The Constructivist Challenge to Structural Realism

A Review Essay

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Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999

For more than a decade realism, by most accounts the dominant paradigm in international relations theory, has been under assault by the emerging paradigm of constructivism. One group of realists—the structural (or neo-/systemic) realists who draw inspiration from Kenneth Waltz's seminal *Theory of International Politics*[1]—has been a particular target for constructivist arrows. Such realists contend that anarchy and the distribution of relative power drive most of what goes on in world politics. Constructivists counter that structural realism misses what is often a more determinant factor, namely, the intersubjectively shared ideas that shape behavior by constituting the identities and interests of actors.

Through a series of influential articles, Alexander Wendt has provided one of the most sophisticated and hard-hitting constructivist critiques of structural realism.[2] *Social Theory of International Politics* provides the first book-length statement of his unique brand of constructivism.[3] Wendt goes beyond the more

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1. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979).
2. See, inter alia, Alexander Wendt, "The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory," *International Organization*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Summer 1987), pp. 335–370; Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Spring 1992), pp. 391–425; Wendt, "Collective Identity Formation and the International State," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 2 (June 1994), pp. 384–396; and Wendt, "Constructing International Politics," *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Summer 1995), pp. 71–81.
3. Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). References to Wendt's book are given in the text, enclosed in parentheses.

moderate constructivist point that shared ideas must be considered alongside material forces in any empirical analysis. Instead he seeks to challenge the core neorealist premise that anarchy forces states into recurrent security competitions. According to Wendt, whether a system is conflictual or peaceful is a function not of anarchy and power but of the shared culture created through discursive social practices. Anarchy has no determinant "logic," only different cultural instantiations. Because each actor's conception of self (its interests and identity) is a product of the others' diplomatic gestures, states can reshape structure by process; through new gestures, they can reconstitute interests and identities toward more other-regarding and peaceful means and ends. If Wendt is correct, and "anarchy is what states make of it," then realism has been dealt a crushing blow: States are not condemned by their anarchic situation to worry constantly about relative power and to fall into tragic conflicts. They can act to alter the intersubjective culture that constitutes the system, solidifying over time the non-egoistic mind-sets needed for long-term peace.

Notwithstanding Wendt's important contributions to international relations theory, his critique of structural realism has inherent flaws. Most important, it does not adequately address a critical aspect of the realist worldview: the problem of uncertainty. For structural realists, it is states' uncertainty about the present and especially the future intentions of others that makes the levels and trends in relative power such fundamental causal variables. Contrary to Wendt's claim that realism must smuggle in states with differently constituted interests to explain why systems sometimes fall into conflict, neorealists argue that uncertainty about the other's present interests—whether the other is driven by security or nonsecurity motives—can be enough to lead security-seeking states to fight. This problem is exacerbated by the incentives that actors have to deceive one another, an issue Wendt does not address.

Yet even when states are fairly sure that the other is also a security seeker, they know that it might change its spots later on. States must therefore worry about any decline in their power, lest the other turn aggressive after achieving superiority. Wendt's building of a systemic constructivist theory—and his bracketing of unit-level processes—thus presents him with an ironic dilemma. It is the very mutability of polities as emphasized by domestic-level constructivists—that states may change because of domestic processes independent of international interaction—that makes prudent leaders so concerned about the future. If diplomacy can have only a limited effect on another's character or regime type, then leaders must calculate the other's potential to attack later should it acquire motives for expansion. In such an environment of future un-

certainty, levels and trends in relative power will thus act as a key constraint on state behavior.

The problem of uncertainty complicates Wendt's efforts to show that anarchy has no particular logic, but only three different ideational instantiations in history—as Hobbesian, Lockean, or Kantian cultures, depending on the level of actor compliance to certain behavioral norms. By differentiating these cultures in terms of the degree of cooperative behavior exhibited by states, Wendt's analysis reinforces the very dilemma underpinning the realist argument. If the other is acting cooperatively, how is one to know whether this reflects its peaceful character, or is just a facade masking aggressive desires? Wendt's discussion of the different degrees of internalization of the three cultures only exacerbates the problem. What drives behavior at the lower levels of internalization is precisely what is not shared between actors—their private incentives to comply for short-term selfish reasons. This suggests that the neorealist and neoliberal paradigms, both of which emphasize the role of uncertainty when internalization is low or nonexistent, remain strong competitors to constructivism in explaining changing levels of cooperation through history. And because Wendt provides little empirical evidence to support his view in relation to these competitors, the debate over which paradigm possesses greater explanatory power is still an open one.

The first section of this essay outlines the essential elements of Wendt's argument against the backdrop of the general constructivist position. The second considers some of the book's contributions versus existing theories within the liberal, constructivist, and realist paradigms. The third offers an extended critique of Wendt's argument against structural realism.

