

Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory and International Politics*, pp.22-44

Notes

In his first chapter, Wendt proposes a “map of structural theorizing”: he interprets different forms of structural IR theory in the light of two debates in social theory.

- On the x-axis, “the difference *ideas* make” in social life: this is the extent to which ideas are material (a “**materialist**” sociology) or social (“**idealist**”).
- On the y-axis, “the difference *structures* make”: this is the relationship between agents (“**individualist**”) and structure (“**holist**”).

MATERIALIST hypothesis: material forces (human nature, natural resources, geography, forces of production, forces of destruction) *as such* drive social forms (23-4). It privileges **causal** relationships, effects, questions etc.

IDEALIST: deep structure of society is constituted by ideas rather than material forces. It privileges **constitutive** relations, effects, questions etc. (25)

For the agent-structure problem, Wendt looks at the question of the extent to which structures “construct” agents. He makes the distinction between the “effects of structures on agents’ *properties*” (ie constructing effects) and “effects on agents’ *behavior*” (ie constraining)

HOLIST: a “top-down” conception of social life, which is irreducible; agents’ properties are constructed in both causal and constitutive senses.

INDIVIDUALISM: a “bottom-up” conception of social life, which is reducible to agents; agents’ behavior can only be constrained by causal effects.

His book comes into the “idealist-holist” box which he describes as constructivist.

Wendt then cites what he perceives to be his methodological, ontological and empirical differences before finally making two claims:

1. “What really matters is what there is rather than how we know it.”
2. “Science should be question rather than method-driven, and the importance of constitutive questions creates an essential role in social science for interpretive methods”. (40)