Wendt, Alexander. "Scientific Realism and Social Kinds," Social Theory of International Politics, Ch.2.

In this article, Wendt tries to have his cake and eat it and pretty much gets away with it, combining a neopositivist (sorry, had to do it) epistemology with constructivist methodology. He defends a "scientific realism" philosophy of science versus "empiricist" and "post-modern" philosophies on several grounds.

Introduction

Wendt backs the philosophy of science which he calls "scientific realism," which assumes that 1)the world exists independent of human beings, 2)mature scientific theories typically refer to this world, and 3)they do so even when the objects are unobservable. He calls this approach "ontology before epistemology," since "theory reflects reality." – i.e. that which exists (ontology) determines how you can know things (epistemology). This is contrasted with two types of anti-realists. The first set is empiricists, who reject 3) and hold that the only things which are real are the things which you can observe; description defines objects (epistemology determines ontology – what you see and describe is what exists) The second set is post-modernists, who simply view that "social life is not amenable to causal explanation."

He seeks to address two criticisms. First, does scientific theory refer to, and produce knowledge about reality? Second, even if science can know nature, can it know society (social kinds v. natural kinds). He provides a four-part answer.

Scientific Realism and theories of reference

Scientific realism opposes the view that what exists (ontology) is depenent on what we know or believe (epistemology). Note that "Realism makes it possible to conceive of states and state systems as real and knowable, but it does not tell us that they exist, what they are made of, or how they behave." Wendt defines realism as subscribing to three principles:

World Independence

"It is not just that our experiences are *as if* there are cats, there are cats." An objective world does ultimately exist.

Mature theories refer to the world

How do we refer to the world? Empiricists describe, postmodernists relate, and realists find causes. Description is difficult because you can't refer to things which you have a bad description of. Relations are difficult because you can't account for why the world resists certain interpretations. Causation is difficult because you may misspecify the natural kinds which are relating to each other; observation is theory-laden; boundaries are hard to specify.

Theories provide knowledge of unobservable causes

Unobservables should be treated as real, not "as if," using "inference to the best explanation (IBE). If we treat things "as if," we have very little knowledge about the "real world."

The ultimate argument for realism

Under scientific realism, the success of science is not miraculous, since it treats unobservables as real; if we don't, then the fact that your theoretical construct has real effects is a "miracle."

The problem of social kinds

Wendt describes four ways that social kinds differ from natural kinds:

Space-Time Specificity

Social science theories refer to particular events in particular places at particular times, since social kinds are variable.

Interlocking Beliefs

Social kinds depend on the beliefs, concepts, and theories of actors. If we all stop believing that states are soverign, they won't.

Dependence on actions

Social kinds depend on practices to carry them from one place and time to another.

Internal and External Structure

Social kinds cannot be isolated from the environment in which they exist, unlike natural kinds, which can be.

So what?

Wendt argues that these aren't problematic, since Social kinds are 1)based on natural kinds (material bases), 2) self-organizing, and 3)are usually independent of the explainers.

On causation and constitution

Explanations can be causal (Why? How?) or constituitive (How possible? What?).

Causal Theorizing

X->Y assumes 1)X and Y are independent, 2)X precedes Y temporally, 3)But for X, no Y would have occurred. Remember, thought, that explanation and prediction are not equivalent.

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Constitutive Theorizing

Takes 1) and 2) as problematic. a and b are complementary; answers to why questions require answers to how and what questions. The methods and analysis of the two are very different. So answering constituitive questions is important; constituitive theories are theories, and we must recognize constituitive effects.

Toward a sociology of questions in international theory

We need to break down big questions (What caused the Cold War?) into causal and constituitive questions. The criteria for knowledge depend on the question and the evidence; all theories must be in principle falsifiable, though. We should be sensitive to the politics of questions, i.e. the purpose of asking them, and the reason for problematizing variables. Finally, we should encourage new questions.

Definitions

[Some from Wendt, some from me, some from Webster's (in quotes).]

Scientific Realism: assumes that 1)the world exists independent of human beings, 2)mature scientific theories typically refer to this world, and 3)they do so even when the objects are unobservable.

Empiricism: The idea that the only things that are real are those which can be measured. (ontological statement)(anti-scientific realist, denies that unobservable objects exist., epistemology before ontology)

Post-Modernism: Nothing that you do or study or conclude can be applied to other cases. Everything is a social construction. (Denies induction). There are no external constructions which can be shared. (anti-scientific realist, denies that any objects exist, constructivism is epistemological and ontological) Reality has nothing to do with the determination of meaning and truth, which are governed by power relations and other sociological factors within discourse.

Nomological: "Relating to or expressing basic physical laws or rules of reasoning."

Induction: Generalizing from specific cases to a general principle.

Deduction: Applying general principles to specific cases.

Ontology: Tells you what is what is not real. "A branch of metaphysics concerned with the nature and relations of being."

Epistemology: Tells you how you know what you know. "The study or a theory of the nature and grounds of knowledge esp. with reference to its limits and validity."

Methodology: Tells you what you do to produce knowledge. "A body of methods, rules, and postulates employed by a discipline: a particular procedure or set of procedures."

Constructivism: Concept that all meaning is socially constructed and formed by common intersubjective interpretations.

Positivism: "Philosophical doctrine contending that sense perceptions are the only admissible basis of human knowledge and precise thought."

Post-Positivism: Logic (used to turn perceptions into theories) is an epistemological construct; the Platonic Iron Curtain between subjects and objects isn't real. (anti-scientific realist, holds that you can't study society since this collapses subject and object)

Instrumentalism: Empiricist theory that non-observable concepts should be treated "as if" they "really existed" for the purposes of science.

Foundationalism: Theories should be tested against a pre-theoretical "foundation" for correspondance.

Structuralism: Structure is taken as ontologically primitive, and constitutes agents and interests.

Post-Structuralism: Structure is socially constructed from processes, and so is neither objective nor external to social reality.

Heuristics

[(take it or leave it – here's my opinion)]

	Scientific Realism	Empiricism	Post-Modernism
Reference	Causal	Description	Relation
Dominant Ology	Ontology	Epistemology	Epistemology
Ontology	Things Exist Independent of Observation (Materialist)	Your Observervations are real; all else is socially constructed. (Idealist)	Nothing Exists; all is socially constructed. (Constructivist)
Description	Causal Mechanisms, Explanation	Deduction from observable laws, Explanation/ Understanding	Discourses, Understanding
Epistemology	Induction	Deduction	Description of Relation