Overview: Constructivism and Wendt's Argument

Three elements make constructivism a distinct form of international relations theorizing. First, global politics is said to be guided by the intersubjectively shared ideas, norms, and values held by actors. Constructivists focus on the intersubjective dimension of knowledge, because they wish to emphasize the social aspect of human existence—the role of shared ideas as an ideational structure constraining and shaping behavior.[4] This allows constructivists to

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4. See Audie Klotz and Cecilia Lynch, "Conflicted Constructivism? Positivist Leanings vs. Interpretivist Meanings," paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Minneapolis, Minnesota, March 1998, pp. 4–5; Jeffrey Checkel, "The Constructivist Turn in

pose this structure as a causal force separate from the material structure of neorealism.

Second, the ideational structure has a constitutive and not just regulative effect on actors. That is, the structure leads actors to redefine their interests and identities in the process of interacting (they become "socialized" by process). Thus unlike rationalist theories such as neorealism and neoliberalism, which hold interest and identities constant in order to isolate (respectively) the causal roles of power and international institutions, constructivism considers how ideational structures shape the very way actors define themselves—who they are, their goals, and the roles they believe they should play.[5]

Third, ideational structures and actors ("agents") co-constitute and co-determine each other. Structures constitute actors in terms of their interests and identities, but structures are also produced, reproduced, and altered by the discursive practices of agents. This element allows constructivists to challenge the determinacy of neorealism. Structures are not reified objects that actors can do nothing about, but to which they must respond. Rather structures exist only through the reciprocal interaction of actors. This means that agents, through acts of social will, can change structures. They can thereby emancipate themselves from dysfunctional situations that are in turn replicating conflictual practices.[6]

International Relations Theory," Vol. 50, No. 2 (January 1998), pp. 324–348; Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It"; Emanuel Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (September 1997), pp. 319–363; and Martha Finnemore, *National Interests in International Society* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), chap. 1.
5. See Nicholas G. Onuf, *World of Our Making* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), chap. 1; Audie Klotz, "Norms Reconstituting Interests: Global Racial Equality and U.S. Sanctions against South Africa," *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Summer 1995), pp. 451–478; Klotz and Lynch, "Conflicted Constructivism?" p. 7; Andreas Hasenclever, Peter Mayer, and Volker Rittberger, *Theories of International Regimes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 158–167; Peter J. Katzenstein, "Introduction: Alternative Perspectives in National Security," in Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 1–32; Ronald L. Jepperson, Alexander Wendt, and Peter J. Katzenstein, "Norms, Identity, and Culture in National Security," in ibid., pp. 33–75; Alexander Wendt and Raymond Duvall, "Institutions and International Order," in Ernst-Otto Czempiel and James N. Rosenau, eds., *Global Changes and Theoretical Challenges* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1989), pp. 51–73; Finnemore, *National Interests in International Society*, chap. 1; John Gerard Ruggie, *Constructing the World Polity* (London: Routledge, 1998), chap. 1; Mlada Bukovansky, "American Identity and Neutral Rights from Independence to the War of 1812," *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (Spring 1997), pp. 207–243; and the special issue of *Security Studies* on the origins of national interests, Vol. 8, Nos. 2–3 (Winter–Spring 1999). For a broader discussion of the rationalist-constructivist debate and for further references, see the special issue of *International Organization*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (Autumn 1998).
6. See Ted Hopf, "The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Summer 1998), pp. 172–173; Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It";

For constructivists, therefore, it is critical to recognize that an actor's reality at any point in time is historically constructed and contingent. It is the product of human activity—historical social practices—and thus can, at least in theory, be transcended by instantiating new social practices. This process of cultural change may be slow; after all, agents are sometimes going up against thousands of years of socialization. But even the most embedded structures can be altered by acts of will (and the requisite social mobilization). The neorealist presumption that there are universal laws of international politics that work across space and time, driven by the given reality of structure, must therefore be discarded or at least highly qualified.[7]

Social Theory of International Politics moves beyond this core constructivist framework. For Wendt, constructivism in its different strands is simultaneously too extreme and too limited in its attack on neorealism. It is too extreme when it claims that it is "ideas all the way down," namely, that all aspects of human reality are shaped by socialization through discursive practices.[8] Material forces do exist and may have independent causal effects on actor behavior. Moreover, the state is a real, self-organized actor that has certain basic interests prior to its interaction with other states. Yet according to Wendt, constructivism is too limited when it simply tests ideas as causal factors against realist variables like power and interest, without exploring the degree to which these apparent "material" variables are really constituted by ideational processes. If much of what scholars take to be material causes is ac-

