world, whereas principles should connect practices to those who are meant to govern.

Political philosophers have explored these themes by focusing on the wellbeing of the forthcoming generations (English 1977; Barry 1997; Grosserries and Meyer 2009; Gardiner et al 2010; Gonzales-Ricoy and Grosserries 2017). Some contend that no political philosophy explicitly engages with 'long-termist thoughts'; philosophers find reasons that both support and oppose long-termist engagement, and generally agree that the focus should be on the 'near-to-medium term' future. What political values, and practices, might constrain, challenge, or 'positively affect the future are the key priority principles' when undertaking actions. The standard case for long-termism centres on the premise that promoting valued action is a weighty duty (Barrett and Schmidt 2022, 3-5). These ethics endure as established concepts.

Broader questions relate to how long-termism is linked to global governance. Effective long-termist purposes probably require international action (Ord 2020). In this regard, some fear that centralising the political authority might increase the totalitarian risks (Caplan 2011). The EU's long-sighted view of international practices notably includes the political values of justice, legitimacy, and democracy that are also central to long-termist scientists. These values are the practices that the EU's global governance professes, dispenses, and cares about since the citizens are entitled to them, and for an extended period. If long-termism as a profession holds up, and yet the EU's governance fails to fulfil its 'near-to-medium term' duties, there will be a possibility that civil society (or at least some sections of it) will exert pressure on decision-makers to approach long-termist actions (cfr. Barrett and Schmidt 2022, 28). Despite the relevance of the distant future, the predictable value of our present actions tends to be determined by near-term deliberations (Tarsney 2020).

A way to proceed in this discussion is connected to the debate, as raised by the philosophers, concerning whether our approach should be practice-independent or practice-dependent (Schmidt 2023). To dig into that matter we trust this article's central research question: does (and how) the practice approach make it possible to capture the practices of the European Union's governance that give rise to contrasting directions when encroaching on social interactions? Practice-independent methodologies would employ principles that are disconnected from actual life and real-world practices; this contrasts with the capturing of practices of the European Union's governance that reflect real life. Since a gap in previous near-to-medium term studies concerns poor attention paid to the European

Union, and particularly to its policies that might result conflicting when meeting the social sphere, and how, these conflicting policies might relate to the future, we believe that filling this space is an opportunity not to be missed. Policymakers from the EU and member states are expected to reflect on whether their practices back a medium term thinking when applying their policies. We now focus on whether, or how, the ‘practice approach’ supports consideration of long-termism.

III. THE PRACTICE APPROACH

As stated in the introduction, seeing the ‘future as part of the present’ when dealing with policies is a challenging task. The practice approach helps us to reason in terms of the contrasting policies and practices that political decisions may lead to. It grasps the opposing effects that are generated by the impact of the EU governance’s practices on the social context that might affect the years to come. This perspective is based on ‘practices’, which are defined as a performance and a process of doing (Goffman 1956). Practices demand engaging with agency and the social and natural environments that mutually interact (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 2). They represent a synthesis of physical acts and mental intuition (background knowledge), as well as dynamic material and ideational processes. They fulfil an important role in explaining political processes and changes, such as variations in opinions concerning the world that people embrace, individually and collectively (p. 7). As a definition, we adopt the understanding of practices as socially organised activities that relate to world politics, broadly construed (Adler and Pouliot 2011).

Believing in the value of navigating the practice literature, and its possible illumination of the EU’s governance’s interest in the future impact of its policies, Avant et al (2010) explain that, if we wish to understand who governs globally, then we must account for how actors approach socialising (cfr. Bourdieu 1989). The same applies to the EU’s governance, where influential actors strive to maintain their domination. Important actors perform their power by preventing access to decision-making, while secondary and minor players desire to open up the political game. This type of confrontation helps us to understand why international practices generate ‘conflicting political effects’. Modes of governance not only structure world politics, but are also issues of struggle, in and of themselves (Pouliot and Therien 2018, 165), as will be observed during negotiations in the following, illustrative, Covid-19 related case, where opposed forces, attached to different modes of governance, clashed. Koppell (2010) contends that, typically, powerful actors frame their interests in terms of efficiency, whereas peripheral and subordinate players in terms of democratisation, which also applies to the ensuing case studies. These premises shed some light on why the practice methodology brings in the innovative ‘wager’ that practices are not simply outcomes to be explained but also ‘*explanans*’ (cfr Marchi 2024, 3) that is, active (social) forces that make and remake the world (Adler and Pouliot 2011; Pouliot and Therien 2018, 165).

