

**Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), Chs 1 (partial), 3, 4, 6. (pp. 22-44, 92-190, 246-312)**

Chapter 1, beginning at page 22, 'A map of structural theorizing'

Structural theories in international relations can be distinguished by their position along two continuums, the materialist-idealist and the individualist-holist.

Materialist-idealist continuum separates theories based on the extent to which the material environment or social consciousness is the *primary* form of explanation of society.

Individualist-holist continuum places theories according to their position in the agent-structure debate. i.e. whether social science is reducible to the actions of independent individuals or whether structures invest 'properties' in agents.

Wendt then classifies various theories. The most important for us are:

Neo-realism: individualist, since structure only regulates behavior rather than constitute actors, and materialist. (Though structuralist (i.e. holist) to the extent that the system creates like units)

Neo-liberalism: individualist and materialist. (Though idealist to the extent that expectations play a role)

Those theories that are idealist and holist can be labeled constructivist and include world society, postmodernist and feminist theories.

Wendt's aim is to draw distinctions between constructivism and the alternatives along the two axes. He identifies 3 areas of difference.

1. Methodological. The two perspectives (individualist and constructivist) ask different questions and thus may not be in conflict as far as theory goes. However, methodological differences produce different outcomes, so dependence on one theory is dangerous, especially when one method takes over, as has happened with rational choice. Some questions and ideas are neglected.
2. Ontological. Variation in ontology leads to different prescriptions on what should be observed, which allows ontologies to be tested.
3. Empirical. To what extent are states constructed by domestic or systemic structures.

Wendt also discusses epistemology. Noting that while idealism may seem to fit well with a post-positivist epistemology (i.e. science has no privileged status, existence of objective reality is not assured), he is more a positivist, stating that "what really matters is what there is, rather than how we know it" and that science should be question, rather than method driven.

Chapter 3

The materialist assumptions in IR theory are now being problematized. This has followed two tracks. The first involves ideas as intervening variables which Wendt argues relegate them to a "mopping-up" role. Anyway, some neo-liberals have already shown that ideas can be "relatively autonomous determinants", i.e. independent variables. The second approach is to let ideas actually constitute materialist forces of interests, power and

institutions. So the goal is to show that concepts of power and interest are composed of ideas.

So, for Realism, power is constituted by material forces, for idealism [not Idealism] power is constituted by ideas and culture.

For Wendt, neorealism articulates this best, so Waltz is the No. 1 target. He summarizes his explicit theory (ordering principles, character of units, distribution of capabilities, leading to security seeking egoistic states, resulting in balancing, concern with relative gain, functional similarity and preference for bipolar system). He then identifies implicit assumption in Waltz.

1. States actions imply they favor the status quo, rather than hunger for conquest or collectivism. Waltz does not recognize the importance of this assumption.
2. Furthermore, Waltz assumes a distribution of interests for the state. His distribution of power assumes states have a sufficient knowledge of each other to know that the worst-case scenario is not always relevant. "History matters." Since history is a record of past interests, these interests have an impact on distribution of power.

Despite the importance of ideas in describing international politics, it is not "ideas all the way down", a baseline of materialism is required comprising:

1. The distribution of material capabilities
2. the nature of capabilities has effects also, especially technological nature
3. Geography and natural resources.

The important point here is that it is our interests, the things we want material capabilities for, that drive social change.

Ideas are constitutive variables, influencing the nature of both power and interest. Not all ideas have this function. However we want what we want because of how we know about it, not because of unthinking passions implemented by a series of beliefs. Wendt argues that our desires are constituted by what we know, i.e. our beliefs. Our interests can be cognitive, involving motivations based on "schemas" which help us identify things and events. Turning to states, Wendt shows how various schemas would be used by states to define their interests. For example, a status quo state would possess schemas concerning being a satisfied, law-abiding, member of a legitimate society of states.. Revisionist or collectivist states would have schemas in keeping with the interests they sought to define.