Wendt, "Collective Identity Formation and the International State"; Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground," pp. 338–340; Bradley S. Klein, *Strategic Studies and World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), chaps. 1–2; Christian Reus-Smit, "The Constitutional Structure of International Society and the Nature of Fundamental Institutions," *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Autumn 1997), pp. 555–589; and Finnemore, *National Interests in International Society*, chap. 1.
7. See Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luchmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchor, 1966), p. 60; Richard K. Ashley, "The Poverty of Neorealism," in Robert O. Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 255–300; Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It," p. 410; James Der Derian, "Introduction: Critical Investigations," in Der Derian, ed., *International Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 4–9; Rodney Bruce Hall, "Moral Authority as a Power Resource," *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Autumn 1997), pp. 591–622; and Rey Koslowski and Friedrich V. Kratochwil, "Understanding Change in International Politics: The Soviet Empire's Demise and the International System," *International Organization*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Spring 1994), pp. 215–247.
8. In earlier work, Wendt himself comes close to this more extreme constructivist line. Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It," p. 401; and Wendt, "Constructing International Politics," p. 73. On the idea that material structures gain their meaning only through discursive practices, see Bukovansky, "American Identity," p. 218; Finnemore, *National Interests in International Society*, pp. 6, 128; and David Dessler, "What's at Stake in the Agent-Structure Debate?" *International Organization*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Summer 1989), pp. 473, 461.

tually the product of historical social practices, then realism explains far less in international relations than is commonly assumed.

Social Theory of International Politics is a complex work of both social philosophy and social science, one that justifies multiple readings to absorb its subtleties.[9] Its core argument, however, can be summarized as follows. The book's target is Waltzian neorealism. The overarching goal is to do for constructivism what Waltz did for realism, namely, the building of a parsimonious systemic theory that reveals the overarching constraining and shaping force of structure—this time from an ideational perspective. (Thus the title's twist on Waltz's masterwork—"*Social* Theory of International Politics.")

As with neorealism, Wendt's argument is founded on the notion that states are the primary actors in world politics. States are self-organized units constructed from within by the discursive practices of individuals and social groups. As units that exist in the collective knowledge of many individuals, they are not dependent on the thoughts of any one person. Moreover, as self-organized entities, each possesses a "corporate" identity as a sovereign actor, an identity not tied to interaction with other states.[10] Even more controversial for extreme constructivists, Wendt also suggests that states possess certain essential needs that arise from their nature as self-organized political units: needs for physical survival, autonomy, economic well-being, and collective self-esteem—namely, the group's need to feel good about itself (see chap. 5, especially pp. 207–209, 224–226, 235–236).

Wendt argues that it is only with this starting point—the state as a "pre-social" actor with certain basic needs—that we can see the impact of interaction at the system level on the interests and identities of states. If states were solely a product of interaction, there would be no independent things upon which interaction could have its effect. Moreover, the state could never act as a free-willed agent employing rational deliberation to change its situation; it would be little more than a cultural automaton (pp. 198, 74, 125–130, 179–182, 244). Wendt also contends, contrary to more extreme constructivists, that the state, at least initially, has a tendency to be egoistic in its relations with others. Wendt acknowledges that members of groups, as social identity theory has shown, al-

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9. For a recent discussion of the more philosophical aspects of the book, see the essays by Robert O. Keohane, Stephen D. Krasner, Roxanne Lynn Doty, Hayward R. Alker, and Steve Smith, and Wendt's reply, in *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (January 2000), pp. 123–180.
10. Going beyond his previous work, and borrowing from James D. Fearon, Wendt also includes another form of identity that is intrinsic to the state—its "type" identity as a particular form of sovereign actor (e.g., being a "democracy," a "fascist" state, etc.). See Fearon, "What Is Identity (As We Now Use the Word)?" unpublished manuscript, University of Chicago, 1997.

most always show favoritism toward each other when dealing with members of the out-group. This means that in the initial stages of a state-to-state interaction, egoistic self-help behavior is likely to be exhibited (pp. 306, 322–323).[11]

Wendt's apparent concessions to the neorealist paradigm, however, do not mean that egoistic orientations will always be dominant, that states cannot learn to be more other-regarding and cooperative. Drawing from symbolic interactionism, Wendt argues that interaction with other states can lead actors to significant redefinitions of self. In the process of interacting, two states, designated as "Ego" and "Alter," take on certain roles and cast the other in corresponding counter-roles. Such role-taking and alter-casting, depending on the type of behavior exhibited (egoistic vs. other-regarding, militaristic vs. cooperative), can lead to one of two results: a reproduction of initially egoistic conceptions of self and other, or a transformation of the shared ideational structure to one that is more collective and other-regarding (pp. 327–336). The critical point for Wendt is that a structure has no reality apart from its instantiation in process. Structure, he stresses, "*exists, has effects, and evolves only because of agents and their practices*" (p. 185, emphasis in original; see also p. 313). Hence, if egoistic and militaristic conceptions of self and other continue, it is only because of the interactive practices that sustain those conceptions. Likewise, discursive practices are the source of any transformation in interests and identities. By casting the other in a nonegoistic light, and acting toward it from an other-regarding standpoint, actors can begin to build collective identities that include the other as part of the definition of self (chap. 7, especially pp. 336–342, 368–369).

