

# An Ontological Review of Wendt's 'Anarchy Is What States Make of It'

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NIELS SCHATTEVOET, FEB 8 2023

In his article *Anarchy Is What States Make of It*, Alexander Wendt offers a critique of the structuralist ontology of neorealism (and neoliberalism), the most prominent IR theory at the time (Wohlforth 1995). Wendt addresses the debate concerning the extent to which state behaviour is determined by structure (that is, the anarchical international system and the distribution of (material) power therein) or process and institutions (1992: 391). Neorealism assumes states' identities and interests to be static and self-interested, focused on their own security and survival in an anarchical system (ibid.). Consequently, so goes the neorealist argument, states are necessarily reliant on self-help, as "both central authority and collective security are absent" (ibid.: 392). Self-help is not regarded by neorealism as an institution that exists through state behaviour and can thus also disappear. Rather, it is seen as a logic exogenous to the system, from which states cannot escape.

Wendt refutes "the neorealist claim that self-help is given by anarchic structure exogenously to process" (ibid.). Instead, states' self-help and power politics should be seen as endogenous to international relations; they are part of the process and interaction between states. Therefore, self-help and power politics do "not follow either logically or causally from anarchy" (ibid.): they are (one of many possible) institutions resulting from, rather than causal determinants of state behaviour. Anarchies may thus "contain dynamics that lead to competitive power politics, but they also may not" (ibid.: 395). It depends on what states make of it, and, as such, we can speak of an "ontological dependence of structure" – the given anarchical status of the international system – on the process (ibid.: 406). Interstate interaction and intersubjective understandings determine what impact 'structural' anarchy has on state behaviour and international relations (Hay 2002: 24).

In this essay, I revisit Wendt's contribution to the abovementioned debate from an ontological and epistemological perspective. Having offered an outline of his core argument above, I briefly discuss a realist critique of Wendt's position next – notably the fact that Wendt does not account for the negative impact of uncertainty and how uncertainty in the international system is actually reinforced by the potentially quickly changing dynamics of domestic interest-formation processes. Third, I address various ontological shortcomings in Wendt's approach, demonstrating that Wendt himself actually makes structuralist assumptions that guide and, to a certain extent, determine states' interests (which directly goes against Wendt's argument on the precedence of process over structure). Fourth and last, I conclude that addressing such ontological shortcomings in Wendt's article necessarily leads to fundamental epistemological problems.

### A Realist Critique of Wendt's Position: Uncertainty

Wendt's argument that anarchy does not have a particular causal logic is undermined by a "critical aspect of the realist worldview", which is not addressed by him: uncertainty (Copeland 2000: 188). Even when we accept that the anarchical status of the international system does not automatically dictate the identity, interests and thus behaviour of states, the fact that states are uncertain about their counterparts' (future) intentions "can be enough to lead security-seeking states to fight" (ibid.). The constructivist emphasis on the fluidity of (domestic) processes of identity- and interest formation reinforces this dynamic, as states' intentions may quickly "change because of domestic processes independent of international interaction" (ibid.). In the remainder of this essay, I develop a critique on the

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absence of the above constructivist emphasis on the domestic dynamic of identity shaping and interest formulation in Wendt's approach.

## Addressing Wendt's Ontological Shortcomings ...

Following Wendt's reasoning, the neorealist claim that anarchy necessarily leads to self-help and power politics presupposes "a history of interaction in which actors have acquired 'selfish' identities and interests" (1992: 402). Features such as selfishness can only exist "in society" and must therefore be developed *after* interaction (ibid.). Since states thus do not begin their relationship in a security dilemma, the point of first contact is crucial for the further (development of) interactions between states (ibid.: 404).

Wendt's analogy to illustrate this first contact – that of two imaginary actors, alter and ego – raises an important ontological question. While claiming to depart from a 'pre-social' or 'pre- interaction' situation without making structural assumptions, Wendt actually presupposes the actors' "motivation for discovery" (Inayatullah & Blaney 1995: 73). After all, why should alter be interested in ego in the first place, and the other way around? His first-contact analogy suggests that Wendt presumes the actors' motivation to be "rooted in the materiality of agency and in the self's motive for protection and survival" vis-à-vis a potential competitor (ibid.). Indeed, as stated by Wendt himself, identity formation in an anarchical system is "concerned first and foremost with preservation or 'security' of the self" (Wendt 1992: 399). In an important way, thus, Wendt fails to fully move beyond neorealist structuralism by implicitly asserting that "the agency of actors and their most basic motives are given prior to, and largely independent of, social interaction" (Inayatullah & Blaney 1995: 73).