Conversations on the practice methodology involve asking what we mean when we speak about practices within the EU’s governance and care about the future. We describe the EU’s governance as being guided by a set of agreed rules, procedures and practices which portray how power is employed in the European Union (cfr Marchi 2024, 4). The EU’s governance’s purpose consists of reinforcing diplomacy at the Union level and bringing the citizens closer to its institutions. It is based on several principles, including the transparency of the EU’s institutions, the involvement of civil society in the decision-making, framing and implementing well-managed policies, and offering a regulatory framework to support growth and employment. It respects the proportionality and subsidiarity principles, and ensures that each EU institution, together with its member states, explain and take responsibility for its actions within the EU. Coherently with its commitment to improving the operations of the international institutions, the EU contributes to the debate on global governance (EUR-Lex), views these values from a long-term perspective, and cares that they continue to be observed.

Practice scholars engage with identifying prospective long-term risks. This entails knowing how to identify technological threats (Huysmans 2006; Berling 2012), facing the question of which actors (states or regions) wield influence within governance (Avant et al 2010), and addressing the different types of governance (Porter 2015). These emphases, together with a focus on ‘deeds’ (Onuf 1989), ‘practical thinking’ (Kratochwil 1989), attention to Bourdieu’s social theories (Neumann 2002; Hopf 2010; Bigo 2011), and practices in an ‘economic inequality dimension’ considered in the medium-long-term future (Schmidt and Juijn 2024), contribute towards establishing ‘practices’ as tools for analysis (Bueger and Gadinger 2014, 6). These issues apply to the EU and its governance, and are explored by scholars of EU studies (Bicchi 2011, 2016; Goff 2015; Merand and Rayroux 2016; Adler-Nissen 2016; Bicchi and Bremberg 2016; Zwolski 2016), who have also identified the counter-piracy practice (Bueger 2016), the security communities of practice (Graeger 2016), and the uprisings in the

Middle East with a judgement of the future (Bremberg 2016). These scholars investigated how the EU develops its long-term interests by paying attention to several fields, such as understanding diplomacy (Neumann 2002; 2005; 2012; Pouliot 2008; 2010), studying the bilateral and multilateral political processes and culture (Pouliot and Cornut 2015; Sending et al 2015), addressing security and the making of insecurity, and giving substance to the indication that security is not fixed, but socially constructed, and so intrinsically political and contingent (Balzaq et al 2010; Bueger 2016) (Bueger and Gadinger 2014, 5; Marchi 2024, 4).

These considerations encourage us to stress the value of the practice approach to the observation of how the EU operates, particularly with regard to identifying practices that enrich the scrutiny of the EU and its focus on the future. This is an ‘uncharted area’ of the EU’s policy-making that requires exploration. The practice approach by itself would have a limited understanding of forward-thinking. Contribution is provided by the social sphere interacting with actions and purposes, as supported by our view of practices as socially organised activities. The application of the analytical process set by the practice approach implies dealing with actions, provisions, and policies and the way in which they tend to impact on reality, which is the real life made by people. It is vital to remember that the practice approach helps to provide a vision of the contrasting policies. We know that the contrasting policies are generated when the EU’s governance’s powerful practices interact with the social processes. The contrasting policies will allow us to discuss the influences, and conjectures about the future. We will consider these elements in the illustrative cases. To proceed with the practical analysis, the following section on ‘Data sources concerning the case studies’ offers explanation of the employed analytical means, particularly the interview and document analysis.