The book begins its sustained critique of neorealism in chapter 3. Wendt argues that behind Waltz's explicit model of international politics, emphasizing anarchy and the distribution of material capabilities as primary causal factors, lies an implicit model focusing on the distribution of interests across states. That is, neorealism cannot explain variations in international outcomes without implicitly invoking different types of states—some of which seek only to maintain what they have (status quo states) and some that seek to change the system through force (revisionist states). Systems consisting of only status quo states constitute "one kind of anarchy," while systems with revisionist states constitute another. Foreshadowing his later discussion, Wendt suggests that status quo states should be relatively peaceful (anarchies of a Lockean or perhaps Kantian kind), while revisionist states will be conflictual, with states al-

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11. On social identity theory, see Jonathan Mercer, "Anarchy and Identity," *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (Spring 1995), pp. 229–252.

ways on the edge of elimination (anarchy with a Hobbesian culture). This argument implies that anarchy, as a mere absence of central authority, has no one "logic." Rather the way a particular anarchy and distribution of power plays itself out will depend critically on the distribution of interests in the system—"what states *want*" (p. 106, emphasis in original).[12]

Waltz's neorealism is therefore underspecified: A hidden variable, the distribution of interests (status quo vs. revisionist), is doing most of the explaining. Any material structure, in fact, will have no effect except insofar as it interacts with the ideational structure that is the distribution of interests. Concrete interests, moreover, are not simply given by the system. Socialized beliefs about what kinds of objectives are worth pursuing or avoiding will shape each state's actual interests. So while individuals and states may have certain basic needs (such as needs for survival, esteem, and autonomy), how these needs are manifest in particular actors will be a product of social discursive practices (pp. 113–135).

Building on this foundation, in chapter 6 Wendt lays out what he calls the three "cultures of anarchy" that have characterized at various times the past two thousand years of international relations. In each culture, states play certain types of roles vis-à-vis each other, complete with specific behavioral norms. In a Hobbesian culture, which according to Wendt dominated world affairs until the seventeenth century, states cast each other in the role of "enemy": The other is a threatening adversary that will observe no limits on the use of violence. Violence must therefore be employed as a basic tool for survival. In a Lockean culture, which has characterized the modern state system since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, states view each other as rivals that may use violence to advance their interests, but that are required to refrain from eliminating each other. In a Kantian culture, which has emerged only recently in relations between democracies, states play the role of friends, that is, states do not use force to settle disputes and work as a team against security threats (pp. 258, 260–262, 279–280, 298–299).

The behavioral norms for each culture are known by the actors and are thus "shared" to at least a minimal degree (a minimal requirement for a culture). These norms, however, can be internalized to three degrees. In the first degree,

12. Wendt's argument here extends earlier work by Randall L. Schweller, Andrew Moravcsik, and Arthur A. Stein. See Schweller, "Neorealism's Status Quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?" *Security Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Spring 1996), pp. 90–121; Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics," *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Autumn 1997), pp. 513–555; and Stein, *Why Nations Cooperate: Circumstance and Choice in International Relations* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990).

consistent with neorealism, compliance to the norm is solely a function of coercion: The actor complies because of the threat of punishment founded on the relative superiority of the other actors. In the second degree, closer to the neoliberal view, actors conform to the norm not because they see it as legitimate, but merely because they think it is in their self-interest. Acceptance at both the first and second degrees is therefore purely instrumental, and when the costs and benefits of complying change, behavior should also change. At the third level, consistent with constructivist logic, states have internalized the behavioral norms as legitimate, as part of who they are. They identify with the other's expectations, incorporating the other within their cognitive boundaries. Only at this level does the norm really "construct" states by shaping their core interests and identities as actors (chap. 6, passim, especially p. 250).

Given that there are three forms of culture, depending on the norms followed by the actors, and three degrees of internalization of these norms, Wendt portrays international systems as being in any one of nine possible modes at any particular time. On the horizontal axis, moving from left to right, is the "degree of cooperation" represented by the Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian cultures respectively. On the vertical axis, from bottom to top, are the three "degrees of internalization" (see Figure 4, p. 254). This three-by-three grid offers some advantages. It allows us to see conflictual Hobbesian systems as a product of shared internalized ideas at the third degree (a social construction) and not just as a product of material forces (the realist view). Moreover, high degrees of cooperation (a Kantian culture) can be a product of pure self-interested compliance resulting from the threat of punishment (first degree) or the simple benefits of cooperation (second degree). Conflict does not confirm realism, just as cooperation does not confirm liberalism or constructivism. It all depends on the degree of internalization—*why* the actors acted in a conflictual or cooperative fashion, *why* they treated each other as enemies, rivals, or friends.