Wendt notes that such schemas do not necessarily contradict rational choice theory, since it takes an open view on preferences, i.e. doesn't care where they come from.

Our interests can also be deliberative, which includes reason in the process of inducing action from desires. Once again this does not render rational choice inconsistent with the theory.

Wendt then links ideas and interests. Simply put, interests are beliefs (i.e. ideas) about how to meet needs. Needs, in turn are "objective interests" [seems pretty circular], i.e. functional necessities which can be material, like the need for physical security, a stable set of expectations about the world, social contact and so on, or identity needs, which are extremely variable. Therefore, fear, aggression and the like are not inherent, but the effect of unmet needs.

Once again, Wendt argues that its not all ideas. Ideational interests will ultimately give way to biological necessities.

Wendt claims three 'virtues' in his argument that power and interest are constituted more by ideas than material constraints.

1. It suggests a program of empirical research to identify states interests.
2. offers ways to understand relationship between cognition and culture, i.e. between agency and structure
3. offers possibility of systemic change, If interests are formed by ideas then learning can bring change that materialists would not consider

In sum, power and interests are concepts that "presuppose" ideas. The neoliberal view that ideas cause interests is insufficient, ideas constitute interests. The upshot is that many "material" perspectives incorporate cultural forms and hence will be targets for the kind of criticism outlined above.

#### Chapter 4

Constructivism is about holism as well as idealism. This prompts two questions: what is an ideational structure, and what effects do such structures have? Wendt in this chapter tries to show what a theory of the suture of ideas can add over and above rationalist theories.

Any social structure will be composed of partially independent elements, including ideas, material factors and interests. We can examine them separately, but need to remember that all are interlinked and form a single whole.

Neorealism provides a material structure, Wendt sets out to provide an ideational one. Interests form the arena in which these two structures claim influence.

Waltz identifies two levels of structure, the state and the international system. His formulation "reifies" structure, divorcing it from the actors and action that give rise to it. This makes it difficult to find how the effects of structure are influenced by action or interaction of units.

Two levels of structure:

Micro-structure – structure of interaction between units, labeled reductionist by Waltz.

Macro-structure – structure from the perspective of the system as a whole.

Micro-structure is what Waltz calls reductionism. Wendt argues for three levels of structure: unit level, which explains with respect to attributes; micro-structure at the interaction level between states; macro-structure at the system level, but which is only produced by action at the micro-level.

In examining the effect of culture on international politics, Wendt goes on to introduce a distinction in ideas. There is common knowledge, which are shared ideas believed to be true and where all parties know the other knows. Hence common knowledge is subjective and intersubjective. And there is collective knowledge, which are knowledge structures which create macro level systems of unit behavior. E.g. capitalism or the Westphalian system. From this Wendt concludes that culture is more than just all shared ideas. Cultural forms are "communally sustained" i.e. robust within societies and therefore will not always change when elements within them change.

The structure of ideas (or culture) is also described by two forms of effect: causal and constitutive. This is the core of the debate between individualists and idealists: does culture affect actors, and if so, is the effect causal or constitutive.

Causal effects can only exist between independent objects, so actors must be in some way independent of culture. They achieve this by being at some level “self-organizing”. This is a core idea of individualism and is a constraint on holism. Wendt’s hypothesis here is that actors learn their identities and interests from the behavior of others towards them.

Constitutive effects concerns the question whether agents ideas are constituted solely “in the heads” of agents or through “presupposing” the world, i.e. through the acceptance of a particular “conceptual grid”, so that thinking depends on social relations. There are two reasons to favor the latter: our acceptance of others recollections of events and our deference to the knowledge of others when we believe it to be superior.

As with his discussion of idealism, Wendt tries to find a compromise through including a basic form of the alternative in a form of synthesis. First it was a rump materialism, now a rump individualism. He introduces the two concepts of individuality and the terms of individuality. The first is the self-organizing part of the Self, the second those that are dependent on culture. This allows the individual to be both independent and dependent on structure (culture), and for structure to be both causal and constitutive.

