

“Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics,” Alexander Wendt, *International Organization*, Spring 1992

Headline: Structure has no existence or causal powers apart from process. Self-help and power politics are institutions, not essential features of anarchy. *Anarchy is what states make of it.*

Wendt recasts the realist/liberal debate as an argument over the determinants of state action in the international system: i.e., whether state action is influenced by “structure” (anarchy and relative power) or “process” (interaction and learning). He puts forth a “constructivist” argument rejecting the realist belief that the *structure* of the international system – anarchy and “self-help” – forces states to “play competitive power politics.” Rather, Wendt argues that self-help and power politics do not follow “either logically or causally” from anarchy; if they exist, it is due to *process*, not structure (394). Thus, Wendt argues that state identities and interests are shaped and transformed within the international system, rather than (as the realists believe) existing as exogenous variables.

Classical realists attributed power politics to the evils of human nature, whereas neorealism emphasizes anarchy as the root of international conflict. Wendt rejects the neorealist view, since it merely assumes as exogenous certain state interests. In contrast, he advances a constructivist approach – people (or states) act toward objects, including other actors, on the basis of the meanings that the objects have for them (396-7). Thus, states act differently toward enemies than they do toward friends because enemies are threatening and friends are not. While the distribution of power may affect states’ calculations, how it does so depends on “intersubjective understandings” that shape states’ conceptions of self and other. From a constructivist viewpoint, ideas shape states’ assessments and reactions to power (e.g., if the U.S. and USSR decide that they are no longer enemies, their power relationship no longer matters, since the collective meaning of the Cold War disappears).

For Wendt, identities are “inherently relational.” Therefore, a state may have multiple identities (sovereign, imperial power, etc.) based on its institutional roles and relationships to other states. These identities are the basis for interests. Thus, Wendt completely rejects the realist idea that states have a universal identity as power-maximizers: “actors do not have a ‘portfolio’ of interests that they carry around independent of social context. The *process* of international interaction determines interests, not the *structure* of the international system. Because states do not have conceptions of self and other – and thus security interests – apart from or prior to interaction, structural anarchy alone cannot lead to power politics. The only way a “stag hunt” or “security dilemma” can arise is through repeated interaction in which actors acquire selfish *identities* and *interests* (alien analogy: we would not assume, a priori, that we were about to be attacked the first time we encountered aliens). Thus, Wendt argues, foreign policy identities and interests are *endogenous* to the international system (created and transformed by it). Each social interaction between states creates mutual expectations about future behavior – thus, identities and interests are constantly evolving. If self-help security systems exist, therefore, it is because they have evolved from cycles of state interaction in which each party acts in ways that other states feel are threatening to the self; security dilemmas are not given by anarchy or nature – if states find themselves in this situation, it is because they have “made it that way.”

Wendt argues that, even if states do find themselves in a socially constructed self-help system, institutions can transform identity and interests and enable states to escape a “Hobbesian world.” Mutual recognition of the institution of sovereignty is one way out of the security dilemma (e.g., the U.S. does not conquer the Bahamas because it has internalized recognition of mutual sovereignty into its identity and interests). Similarly, institutionalized cooperation can “embed” a sense of collective identity and interest (the EU as example: European states have internalized cooperation as part of their own state identity and interest). Finally, states may engage in “critical self-reflection” and gradually alter their notions of identity and interest (Wendt calls this “critical strategic theory” – e.g., Gorbachev’s “New Thinking” “changes the game” and transforms a competitive security system into a cooperative one). This occurs as states see a breakdown in consensus about national identity, reexamine the structure of interactions shaping that identity, and “altercast” (attempting to induce the other to take on a new identity by treating him/her as if he/she already has that identity). Since anarchy is “what states make of it,” Wendt believes that even a Hobbesian system of anarchy and self-help can be transformed as states interact and change their conceptions of identity and interests.