Wendt's key assertion is that the culture in which states find themselves at any point in time depends on the discursive social practices that reproduce or transform each actor's view of self and other. Anarchy is what states make of it. A Hobbesian system will be sustained only if actors continue to act toward each other in egoistic, militaristic ways. Such a culture is not the inevitable result of anarchy and the material distribution of power, as neorealists would have it. Rather, because egoistic, violent mind-sets are maintained only by egoistic and violent processes, a culture of realpolitik can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If actors gesture differently, showing that they are casting the other in a less self-centered manner, then over time a Hobbesian culture can move to

a Lockean and possibly Kantian form. We must never forget, Wendt reminds us, that cultures are not reified givens, but products of historical social processes. Today's "common sense" about international relations—that it is a self-help world of egoistic states—is itself a product of historically contingent ideas and not a true reflection of the intrinsic nature of states (pp. 296–297). By engaging in new practices, states can instantiate new ideational structures that help actors transcend collective-action problems and historical mistrust. The constructivist move of regarding egoism as always an ongoing product of the social process helps us see that self-interest is not some eternal given driving actor behavior, but an ongoing product of the system. As Wendt asserts, "If self-interest is not sustained by practice, it will die out" (p. 369).

Wendt's Constructivist Challenge

The next two subsections consider some of the implications of *Social Theory* for the three most important approaches in international relations theory: liberalism, constructivism, and structural realism. My focus is on the strengths and weaknesses of the argument against structural realism, given this theory's importance as the primary and constant target of Wendt's analysis.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF WENDT'S ARGUMENT
The contributions of *Social Theory* to modern liberalism are significant. The book cuts against the grain of recent liberal and neoliberal developments by drawing inspiration from traditional "idealist" arguments of the interwar period. Wendt offers a socially scientific underpinning for the idealist claim that diplomacy can fundamentally change the way states think about themselves and others. Recent liberal theory focuses on the impact of domestic-level forces in the formation of state preferences.[13] Neoliberal institutionalism adopts realist assumptions about rational actors with exogenous preferences to consider how institutions further cooperation by solving problems of informational uncertainty.[14] Against liberalism, Wendt poses the causal and constitutive role of systemic ideational structure on the preferences of states, independent of do-

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13. See Moravcsik's summary, "Taking Preferences Seriously."
14. Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984); Stephen D. Krasner, ed., *International Regimes* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983); Hasenclever, Mayer, and Rittberger, *Theories of International Regimes;* and Volker Rittberger, ed., *Regime Theory and International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

mestic-level processes.[15] Against neoliberal institutionalism, Wendt's work challenges the assumption of exogenous preferences particularly the assumption of egoistic, absolute gains–maximizing states. If egoism is sustained only by process, as Wendt claims, then new, more other-regarding practices can reshape the shared ideational environment, moving states to levels of cooperation not explained by neoliberalism.

The book also pushes the constructivist paradigm to a new level of sophistication. Strong constructivists will be frustrated by Wendt's acceptance that states and individuals have basic needs that are independent of social interaction, by his assertion that these actors are predisposed by nature to be egoistic (at least initially), and by his view that states are indeed actors with corporate identities that exist prior to interaction. Yet Wendt shows convincingly that without these baselines, social processes at the international level would have nothing to act upon. The extreme constructivist position—that it is ideas all the way down—leaves the theorist with all structure and no agents. Indeed, if actors were to be wholly constituted by structure, then the constructivist program would fall apart. Agents would be purely puppets of the ideational environment in which they find themselves—in George Herbert Mead's terms, each would exist simply as a socially conditioned "Me," without the free-willed "I" capable of resisting the socialization process.[16] In such a situation, there is no possibility for transformation of the structure through the actions of agents. The system would continually reproduce itself, and change across time resulting from discursive practices would be impossible—except through exogenous material shocks outside of the model.[17]

Wendt's critique of neorealism offers three main contributions. First, he goes beyond liberal and constructivist theorists who treat power and interests as factors covered by realism, and who then seek simply to show that "ideas matter" as a separate causal force. Such theorists, by not asking whether power and interests are constituted by social interaction, give away too much to realism; they are reduced to performing mop-up operations for phenomena not explained by "realist" variables. Wendt shows that to the extent that ostensibly material variables such as power and interest are actually shaped by social

15. In doing so, Wendt is also challenging domestic-level constructivists.
16. George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), chap. 3. On Mead's significant influence on Wendt's thinking, see *Social Theory of International Politics*, pp. 327–336, 170–171, 264–265; and Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It."
17. On the conditions for change in collective ideas, see Jeffrey W. Legro, "The Transformation of Policy Ideas," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (July 2000), pp. 419–432.

practices, they should more properly be considered ideational variables consistent with a constructivist view of world politics.