IV. THE ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES

IV.1 Data sources concerning the case studies

Within the following illustrative cases, the practice approach allows an observation of the effects of the EU’s governance’s practices, and ‘how’ they are generated, when encountering the social element. We account for contrasting reactions. Analytically, the social interactions are important features. We relied on interviews, and due to logistic difficulties related to assessing the ‘social sphere’ through intensified questionings we also relied on the European Parliament (EP). The European Parliament met a dramatic increase of power over the years, and how members of the European Parliament vote become important (Chicchi 2023). We understood the EP as a social area, that is open to understanding people’s needs and their being part of the process of constructing their future. Hence, we relied on the official publications from the European Parliament, and also on the European Council’s and the European Commission’s official documents. In the example regarding Covid-19, the unanimity of the EP in advancing a ‘social Europe’ that supports burden-sharing emerges as a social dynamic, that we regard as a social process. In the Afghanistan narrative, the EP’s parliamentarians provide the social connection between the practices imbued with power of the EU’s governance and the practices imbued with violence that emerge from the Afghan context of a society that is controlled by the Taliban. Here, also, the social interactions are represented by the EP and the parliamentarians prompting of a ‘social Europe’ to lead the EU’s governance during that institution’s focus on Afghanistan. In the micro communities of practice’s example, the MCPs provide the social interactions, with their practices being observed through interviews. For a thorough explanation of the conduct of interviews, see Marchi (2021). The following narratives will focus on these details.

IV.2 The Pandemic

Directed by the research question of observing whether, or how, the practice approach makes it possible to capture the practices of the European Union’s governance that give rise to contrasting positions when encroaching on social interactions, we focus on the case of the Covid-19 pandemic. The approach sheds light on the generation of practices aimed at providing assistance to the member states, at a time of crisis, intended to foster mutual support during the pandemic. It focuses on a package of provisions that were vital to the situation under scrutiny and also significant concerning their near-to-medium term effects.

This case concerns the early 2020 negotiations in the EU arena on burden-sharing, which were linked to the pandemic (Marchi 2020a). It builds on the approach’s belief that micro-level diplomatic dynamics are crucial for explaining how ‘power’ surges, evolves, and falls during negotiations. Power is viewed as a process that interacts with the social relations (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014, 892) that

we investigate. To analyse power in practice, we must access the social context in which practices materialise, change and progress. Feeding resources is competence, an ability that is locally generated, performed, and disputed, ultimately in order to impact on politics. When resources take the form of socially-recognised competence (competence that is acknowledged and accepted by others seeking to produce influence), they generate power (pp. 891, 894).

When investigating power, we observed that, throughout the negotiations among the member states at the EU level, the developing power dynamics was evinced by attempts, on the part of the players, to extract the greatest benefit from the consultations (European Commission 2020). In particular, the emerging power was exhibited by the skill of a (Dutch) finance minister, who contested the proposal at stake; this contestation opposed the system of grants, arguing that borrowing was a realistic proposition, and attempting to convince other member states' finance ministers (Denmark, Sweden and Austria) about the benefits of the 'realistic proposition' (BBC 2020; Politico 2020). This dispute reflected a 'competitive cooperation' that the minister embraced, based on commitments that were unaffordable by the majority of the member states, thereby introducing problems that would have consequences in the future also.

Not everything was divisive in encouraging the EU's governance to steer towards decisions; and the European Parliament, in particular, was determinant (European Parliament 2020). The insistence of the EP and the European Council on delegating the European Commission to intervene with substantial proposals was central in guiding the discourse towards more constructive practices (European Council 2020). The EP was determined in its request that the costs (incurred through reacting to the pandemic) should be shared due to the emergencies that arose. The EP's request materialised in a resolution that attracted a unanimous vote (European Parliament 2020) and paved the way for what became the Next Generation EU (European Council 2020), the specific recovery effort, presented by the Commission's Head, in May 2020. This development denotes attention to the future, and indicates planning in terms of necessity, protecting and symbolically instructing on how to face emergencies in the years to come.