Pre-interaction, actors can be regarded as *known unknowns* to each other: they are likely to have already "constructed some sense of self and some understanding of others prior to contact" (ibid.). These preconceptions, in turn, shape the "socially constituted structure" (ibid.) in which interaction between the actors subsequently takes place and in which their identities and interests are further crystallised. By not engaging with and reflecting on actors' pre-interaction motivations, thus assuming actors to largely be *tabula rasa* prior to contact (e.g. Wendt 1992: 401), Wendt is committed to a certain 'state of nature', which, indeed, is exogenously given. Actors are no blank slates, however, as "each culture brings to the interactions (changeable) images of itself and others that are prefigured by myths, texts, and traditions" (ibid.: 81-2). As such, constructivist IR theory should not just be focused on the interaction from the first point of contact onward. Instead, it should also entail "a comparative and historical analysis of how cultures conceptualise others" and themselves, as this is the true point of departure of international relations (ibid.).

Wendt's failure to appreciate actors' pre-interaction "leaves unexplored the full range of motivations guiding the actions of actors – from treating the other as a 'thing' to treating the other as a fully human agent" (Inayatullah & Blaney 1995: 73). In his article, Wendt discusses sovereignty as one of "three institutional transformations of identity and security interest through which states might escape a Hobbesian world of their own making" (1992: 412). An absence of recognition of others' sovereignty may then result in violence and conflict. Although Wendt is right that the "sovereign state is an ongoing accomplishment of practice" (1992: 412), we cannot understand why states refuse to recognise the other's sovereignty without considering actual (domestic) identity- and interest formation. Wendt gives the example of Western colonialism, whereas an obvious contemporary example is Russia's invasion of Ukraine. What these two instances of state violence share is not (just) a lack of recognition of the other's sovereignty. Instead, 'the Other' is seen as a lesser actor. Whereas the colonisers regarded the colonised peoples as inferior peoples, President Putin claimed the modern state of Ukraine to be a modern creation by Russia (Kremlin 2022).

## ... Results in Fundamental Epistemological Problems

The necessary opening-up, so to speak, of the 'black box' of pre-interaction identity formation, poses fundamental epistemological challenges to Wendt's approach. He suggests a new research agenda which should aim "to assess the causal relationship between practice and interaction (as an independent variable) and the cognitive structures at the level of individual states and of systems of states which constitute identities and interests (as dependent variable)" (1992: 424). However, since identities are "continuously articulated, rearticulated and contested" (Zehfuss

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2001: 337-8), it is challenging to employ them as stable explanatory variables. As Wendt's commitment to 'scientific' standards forces him to regard identity as "constructed but at the same time in some ways given" and to ignore "domestic processes of articulation of state identity" (ibid.: 316), he is in danger of "missing something crucial, namely the politics of representing and constructing social worlds" (ibid.: 341), as the example of Russia's invasion of Ukraine illustrates.

If we address the ontological shortcomings in Wendt's constructivism (i.e. developing a more sophisticated understanding of identity), then we necessarily compromise its epistemological basis (as that builds upon a clearly delineated and bound conception of identity). As such, indeed, there is at least a degree of incommensurability of a truly constructivist understanding of international politics "with a commitment to a unitary notion of science, based on epistemic realism" (Behnke 2001: 124).

In terms of the explanation his approach offers, the result of the ontological-epistemological choices Wendt makes is his unwillingness (and inability) to actually challenge "the neorealist description of the contemporary state system as a competitive, self-help world" (1992: 396). Wendt's constructivism leaves the fundamental neorealist assumption intact – notably, the definition of international relations "as the behaviour of states under the condition of anarchy" (Behnke 2001: 122). Ultimately, therefore, in Wendt's theorising, anarchy "is not a social construction but simply the quasi-natural condition under which ontologically given states conduct their business" (ibid.). Wendt's critique of structuralist neorealism has a "thin layer of subjectivist ontology" in that states, without structural determinism, "can 'construct' their identities in processes of symbolic interaction" (ibid.). To conclude, then, although Wendt's critique was remarkable given the dominance of neorealism in the early nineties (Wohlforth 1995), his substantive alteration of this theory is ultimately rather meagre.

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