Second, Wendt helps improve all systemic theorizing—whether neorealist, neoliberal, or constructivist—by providing the most rigorous philosophical justification yet produced for treating the state as an actor. Most systemic theorists view the state-as-actor assertion as a reasonable assumption for the purposes of theory building, and go no further. This leaves them vulnerable to unit-level theorists who counter that only individuals and social groups exist, and that therefore processes within the state must be the theoretical focus. Wendt demonstrates that the state is a real self-organizing entity that, being held in the collective memories of many individuals, is dependent for existence on no particular actor (just as other social groups are, for that matter).

Third, and most important, with his claim that "anarchy is what states make of it," Wendt offers the boldest critique of realism in the field. Against the realist assertion that anarchy forces states to worry constantly about survival and therefore about relative power, Wendt seeks to show that spirals of hostility, arms racing, and war are not inevitable in an anarchic system. If states fall into such conflicts, it is a result of their own social practices, which reproduce egoistic and militaristic mind-sets. Anarchy does not compel them to be conflictual. It is an empty vessel with no inherent logic (p. 249). To explain behavior and outcomes, this vessel must be filled with varying interests and identities— status quo or revisionist states whose characteristics are at least in part a function of international interaction. Such an analysis helps to overcome the pessimism inherent in many realist arguments.[18] If states can transcend their past

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18. The primary target here is Waltz, *Theory of International Politics,* but also implicitly offensive realists such as John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security,* Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter 1994/95), pp. 5–49, and Eric Labs, "Beyond Victory: Offensive Realism and the Expansion of War Aims," *Security Studies,* Vol. 6, No. 4 (Summer 1997), pp. 1–49. Scholars in the defensive realist camp of structural realism are typically less pessimistic, because they believe that certain forms of soft-line diplomacy can mitigate, although not eliminate, the security dilemma. See especially Charles L. Glaser, "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help," *International Security,* Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter 1994/95), pp. 50–90; Sean M. Lynn-Jones, "Realism and America's Rise: A Review Essay," *International Security,* Vol. 23, No. 2 (Fall 1998), pp. 157–182; Robert Jervis, "Realism, Neoliberalism, and Cooperation: Understanding the Debate," *International Security,* Vol. 24, No. 1 (Summer 1999), pp. 42–63; Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987); and Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: The Structure of Power and the Roots of War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999). On the debate between offensive and defensive realists, which Wendt does not discuss, see Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller, "Preface," in Michael E. Brown, Lynn-Jones, and Miller, eds., *Perils of Anarchy: Contemporary Realism and International Security* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), pp. ix–xiii; Benjamin Frankel, "Restating the Realist Case: An Introduction," *Security Studies,* Vol. 5, No. 3 (Spring 1996), pp. xiv–xx; and Jervis, "Realism, Neoliberalism, and Cooperation," pp. 48–50.

realpolitik mind-sets by instantiating new, more other-regarding practices, then hope for the future can be restored.

WEAKNESSES OF WENDT'S ARGUMENT AGAINST STRUCTURAL REALISM

Wendt's critique of structural realist theory suffers from problems of misspecification and incompleteness. Although it is true that states trained to think aggressively are more likely to *be* aggressive, Wendt's point that realism cannot explain behavior and outcomes without implicitly relying on a hidden variable—the distribution of interests—goes too far. It is based on a misunderstanding of how structural realist arguments are set up to make predictions. Structural realists are not naïve. Like all theorists—whether liberal, constructivist, or classical realist—they recognize that states may exist that, because of domestic- or individual-level pathologies, have interests extending far beyond mere security. Such states tend to destabilize a system, because they are constantly seeking opportunities to expand through force. Yet structural realists build their theories from the starting assumption that all states in the system are presently only security seekers, that they have no nonsecurity motives for war.

The reason for beginning with this assumption is straightforward. It is easy to show that states with pathological unit-level characteristics are often aggressive. But if realists can explain why systems may move from cooperation to conflict, depending on the material conditions, even when all states are security seekers, then the paradigm offers a powerful baseline for theory development. By withstanding the hardest possible deductive test, realism shows the tragedy of world politics—that good states may do bad things, even against other good states. The initial assumption of a system of security seekers can then be relaxed to demonstrate how systems will be even more conflictual once states with unit-level pathologies are introduced.