The article's central question leads to observe the following. 'How the competing effects ingrained in the power dynamics of the EU's governance were generated' is the product of the functioning of the practice approach. It answers this paper's investigation of whether the approach applied to the EU captures practices of the EU's governance and their symbolic extension to the 'near-to-medium term' future. During the negotiations, the social interactions confronting the 'nature of power', induced by the minister, spurned a political and social order based on rejecting the sharing of solutions to problems (Marchi 2020a, 26). In a long-termism mode, neither the nature of the power that was revealed by the minister, nor its origin, arose from a wide-ranging philosophy, keen to bridge difficulties, and aimed at a collective better future. In forward-thinking terms, the EP acted as a social sphere, where several parliamentarians opposed what they judged to be a limited understanding of a far-reaching governance. The practice approach highlighted the 'divisive power politics' and the 'unifying strategies'. The fact that these were very real possibilities alerts policy-makers about the near and future consequences attached to policies.

IV.3 Afghanistan

This short case concerns the EU's embroilment in Afghanistan after August 2021 (Marchi 2022b) and regards diplomacy as a procedure connected to the social relations that the practice approach assesses. We engage with this case, coherently with this article's research question of observing whether (and how) the practice approach makes it possible to capture the practices of the European Union's governance that give rise to contrasting directions when encroaching on social interactions. From a long-term perspective, this evidence sheds light on the responsibility which is felt by the European Union (policy-makers) in problematic situations where there exist no straightforward answers. The EU's governance would be asked to encourage the creation of opportunities. It would be requested to adapt to anomalous contexts where violence plays a role in the making of governance and structuring of the state. The EU may find it difficult to impact on society in Afghanistan if it uses the language of 'rules', 'rights', human rights, 'justice', and 'morality' (Their and Chopra 2002; Freeman 2002). This implies that the EU may need to distance itself slightly from the body of strict rules, by which it is shaped. It may provide more opportunities to interact with 'societies and governance' in Afghanistan. Using a language that is comprehensible to the other state may help to reconstruct the relations. Reconstructing the relations would fulfil several missions; it would reduce trouble, prevent future problems, and transform vulnerabilities, avoid unwelcome scenarios, and promote respect for the

wellbeing of upcoming generations. All of these propositions require the undertaking of difficult tasks, determination, and a focus on future outcomes.

With these considerations framing the EU's governance, this illustrative case contends that merely following the norms, those of the EU's Treaties, does not always produce the desired results (cfr Pouliot 2008, 281). The wanted outcome aims at achieving peace and security within the complex context of Afghanistan under the Taliban. The unwavering compliance with the EU's Treaties, satisfying the 'rights based approach's working principles', has failed to construct an Afghan state. The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP) admitted this humiliation in 2021 (Borrel, September 2021). As for the practice methodology, the EU's governance was incapable of inspiring the local governance and social sphere, and was unable to create the basis for a better future.

Concerning the future, this approach indicates that opportunities exist 'in' and 'through' practice (Pouliot 2008, 281). Hence, we explore how the 'practical sense' of the EU diplomats and officials makes 'diplomacy' the self-evident way to interact with Afghanistan under the Taliban. Practice theorists suggest attempting to interact more closely with extremist groups via an intensified dialogue (Sen 2007, 83; Alderdice 2021). A manifestation of social dynamics was played out in the European Parliament by a group of European parliamentarians, who proposed a 'multilateral forum for dialogue' (European Parliament 2020, 9). This was an open arena that gave a voice to the inhabitants of the country. It generated a motion for a resolution that was presented to the EU's institutions. The request for a multilateral forum attributed relevance to 'social relations' as a means of resolving problems and also, possibly, achieving peace, that is the central contribution to the longterm thinking.

