

Wendt, Alexander. *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Chapter 1.

I. What is constructivism?

“Constructivism is not a theory of international politics”. (7) Instead, Wendt’s constructivism is an attempt to analyze the “ontology of the states system” or to answer “second-order” questions about what is “out there” and how we recognize it. (5) It is grounded on two basic tenets: 1) “structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces; and 2) “the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature”. Because the former may be loosely described as “idealist” and latter as “structural”, one can understand constructivism as a kind of “structural idealism”. (1)

There are three main streams of constructivism: modernist (Ruggie and Kratchowil); postmodernist (Ashley and Walker); and feminist (Peterson and Tickner). These streams are united not only by the principles described above but also by the implied critique of “neo” -realism or –liberalism based on the methods of microeconomics: neo-everything is “undersocialized”. (4, cf. 14-19 for Wendt’s critique of Waltz)

Wendt’s particular version includes some additional claims: 1) states “really are agents”, ie they have meaningful intentionality; 2) his argument is “systemic” in that it considers the international system as both an independent and dependent variable; and 3) the international system is characterized by “material” anarchy. (10-14)

II. What can constructivism do?

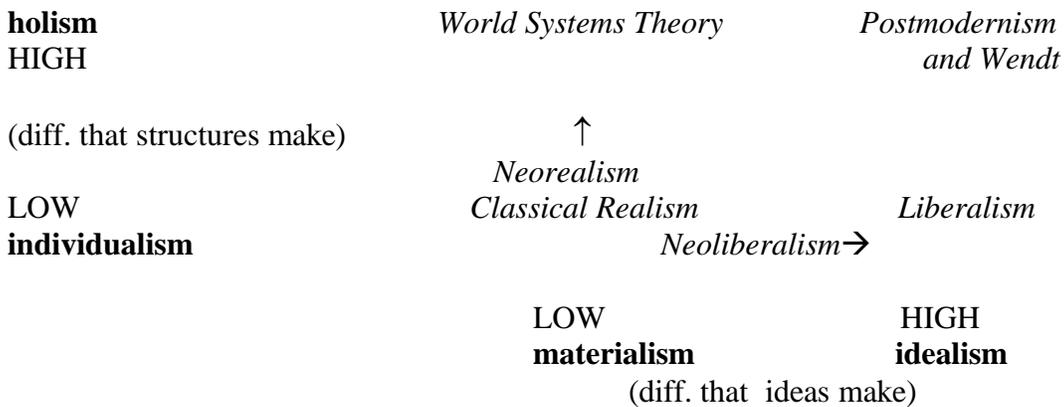
International politics is a “hard case” for constructivism because it does not appear very “social” (2). But by reconceptualizing “what the international system is made of”, Wendt’s constructivism can provide an alternative to materialist assumptions about the basis of international politics. For example, Wendt denies that the assumption of anarchy or a “horizontal” distribution of power necessarily suggests competition among states. For if the international structure is a social phenomenon composed of shared ideas, structures that contain the same balance of material capabilities may be distinguished by the “distribution of knowledge or ideas”. Specifically, there are three possible “cultures” of anarchy – Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian – in each of which the influence of material differences on state behaviour will be different. (20) In fine, there is no underlying logic of anarchy: the logic of anarchy is structured by ideas about the nature of anarchy. (21)

This kind of thinking makes possible a new set of answers to “first-order” or substantive questions about the behavior of actors under different conditions.

Empirical inquiries like “are interests endogenous or exogenous to the international system” and “to what extent are interests and identities constant?” provide a way out of purely theoretical debates. (38) One should note, by way of example, that for Wendt states are agents with interests only because they have been constructed as such by an historical or intellectual project of state-building. States were not agents during, say, the era of feudalism.

III. Four sociologies of political science

Wendt offers “map” of ontological assumptions that he claims is applicable to any domain of social inquiry. I reproduce it roughly, with examples from IR theory, below:



The materialism-idealism axis indicates the degree of influence “brute” power has on agents’ behaviour, eg military capability, compared with the “nature of social consciousness”. (24) The holism-individualism axis indicates the extent to which one believes that “social scientific explanations should be reducible to the properties or interaction of independently existing individuals” (individualism) as opposed to the claim that “the effects of social structures cannot be reduced to independently existing agents or their interactions” (holism). (26)

According to Wendt, any combination is in principle defensible, but we be careful not to reify our assumptions. (34) “The possibility that different ontologies are incommensurable should not be treated as an excuse to avoid comparison. Ontology-talk is necessary, but we should also look for way to to translate it into propositions that might be adjudicated empirically.” (37) As might be expected, Wendt promises to defend a version of holistic or structural idealism in the remainder of this book.