

# A Brief Overview of Alexander Wendt's Constructivism

Written by Zhan Mengshu

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ZHAN MENGSHU, MAY 19 2020

For decades, the theory of International Relations was dominated by two approaches: realism and liberalism. Constructivism had been marginalized by these mainstream theories because it focused on social construction instead of material construction (Barkin, 2017). The turning point came late in the 1980s as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War made people reconsider the explanatory ability of mainstream theories (Hopf, 1998). Consequently, a new debate emerged. Under this, the development of Alexander Wendt's constructivist theory gained attention in academia and began to stand out (Lapid, 2007). Wendt published 'Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics' in 1992. In this paper he revealed the limitation of the concept of anarchy from the neorealist and neoliberal theories in explaining international relations (Wendt, 1992). In 1999 he further developed the theory in *Social Theory of International Politics*. In the book, Wendt opened up a moderate lane in the development of constructivist theory (Guzzin & Leander, 2001) and essentially created a 'thin' constructivism. That is, Wendt recognizes the main points of materialism and individualism, as well as a scientific methods of social inquiry. This was criticized by some constructivists, nevertheless, the variant of constructivism proposed by Wendt became the most mature and influential branch within the theory (Jackson & Sorensen 2007, 162).

Wendt highlighted the importance of shared ideas (knowledge) in international relationships in his theory. According to Wendt "socially shared knowledge is knowledge that is both common and connected between individuals" (Ibid, 141). First of all, Alexander Wendt pointed out that "the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces" (Ibid, 1). Obviously, Wendt disagrees with the notion that the structures of human association are constructed by material phenomena, as defined by the theories of neorealism and neoliberalism (Ibid, 16). But he doesn't deny the existence of objective facts. He believes that the material element exists and also cannot be ignored. Wendt explained that although he recognized the existence of material factors, these factors in his theory do not play a crucial role in his theory; instead he indicates that shared ideas are the most important elements in international relations. Wendt named his assumption as rump materialism (Ibid. 132).

Moreover, Wendt emphasised, that "the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature" (Ibid, 1). Regarding the principle of determining national interests, previous mainstream theories of international relations insisted that national interests are premised on material factors (Ibid, 98-109). But Wendt's constructivism believes that national interests are constructed by shared ideas, rather than material factors. Wendt interpreted that everything has a material base, for example bodies for people and territories for states. But, what really distinguishes those actors with different identities are shared ideas, like consciousness and memory (Ibid, 225). Alexander Wendt categorizes identities into four types: (1) person or corporate, (2) type, (3) role and (4) collective (Ibid, 224). Person or corporate identity consists of self-organizing, homeostatic structures that differentiate actors from other entities (Ibid). Wendt quoted the term "type" from Jim Fearon (Ibid, 225). It refers to a social category or label that is suitable for the persons who have one or more same characteristics, in term of appearance, behavioral features, attitudes, values, skills (e.g. language), knowledge, opinions, experiences, historical similarities (such as region or place of birth), etc (Fearon 1997, 14). Role identities are dependent on culture and rely on others more. If the type identities are pre-social (not reliant on society), the role identities are not based on intrinsic attributes. Therefore, they are only related to other attributes (Wendt, 1999, 227).

Collective identity considers the relationship between the self and the other as its logical conclusion, namely identification. Collective identity is a unique combination of role identity and type identity. It has causal power so that

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it could induce actors to define the interests of others as part of self-interest, i.e. it enables them to possess altruism (Ibid, 229). Except for the first type of identity, the other three can simultaneously display on the same actor (Ibid, 230). In terms of national interests Wendt also has a different viewpoint from neorealist theory. Waltz assumes that the only interest of states is survival (Waltz, 1979). Wendt instead believes that national interests include the four objective interests of survival, autonomy independence, economic well-being and collective self-esteem (Wendt, 1999, 235-237).