This approach revealed diverse processes. Complying with the research question, we observe contrasting governance practices. The approach showed different tensions when considered in relation to the future. The EU strategy of compliance to the formal rules demonstrated that the EU was incapable of both sustaining an Afghan state and offering a reformed future. The other strategy that emerged supported a policy that was open to dialogue. It was rooted in the social dynamics' call of the European Parliament to make social Europe more accountable. It focused on enabling people to be part of the process concerning their future. The competing effects led in different directions and raised questions for the EU and policy-makers concerning the optimum course of action for fostering a new, favourable future.

IV.4 Micro Communities of Practice

In this case too, by focusing on the micro communities of practice, the research question leads to see how the practice approach makes it possible to observe the conflicting influences that were engendered by the power dynamics of the EU's governance and attention to the future. In this specific context, the micro communities of practice are groups of individuals, linked by mutual engagement, who work together on the same tasks (Graeger 2016, 490). This case raises the question of how the European Union views Beijing's promotion of itself around the world and, also, how it envisages the future directions. It also encourages us to consider how the European Union exercises its power when choosing between cooperation and the 'weakening' of it, with important consequences for the years to come. Attention is paid to the practices of the EU's governance concerning China's BRI (Belt and Road Initiative), that were debated within the EU in early 2019. This narrative involves two micro communities of practice, one in Brussels and the other in Rome, both focused on the EU and China, that the practice approach investigates (Marchi 2021).

With its resources of knowledge and 'judgment' about the future, the existing community of practice in Brussels (cfr Bicchieri 2016) is accepted as having provided a political assessment of Beijing's interaction with Europe and the EU's future strategies. The MCP in Brussels consists of several actors, the diplomats of the union, members of the Commission, and individuals involved in the EU External Action. The practice method reveals (cfr Adler-Nissen 2016) that these people have engaged with the community spirit, communicating information to each other (Interview A), and that their exchanges constitute social dynamics. This MCP contributed to the formation of the EU's policy (Interview A).

The MCP in Rome, operating at the citizens' level, is taken to represent a very limited, albeit acceptable, share of the citizens of a EU state. This share of the citizens conveyed their views on the advantages and disadvantages related to an open EU policy on China, and its consequences. Unaffiliated with any political parties or ethical or religious groups, this MCP was interviewed by this author in autumn 2018 (Marchi 2021, 13). The individuals within this MCP provided resources by describing their own experiences, and projecting their opinions onto the future. They compared the present to the long-term prospects, and alerted to the risks and potential gains. They practiced political

conversations concerning the EU's governance and its future. Analytically, stories and narratives socially construct a reality that can be measured empirically (Shanahan et al., 2017).

In the MCP in Brussels, in March 2019, self-protective mechanisms were employed when writing reports on the EU-China interactions (Interview A). These were debated in order to shape the official declarations that would become policy, and to examine the future relations. 'Practices' were these officials' judgments, that in general terms supported closer interactions (Interview A). As it emerged (Interview C), for the first time, the EU addressed Beijing as a competing challenger by encouraging approaches that differed from those of the European Union. The EU supported a screening framework to safeguard the member states' economies from foreign direct investment, with a clear reference to Beijing (European Parliament 2019; Interview B). This strategic outlook declared that the EU needed to effect a 'further policy shift' (European Commission 2019), which meant adopting a more assertive approach concerning the EU's engagement with China (Interview C). It indicated a desire to support exclusionary tendencies towards fragmentation, projecting this attitude to future time.

The approach's focus on the MCPs at work highlighted the informal social processes. The EU's official documents do not necessarily reveal the tone underlying the creation of the foreign policy and the EU's governance, but the interviews and consultations do help, at times sensing moods, or suggesting intentions or positions regarding the future. The people making up the MCPs provide the social interactions, with their practices being observed and enquired. In the MCP in Brussels, as supported by the interviews, the outlining of the EU's image as inclined to refuse openness towards China speaks volumes about its future purposes. That image contrasts with the unlocking of the informal social processes that the practice method exposed by focusing on the MCP in Rome. The latter proposed that efforts should be made to concentrate on the future, and identify and explain what was needed in order to integrate China into the wider world economy. Its disposition to act leads to a EU's governance that seeks a new direction towards a common political construction with China, and aims to create future opportunities. According to the central question about whether or how the practice approach facilitate the observation of the conflicting influences of the power dynamics of the EU's governance and attention to the future, we attained results. The contrasting outcome of fragmentation and integration illuminate the back-staging that influenced the foreign policy paying attention to the future. They are the product of the practice outlook's releasing of the informal social processes that constitute the EU's governance.