To show how purely security-seeking states can still conflict, structural realists point to prudent leaders' uncertainty about two temporal dimensions—first, the present intentions of the other, and second, and even more critical, the future intentions of the other.[19] Both of these dimensions are at the heart of the realist understanding of the security dilemma. In a two-actor security di-

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19. For ease of exposition, below I use the terms "intentions" and "motives" largely synonymously. Although intentions is the more commonly used term, motives more accurately captures what is at stake, namely, whether states differ in their core reasons for acting—either for security or nonsecurity objectives. See Charles L. Glaser, "Political Consequences of Military Strategy: Expanding and Refining the Spiral and Deterrence Models," *World Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (July 1992), pp. 497–538.

lemma, states A and B are both seeking only their own survival. But given the difficulty of seeing the other's motives (the "problem of other minds"), state A worries that B currently harbors nonsecurity motives for war. Hence, if B takes steps only for its own security, these steps may be misinterpreted by A as preparations for aggression. State A's counterefforts, in turn, will likely be misinterpreted by B as moves to aggression, sparking a spiral of mistrust and hostility.[20]

Even more intractable for systemic realists is the problem of future intentions. Even when states A and B are both fairly certain that the other is presently a security seeker, they have reason to worry that the other might change its spots some years later as a result of a change of leadership, a revolution, or simply a change of heart resulting from an increase in its power.[21] The fear here is not that the present "distribution of interests" contains states with innately aggressive intentions, but that the future system will contain such states.

In short, systemic realists understand that inherently aggressive states are possible. But they do not require the system in the present moment to contain such states for it to still fall into conflict. Contrary to Wendt's claim, therefore, anarchy and distributions of power can have effects that do not depend on assumptions about the real, current distribution of interests (even if the possibility of evil states down the road is important). Realism only needs states to be uncertain about the present and future interests of the other, and in anarchies of great powers, such uncertainty may often be profound.

The question of uncertainty is critical to understanding the differences between structural realism and constructivism, and where Wendt's analysis misses the mark. Consider first uncertainty regarding the other's present intentions. Wendt is aware that this kind of uncertainty challenges his point that

20. See, inter alia, Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (January 1978), pp. 167–214; and Charles L. Glaser, "The Security Dilemma Revisited," *World Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (October 1997), pp. 171–201. As Andrew Kydd notes, uncertainty over the other's motives is an essential component of any structural realist argument drawn from the security dilemma. Kydd, "Sheep in Sheep's Clothing: Why Security-Seekers Do Not Fight Each Other," *Security Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Autumn 1997), pp. 125–126.
21. Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 62; Robert Jervis and Robert J. Art, "The Meaning of Anarchy," in Art and Jervis, eds., *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1985), p. 3; and Mearsheimer, "False Promise of International Institutions," p. 10. Defensive realists tend to put more emphasis on uncertainty about present intentions, whereas offensive realists stress the problem of future intentions and the consequent need to increase power as a hedge against future threats. Compare especially defensive realists such as Glaser, "Realists as Optimists," and Walt, *Origins of Alliances*, to offensive realists such as Mearsheimer, "False Promise of International Institutions."

the current distribution of interests drives the way anarchy plays itself out. He counters that, at least in the modern environment, the "problem of other minds" is not much of a problem. States today can indeed learn a great deal about what the other is doing and thinking. That knowledge may not be "100 percent certain," Wendt argues, "but *no* knowledge is that" (p. 281, emphasis in original). To assume a worst-case scenario and to treat the other as hostile may be more dangerous than adopting a conciliatory policy, because it creates a self-fulfilling prophecy of mutual mistrust (pp. 281, 107–109, 360).

This counterargument has serious flaws. In essence, it is an effort to assume away the problem—that there really is no problem of other minds—and it is weak on three grounds. First, Wendt's view that states typically know a lot about the other's motives is an unsupported empirical statement based only on a reading of the contemporary situation. Even if it were true for the majority of states today—and it certainly does not capture the reality between the states that count, such as the United States and China—his point cannot be retrofitted into the previous five centuries that constitute the focus of Wendt's analysis. In sum, if uncertainty about present intentions was rampant during these five hundred years, it (along with shifts in relative power) may explain a great deal about changes in conflict and cooperation over time.

Second, Wendt's view is inconsistent with his recognition that states often do have difficulty learning about the other. The very problem Ego and Alter have in first communicating is that "behavior does not speak for itself." It must be interpreted, and "many interpretations are possible" (p. 330). This point is reinforced by Wendt's epistemological point of departure: that the ideas held by actors are "unobservable" (chap. 2). Because leaders cannot observe directly what the other is thinking, they are resigned to making inferences from its behavior. Yet in security affairs, as Wendt acknowledges, mistakes in inferences—assuming the other is peaceful when in fact it has malevolent intentions—could prove "fatal" (p. 360).

Wendt accepts that the problem facing rational states "is making sure that they perceive other actors, and other actors' perception of them, *correctly*" (p. 334, emphasis in original). Yet the book provides no mechanism through which Ego and Alter can increase their confidence in the correctness of their estimates of the other's type. Simply describing how Ego and Alter shape each other's sense of self and other is not enough.[22] Rational choice models, using

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22. Consider Wendt's statement that "Ego's ideas about Alter, *right or wrong*, are not merely passive perceptions of something that exists independent of Ego, but actively and on-goingly constitutive of Alter's role vis-à-vis Ego" (p. 335, emphasis added). His subsequent discussion offers no insights into how Ego would be able to learn that its ideas about Alter were indeed right or wrong.

assumptions consistent with structural realism, do much better here. In games of incomplete information, where states are unsure about the other's type, actions by security-seeking actors that would be too costly for greedy actors to adopt can help states reduce their uncertainty about present intentions, thus moderating the security dilemma.[23] Wendt cannot simply argue that over time states can learn a great deal about other states. It is what is not "shared," at least in the area of intentions, that remains the core stumbling block to cooperation.