In addition, Wendt illustrated the actions of actors depend on their interests. Therefore, according to Wendt's constructivism the actions of actors are also influenced by shared ideas. Rationalism treats identity and interest as exogenous factors and constants. In contrast, constructivism considers identity and interest as endogenous factors, namely the dependent variables (Ibid, 336). In order to clarify the relationships between idea, identity, interest and action, Wendt considered the theory of rational choice as a reference. On the basis of this theory, there is the intentional equation: Desire + Belief = action, where *identity* belongs to *belief* and *interest* belongs to *desire*. That means identity and interest jointly influence actions (Ibid, 115, see also 231). Wendt also interpreted that identity is a prerequisite for interest because an actor cannot know what he wants until he knows who he is. (Wildavsky, 1994). Interest and identity also influence each other. Without interest, identity has no motivational power; without identity, interest has no direction. (Wendt, 1999, 231). In general, according to Wendt's constructivism, identity and interest consist of shared ideas and the material forces in the system and it is remarkable, that shared ideas occupy the leading part (Ibid, 138). Identity is a prerequisite for interest, while they influence each other; they jointly determine actions. That is why idea is the basis of action.

In terms of anarchy, neorealists treat it as a material phenomenon and treat the international system as a materialistic structure. Thereby, according to neorealism, anarchy is an immutable structure that determines states' actions (Ibid, 247). Furthermore, the rationalist theories of international relations assume that once the identity of a country is determined, then the national interest is also fixed. In order to pursue a state's own interests, the relationships between states is fundamentally conflicting. Therefore, social conceptualizations of structure are rejected in Waltz's theory, and the status of the international relationship only has one schema, namely war is inevitable, peace is temporary, and it is called Hobbes anarchy (Ibid). However, in constructivism actors and structure are mutually constructed. On the basis of the aforementioned explanation, Wendt believes that the international system structure is a structure of shared ideas, as different shared ideas will cause different interests and actions. Hence, the identity is not fixed, rather, it is generated through the interactions of the international community. Only after identity is determined, then identity defines the interest. Therefore, national interests change according to the changes of identity (Ibid, 231).

Through the mechanism of interaction, different characteristics of anarchy can be produced. On the basis of different nature of interaction between countries, Wendt believes that there may be a variety of anarchic cultures. He summarized three different international system anarchy cultures, namely Hobbesian, Lockean and Kantian (Ibid, 246-247).

In Hobbesian cultures, states have no shared idea and are invariably enemies. There are four features in this culture. First, states tend to take strong actions to change the current situation and treat each other as enemies. That is, they would try to destroy or conquer their enemies. Second, decision-making tends not to consider the prospect, rather than prepare for the worst situation in the future. Third, military power is treated as the key point. Finally, if a war breaks out, the states would fight with enemies (perceived), namely, they would use violence without limitation (Ibid, 262).

Regarding Lockean cultures, states may have shared ideas with others, therefore the state treats other states as its rivals (Ibid, 247). This culture also has four implications. The most important is, no matter what conflicts they have, the states must adhere to the sovereignty of each other at the status quo. The second implication concerns the nature of rational behavior. Rivals don't always have to escalate tensions because the institution of sovereignty makes the risks lower. Third, relative military power is still important, as competitors know that others may use force. Ultimately, if the conflict could lead to war, rivals would limit their violence (Ibid, 282).

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In Kantian cultures, if one state treats another as a friend, these states will develop shared institutions among them. In this kind of cultures, states expect each other to adhere to two rules: First, they cannot use war or the risk of war to settle disputes (non-violence); Second, they will fight as a team, when one of them is threatened by a third party – the rule of mutual help (Ibid, 298-299).

All in all, since Wendt proposed his theory, it has come under scrutiny. On the one hand, some point out that Wendt carved out a new way to explain the relations between states (Checkel, 1998). In this vein, Xuewu Gu and Yaqing Qin hold Wendt's constructivism highly (Gu, 2018; Qin, 2001). On the other hand, because Wendt tries to build a bridge between rationalism and reflectivism, his theory adheres to the ontology of reflectivism and the epistemology of rationalism. That means his theory will be likely criticized by both sides (Hopf, 1998). For instance, the neoliberal scholar Robert Keohane criticized Wendt's for a wrong orientation of neoliberalism, i.e. he incorporated neoliberalism into materialism (Alker, 2000). Moreover, constructivist scholar Martha Finnemore pointed out that Wendt's theory ignored the influence of international organizations (Finnemore, 1996).

Regardless, Alexander Wendt's theoretical work enhances our understandings of identities, interests and the actions of states. In addition, it expands IR's understanding of anarchy and of phenomena that can be not explained well by other theories, such as the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

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