V. WHERE DOES THIS LEAD TO? THE FINDINGS

The informal processes of consultations and interviews served to clarify the contrasting 'tendencies'. These are 'political components' to the extent that they stem from political actors, institutions (the European Union), states (the member states), and policy-makers (diplomats, members of the European Commission, and the individuals involved in the EU External Action), as well as the people. Under scrutiny was the practice approach's chase of the complex effects generated by the EU's governance, pointing in opposite directions when impacting on real life: the article's central question. This approach indicated the contrasting practices, symbolically leading policy-makers (the European Union and the member states) to perceive the 'future as part of the present' when pondering, choosing, or engaging with policies. From the trends resulting from the practical observation, diverse settings ensued, at times bearing local impacts, at other times wider effects, and not always considering the future. These settings are the outcome of the illustrative examples that are generalised, and answer the research question.

Offering a scenario that embraces future developments in the extra-European world was the request to the EU that arose in Rome, building on relational processes with China, seeking joint initiatives in common areas and fostering trade. It appears as a policy recommendation for policy-makers. A different scenario inspired fear at the non-Western-centric ambitions and ability, and showed a contrast with Beijing's progress in the world (through its BRI), as registered in Brussels by the approach's focus on the opposed EU's dynamics. In a way this attitude was surprising, and even unexpected when related to the European 'openness towards other states' and sense of inclusiveness. On different occasions, a staging of a policy and practices driven by the command of rules and duties, and confined within core traditions that the Afghans did not understand, was the projection derived from the European Union's attempted construction of an Afghan state. This is an implicit policy implication for the EU's policy-makers, calling their attention to face the reality of the people they need to cooperate with. A different resource, instead, encouraged an open 'debate with the Afghans examining their future', as the approach's other evaluation of the opposed dynamics showed. It was the product of the European Parliament interacting with European society. Furthermore, an institutional scenario during the pandemic, ignoring the institution's members' inability to deal with their own public finances and

debts, projected disaggregated institutions; it symbolically conjectured that very trend as extending into the future, as a ‘split Europe’ implied. The other sequences envisaged by the practice approach forcefully demonstrated the social empathy of the institutions, intensely focused on the human restrictions, wellbeing, and economic restraints. The policy implication here configures a ‘social Europe being on force’, and prospects a trend of institutions that care about the wellbeing of future generations.

