

A Study of Self-Help in Anarchic International Systems

Written by Aaron Francis O. Chan

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AARON FRANCIS O. CHAN, JUL 27 2010

The debate between “rationalists” and “reflectivists” has emerged as a central axis of contention in International Relations (IR) theory. Rationalists treat sovereign states as rational, self-regarding units, leading both Neorealists and Neoliberal Institutionalists to conclude that anarchic conditions create a “self-help” international system. Reflectivists, a broad church that includes postmodernists, critical theorists, and other anti-positivists, see no automatic link between anarchy and self-help.

While the battle has raged for decades, the work of Alexander Wendt has recently become a rallying point for reflectivists, now identified as Constructivists, to critique mainstream rationalists like Kenneth Waltz at a meta-theoretical level while also offering a compelling account of how international relations came to be as they are now. Constructivism is no longer on the margins of IR theory, where it had once been safely ignored.

Wendt’s explicit goal was to “build a bridge” between rationalists and reflectivists by applying Constructivist premises about the social construction of identities and interests to an anarchic international system; his aim was to “argue against the Neorealist claim that self-help is given by anarchic structure exogenously to process.” (Wendt 1992, p.394) If anarchy is what states make of it, then Neorealists cannot automatically assume that the system will be based on self-help, strengthening the Liberal claim that institutions can change state behavior. In Wendt’s view, identity is the key concept. However, this paper will argue that Wendt’s conception of anarchy was wrong. Anarchy is not what states make of it; it is a condition that inevitably leads to a self-help international system.

Although I argue against Wendt’s conception of anarchy, this is not an attack on Constructivism in general. This work concedes that Waltz’s Neorealism can be a special case within Wendt’s Constructivism, but opposes Wendt’s integration of Neorealism into his theory on Constructivist terms. While Wendt’s Constructivism may reliably explain systemic change from anarchy to hierarchy and back again, a condition of anarchy cannot lead to any other institutional arrangement except self-help. So long as anarchy holds, Waltz will apply. If not, then Wendt comes in. Anarchy, then, is the key concept linking Waltz and Wendt in the same theoretical framework.

Anarchy, narrowly defined, is an objective condition; “it is an ordering principle, which says that the system comprises independent states that have no central authority above them.” (Mearsheimer 2001, p.30) For Kenneth Waltz, the archetypal Neorealist, there are only two possible ordering principles in the international system: anarchy or hierarchy. Given anarchy, states, as self-regarding political units, have to contend with and work within the distribution of their material capabilities, understood as military power. The differential distribution of these capabilities results in uncertainty, motivating states to ensure their security by maximizing relative gains in order to protect their position in the system. (Grieco 1988) States fear the power of other states, but have no recourse to any other body that can guarantee their security if conflict arises. Hence, for Neorealists, self-help is a function of anarchy. (Waltz 1979)

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Constructivists, led by Alexander Wendt, challenge this Neorealist logic by arguing that self-help is only one out of the many possible institutions that can be produced by anarchy. For Wendt, “an institution is a relatively stable set or ‘structure’ of identities and interests”, and they are “fundamentally cognitive entities that do not exist apart from actors’ ideas about how the world works.” (Wendt 1992, p.399) Actors form these ideas by acquiring identities. An identity is inherently relational because it requires a concept of “self” defined in relation to an “other.” As “relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self”, identities are the basis of any actor’s interests. (Wendt 1992, p.397) Identities, interests, and institutions are all “mutually constitutive”; state practices create the structure of the international system, which then constrains practice, implying that all the elements of international relations are socially constructed.

Wendt’s critique of Waltz rests on his claim that “the meanings in terms of which action is organized arise out of interaction”, which would mean that states have no fixed, exogenous interests. (Wendt 1992, 403) Wendt invokes the “looking-glass self” to describe identity formation, asserting that the “self is a reflection of an actor’s socialization.” (Wendt 1992, p. 404) After all, “most decisions are and should be made on the basis of probabilities, and these are produced by interaction, by what actors *do*.” (Wendt 1992, p.404) Ultimately, Wendt’s assumption that a concept of self is only possible through socialization with other similarly constituted actors implies that “actors do not have a self prior to interaction with an other.” (Wendt 1992, p.402)

This paper will interrogate Wendt’s conclusions in three stages. First, I explore the possibility of identity formation in isolation prior to interaction between states. Second, I trace the most logical dynamic of socialization that will apply once states begin to interact with each other. Third, I analyze how anarchy affects the creation and maintenance of a functioning international system.