Before concluding the chapter, Wendt notes how culture reinforces itself, as each shared understanding leads to mutual confirmation. e.g. When two people both interpret traffic lights the same way, the cultural beliefs of each will be reinforced. In doing this culture meets needs for sociation and stability of concepts. This has the implication that ideas get “locked in” which in turn can make social change more difficult. Nevertheless, ongoing contestation and contradictions in culture will continue to drive change within it.

## Chapter 6.

Two questions set up this chapter.

1. Is anarchy compatible with more than one kind of structure?
2. Does the international system construct states?

Wendt answers that anarchy can have at least three kinds of structure which he labels Hobbesian, Lockean and Kantian, and that yes the international system has constitutive effects. He sets up a 3 by 3 grid with the cultures of anarchy on one axis and the degree of internalization on the other. The first degree of internalization corresponds to compliance by coercion. The second to compliance based in interests and costs. The third degree of internalization corresponds to compliance based on legitimacy, where the culture of anarchy constitutes the actor.

Anarchies only acquire logics as a result of the structure that exists within them.

Each form of anarchy is “multiply realizable”, i.e. a particular form does not require a particular degree of shared ideas. So, conflict does not imply a materialist logic of anarchy.

At the core of each logic is one subject: for the Hobbesian culture, it is enmity; for the Lockean, rivalry; for the Kantian, friendship.

The nature of the anarchic system will depend on which culture dominates. States will be pressured into taking on the role demanded by the nature of the system.

Hobbesian culture.

The Other is defined as the enemy. The enemy does not recognize the right of the Self to exist, and will not limit violence against the Self. Leads to pure power politics. The logic is war of all against all, a true self-help world.

First degree. Compliance only through coercion. States could be friendly but severe misconception and mistrust forces them to assume the worst. Also possible with revisionist states.

Second degree. Compliance due to perception of self interest and only while benefits outweigh costs.

Third degree. This is possible if conflict is not possible, even though it is desired. The norm of the other as enemy is internalized, and fighting is considered “good” and “right”, that is, part of state’s identity.

#### Lockean culture.

The modern state system is not Hobbesian since the death rate is low, small states can survive and inter-state war is rare.

The logic is that of rivalry, states accept each others right to live, but not to be free from violence. Corresponds to concept of sovereignty. Wars are therefore limited, international law is effective. The condition is similar to Bull’s anarchical society. The system has a relatively stable membership, balancing of power occurs, neutrality becomes acceptable. This model of the world suggests Waltzian anarchy more Lockean than Hobbesian.

First degree. States accept sovereignty only by the coercion of stronger powers.

Second degree. States accept sovereignty as being in their best interests, but are indifferent to the norm itself.

Third degree. States believe sovereignty to be legitimate, and the norm is internalized to the degree it is almost forgotten. It is just “accepted” that sovereignty is legitimate. Corresponds to our “common sense” view of how the world is. States are the main actors, who are self-interested in a partly self-help world where sovereignty is recognized.

#### Kantian culture.

Based on the role structure of friendship, a role described by two rules: disputes settled non-violently, and threats to either addressed jointly. Furthermore, there is no expectation the relationship will end.

First degree. States are forced into never attacking each other or are forced to cooperate by a common threat.

Second degree. Friendship is a strategy, suitable for the state’s current interests. Hard to see how such a weak form of internalization could persist.

Third degree. States accept the constraints of friendship as legitimate, and see the security of the Other as part of the security of the Self. Collective identity develops.

Such an international system begins to strain concepts of anarchy and the state. However, enforcement in a third degree Kantian world is not through some central authority but through a decentralized, internationalized authority.

Wendt concludes by discussing the possibility of progress in international politics. He notes that highly internalized norms are harder to change than others, contradicting the common claim that constructivism implies easy social change. As for progress, while movement towards a third degree Kantian world is not assured, it is unlikely that any regression to a lower-co-operation culture could occur.