As said in the introduction, the long-termist literature does not appear providing a study which includes the European Union, and in particular which focuses on contrasting policies of the Union, and that takes into consideration the medium-to-long term presumable effects of the EU’s contrasting policies. This composition of elements of analysis gives character to this paper, and specifically fills a gap due to the paucity of studies that bring in the EU, its opposing policies and how their projection would contribute to the future. In addition, the testing of the practice approach is a further element given to the long-termist literature. How would the long-term thinkers examined in the introduction react to the findings observed above, policy directions, and generalised settings informed by the short illustrative examples? Long-termist scientists, like Barrett and Schmidt (2022, 3), would ask why a vision of the future must be based on discriminating others, as in the case of China, and on bringing about securitisation, as opposed to concepts centred on constructing commonalities, confidence, and self-reliance, that promise better future landscapes. Scientists, like Ord (2020), who focused on the EU in Afghanistan, would remark that the involvement of a local dialogue to shape joint grounds appears to be a far-sighted choice and a far-reaching practice for oncoming generations. Tarsney (2020), concerning our discussion of the Covid case, would contend that the many more people who will inhabit the world would not gain from the EU’s policies of exclusion, or from the decision to implement restrictive policies. In a similar vein, Greaves et al. (2019), Greaves and MacAskill (2021), and English (1977) would argue that the EU’s governance is expected to excel at inclusion, on all fronts, conscious that engaging to improve life in societies in the far distant future is a moral matter. Likewise, regarding Afghanistan, Barry (1997), Gonzales-Ricoy and Grosseries (2017), Grosseries and Meyer (2009), and Ord (2020) would argue that involving populations (the Taliban) is a principled question within any cooperation efforts. Involving the social sphere, they would stress, is an ethical working principle when seeking to coordinate a joint policy; this would be informed, they would claim, by the knowledge of what is needed there, as acquired by the EU and its extension action, while operating in the field. These long-termists would emphasise that sharing with China, within those sectors where China is able to offer proficiency, would strengthen societies, build tolerance, and promote the acceptance of diversity. They would claim that ‘sharing’ helps to construct a culture in which justice and legitimacy are believed to be the required values for fostering an encouraging future. On the whole, having learnt from the Covid experience that the building of a social Europe is the leading force that people expect from the EU’s governance, this means that a ‘social Europe’ operates with a long-term perspective, attentive to the future. Long-termist Barry (1997), English (1997), Vercelli (1998), Grosseries and Meyer (2009), Ord (2020), Barrett and Schmidt (2022), and also Bourdieu (1989) would add that some imagination and self-pride would enrich the power of the European Union’s governance’s practices regarding the construction of sustainable elements for the future. The practice approach’s chasing of the complex effects that have determined different settings and scenarios offers a base for debating the present, also bearing in mind the near-to-medium term future.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper’s attention to the practice approach, the European Union’s governance and near-to-medium term policy perspectives built on the research question that asked to explore whether and how the practice approach is able to lead us to view the practices of the EU’s governance giving rise to contrasting directions when interacting with the social context. Informed by the previous exploration of practices in the European Union’s governance, this empirical paper encompassed a further theme, the preoccupation for the ‘near-to-medium term’ future of the policies that we enact today for the possible effect that they might bear. Connecting to long-termism, this paper symbolically drew the attention of policy-makers (from the European Union and the member states) to this argument. To place emphasis on this subject, the practice approach proved useful by easily leading to the identification of the contrasting policies that we discussed, comparing them, acknowledging their different substance, and considering their attributes concerning the future. The puzzle of the EU’s governance, the powerful practices, and the relational processes of the social sphere offered useful features that illustrated how interactions were generated, and how they proposed to modify real life affecting the years to come. We grasped this in the logic inferred by the short illustrative examples: how cooperation differed from abstention from it, how supporting innovative policies differed from navigating traditional choices, and

how openness towards new experiences differed from excluding them. Showing how practices led to outcomes, and discussing how outcomes gave rise to consequent trends, these relations were connected to the future with an exercise that the practice approach easily mastered. By ‘future’ and ‘near-to-medium term’, in line with the illustrative examples, we indicated the future of the European Union, its governance, and also more widely the ‘upcoming’ in the external world.

It might be asked what the practice approach offers, compared to other theories, in terms of helping us to discuss policies and practices that are projected onto the ‘near-to-medium term’ future. This article’s focus on the theoretical and methodological thinking of the long-termists revealed several positions. Conceiving the prospect of infinite worlds inhabited by countless beings with worthwhile lives was a mode of posing the question regarding the future presented by scientists (‘utilitarianism, decision theory and eternity’, Frank 2014); whereas a different preoccupation attracted the attention of others who believe that today’s long-term plans might be susceptible to being abolished by future generations (interest theory); similar was the thought that the value of the future human civilisation would principally be decided by future policy decisions (interest theory). Theories or approaches based on an ‘obsession’ with inspiring the conduct of future policy-makers towards adopting the ‘best practices’ when faced with difficult choices were other charted preoccupations (Greaves et al. 2019, 14). Interesting questions also circulated concerning the approaches, related to whether broad factors exist that, once spurred on together, promise a better future (Beckstead 2013). Noteworthy were questions, looking retrospectively at history, concerning whether or how big-wins emerged due to agents addressing challenges that, in the ‘future that followed’, served humanity: here, we suggested a clear-cut answer with reference to the Marshall Plan. Another distinct question was presented by political philosophers, who conjectured about the role played by social practices in normative theorising, and queried whether theories should be practice-dependent or practice-independent (Schmidt 2023). Had we not adopted practices as a unit of analysis, and thinking in a juxtaposing/contrasting mode, we would have not supported the symbolic call of seeing the ‘future as part of the present’ that reverberated throughout this article. A variety of angles of observations, methodologies and theories enrich the long-termist research area; however, by helping to discuss policies and practices projected to the ‘near-to-medium term’ future, the practice approach eased the dynamics of comparing the contrasting effects and their projection, which fed our intention to encourage the habit of bearing the future in mind as we engage with our current choices.