In lieu of any other reasonable starting point, the argument begins with a single entity existing in isolation, precluding all interaction with any similar entities. Wendt rejects any possibility of this isolated entity acquiring an identity, since identities are only formed through socialization. Because interests are functions of identity, an isolated entity that cannot have an identity naturally cannot have a fixed interest. I disagree with this analysis. In contrast, I believe that an entity is able to form a self-concept even in the absence of a peer entity. So long as an entity is able to define itself in opposition to uncertainty, it will be able to conceive a self.

Uncertainty, to borrow Frank Knight’s definition, is “randomness with unknowable probabilities.” For instance, human beings on the planet Earth may be uncertain about the existence of extraterrestrial life in space, but uncertainty about what is out there is enough for humans to self-identify as inhabitants of the Earth. The cognitive understanding of uncertainty by any entity means that the entity is able to comprehend the concept of knowledge, implying the existence of a rational self. Rene Descartes makes the same point in more philosophical terms: *cogito ergo sum*. Even in isolation, prior to any interaction, a single entity can have a self, as defined against an unknowable, all-encompassing “other.” Once a self-identity is conceived, an entity will ineluctably desire to preserve it. Self-preservation is a fixed interest, exogenous of interaction.

I argue that survival is the fixed and fundamental interest of all entities able to conceive of selves. Some entities, like human beings, are biological. A state, on the other hand, is a political entity. Although a state can be treated like a single unit, it is actually a conglomeration of individuals held together by political bonds that help unify the collective in the face of uncertainty. States are also not spontaneously generated. Even in a state of isolation, states are political entities that already have material capabilities, whether economic or military. Even without clear enemies, state comprehension of the dangers lurking in uncertainty, coupled with the survival imperative and its possession of material capabilities implies that states will continue to arm themselves anyway.

When states interact with other states, they construct new identities and articulate new interests, ultimately creating a “structure of identities and interests” in the form of an institution. In anarchic conditions, will this institution necessarily take on the form of self-help? While various state interests are constructed endogenously through interaction, states retain a fixed, exogenous interest in survival that is logically prior to any kind of interaction. “Beyond the survival motive, the aims of states may be endlessly varied”, but “survival is a prerequisite to achieving any goals that states may have, other than the goal of promoting their own disappearance as political entities.” (Waltz 1979, p.289)

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States also have to contend with the presence of conflicts, or divergences of interest. Jean Jacques Rousseau traced the origin of all conflict to the existence of a social context. Assume that a group of men agree to cooperate on a stag hunt in the state of nature. At a crucial moment, one man leaves his fellows hanging to go after a hare, effectively pursuing his own interest at the expense of the others. Rousseau “imagines how men must have behaved as they began to depend on one another to meet their daily needs. As long as each provided for his own wants, there could be no conflict; whenever the combination of natural obstacles and growth in population made cooperation necessary, conflict arose.” (Waltz 1954, p.168) Conflict and cooperation are two sides of the same coin; both are bound to happen when interaction occurs. As more and more states join the nascent international system, the same social context that facilitates and institutionalizes interaction also leads to the appearance of conflict.

Given Wendt’s claim that states continually construct new interests through interaction, some of these interests will inevitably be different from those pursued by other states. When state interests collide, the premise that all states have some military capability becomes more salient to the conflicting states. Since all states have the ability to use military force to pursue their interests, war becomes a constant possibility. Uncertainty gives way to risk, which Frank Knight defined as “randomness with knowable probabilities.” The distribution of material capabilities between states is an objective source of such a probability. Because states are fundamentally driven to seek survival, they now have to calculate risk in terms of the likelihood that they will be attacked. The risk of war might be high or low, depending on how states construct their identities and their interests at any given moment, but it is always possible. International relations must constantly be conducted in the shadow of war.

If the system were hierarchic, states would still have a fixed interest in survival, but conflict could at least be resolved through the intervention of a collective authority, thereby reducing the risk of war in the system. Collective authority could imply anything from a world state to an extremely powerful state-like entity, but self-help would not apply because a collective authority guarantees the security of individual states in the same way that a government protects its citizens from each other. States are free to socially construct new identities and new interests without fear that conflicting interests could lead to war.

In anarchic international systems, this collective authority does not exist. Although collective security can be attempted from time to time on an ad hoc basis, states ultimately have no guarantee that another actor, much less a more powerful one, will intervene in every conflict situation all the time. States must ultimately rely on their own material capabilities, defined by their position in the system, to guarantee their continued existence. The constancy of the survival imperative, the existence of conflict, the distribution of material capabilities, and the risk of war in any international system all imply that anarchy, by definition and logical operation, inevitably leads to just one possible type of institution: self-help. Anarchy is not what states make of it; states are what anarchy makes them. Hence, the logic of self-help in an anarchic international system is firmly rooted in the identity of the fundamental unit making up that system: the anarchical state.

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