It might be remarked that long-termist scientists have embraced a number of themes that this approach and paper omitted to consider; ‘economic inequality’ in future terms is an example, arguing for this gap’s reduction because greater inequality would increase existential risk. Also, the contention that ‘scientific and technological progress might change people’s capabilities in ways that would destabilise civilization’ is a subject that long-termists view with interest. Several other topics are issues that lie at the core of the long-termist analyses, such as increasing ‘happiness as a just argument’, countering ‘risks linked to human extinction’, or how much sacrifice should ‘all those living now’ be willing to make in order to improve the quality of life of the coming generations. We acknowledge the importance of these themes, although we did not aim to include them all. Yet, by enabling the association of conflicting policy positions in a simple straightforward manner, the practice approach has secured the value of supporting the notion of respecting the future by managing today’s choices.

The question may arise of whether the practice approach and its hint at the future might be applied to other case studies and, if so, how. A mode of its application, as a merely practical exercise, suggests the ‘attempts at governance’ before the European Union came to light; it would refer to the 1951 European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), that aimed to prevent another dreadful war like World War II. The field within which these attempts occurred geographically was the European regional space, a space that was politically traversed by wars. The concept of ‘becoming a community’ took time to materialise in reality, and attempted trials and several adjustments followed in its aim to improve the future. The ECSC slowly facilitated governance. Here, also, the practice approach’s ‘imagination’ of the future (viewed retrospectively) would indicate the dynamics of the ‘governance in the making’ impacting on the social context. The governance’s practices infused with power meeting the social sphere of real life (and the politics of the time) allowed contrasting positions, or differences to emerge. Considering West Germany and France, the practice methodology indicates that, as Orlow argues, the German coal sales lost its monopoly, and the steel industry no longer owned the coal mines (Orlow 2002); as Chopra notes, France was to oppose the CSCE because, among other reasons, De Gaulle considered the French government too weak to dominate the ECSC (Chopra 1974). Here, also, the practice methodology would perform well, showing the opposed effects: on the one hand, the benefits of the governance in the European region abjuring wars and, on the other, the governance of ‘fortress Europe’, interested in seeing itself as an organisation willing to compete with other powers.

In terms of the practical implications of this study, it might be asked whether insights into the practices of the European Union's governance might inform the 'near-to-medium term' policymaking or international relations strategies. This might be a case of organising the European Union with a European Defence on a par to NATO, or similar, to promote the region's safety. The decision's practical consequence would take time to realize. It would, however, change the international relations setting, and strategies among nations. It would, possibly, arise as a reaction to the state of affairs provoked by other powers' bellicose activities along the European Union's borders, and even encroachment on them. Here, also, the practice approach would indicate contrasting understandings of how the EU's governance impacts on real life. It is conceivable that these contrasting positions would project their preference for peace missions on the one hand, and for full military operations along the Alliance's style, on the other.

Finally, we hope that researchers of international affairs or European studies might find it of interest to explore the applicability of the practice approach to other areas of international relations and 'preoccupations regarding the future', and might enrich and argue the conclusions offered here.

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