Third, Wendt's position that the problem of other minds is not much of a problem ignores a fundamental issue in all social relations, but especially in those between states, namely, the problem of deception. In making estimates of the other's present type, states have reason to be suspicious of its diplomatic gestures—the other may be trying to deceive them. Wendt's analysis is rooted in the theory of symbolic interactionism, but he does not discuss one critical aspect of that tradition: the idea of "impression management." Actors in their relations exploit the problem of other minds for their own ends. On the public stage, they present images and play roles that often have little to do with their true beliefs and interests backstage.[24]

In laying out his dramaturgical view of Ego and Alter co-constituting each other's interests and identities, Wendt assumes that both Ego and Alter are making genuine efforts to express their true views and to "cast" the other in roles that they believe in. But deceptive actors will stage-manage the situation to create impressions that serve their narrow ends, and other actors, especially in world politics, will understand this.[25] Thus a prudent security-seeking Ego will have difficulty distinguishing between two scenarios: whether it and Alter do indeed share a view of each other as peaceful, or whether Alter is just pretending to be peaceful in order to make Ego think that they share a certain con-

23. See James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Summer 1995), pp. 379–414; Glaser, "Realists as Optimists"; Andrew Kydd, "Game Theory and the Spiral Model," *World Politics*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (April 1997), pp. 371–400; Kydd, "Sheep in Sheep's Clothing," pp. 139–147; and Dale C. Copeland, "Trade Expectations and the Outbreak of Peace: Détente 1970–74 and the End of the Cold War 1985–91," *Security Studies*, Vol. 9, Nos. 1/2 (Autumn 1999–Winter 2000), pp. 15–58. When discussing game theory, Wendt's book considers only games of complete information, in which actors are certain about the other's preferences and type (pp. 106–107, 148, 159–160, 167, 183, 315).
24. See especially Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959), chap. 6.
25. These actions are what game theorists would call efforts at "strategic misrepresentation." On the instrumental manipulation of norms for self-interested reasons, see Paul Kowert and Jeffrey W. Legro, "Norms, Identity, and Their Limits: A Theoretical Reprise," in Katzenstein, *Culture of National Security*, pp. 492–493.

ception of the world, when in fact they do not.[26] Wendt's analysis offers no basis for saying when peaceful gestures should be taken at face value, and when they should be discounted as deceptions.[27] When we consider the implications of a Hitlerite state deceiving others to achieve a position of military superiority, we understand why great powers in history have tended to adopt postures of prudent mistrust.

The problem of future intentions—which Wendt's book does not discuss—is even more intractable. The problem is rooted in the possibility of domestic changes in the other that occur despite efforts to maintain cooperative relations. Wendt brackets off domestic processes to focus on the effect of interaction between states. This approach fails to consider the implication of liberal and domestic-constructivist arguments on the conclusions of Wendt's systemic constructivism. States do not form a conception of themselves only through interaction with other states. Socialization processes internal to a state can change the state's identity and interests independently of such interaction. Wendt captures this point in his discussion of the four forms of identity: "corporate," "type," "role," and "collective." The first two develop through processes within the state, reflecting the self-organizing aspect of the unit, and do not require the recognition of other states for their meaning.[28] Role and collective identities, on the other hand, are constituted only through interaction between states.[29]

These distinctions have profound implications for the potential impact of security dilemmas in Wendt's framework. If the nature of the other's domestic regime can change independently of international interaction, then even when Ego is confident that Alter is currently a security seeker, it must worry that Alter might *become* pathologically hostile later on. This worry will be particularly

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26. This problem is especially pernicious in Wendt's Lockean and Kantian worlds, where states do seem to be following norms of self-restraint. But even in a Hobbesian world, it is highly likely that Ego may believe that Alter is an "enemy" even when Alter does not accept this assessment. It is not enough for Wendt to say that they both intersubjectively share the view that the other is an enemy (pp. 260–263). In fact, in a spiraling security dilemma, there are two separate beliefs that do not overlap: Ego thinks Alter is an aggressive enemy, when Alter knows that it is not; and Alter likewise thinks Ego is an aggressive enemy, when Ego knows that it is not. Again, it is what is *not* shared—the uncertainty in the system—that is problematic.

27. Costly signaling games in rational choice game theory again provide a mechanism by which states can evaluate valid versus potentially deceptive gestures.

28. See Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, pp. 224–233; and Wendt, "Collective Identity Formation."

29. For Wendt's earlier twofold distinction between corporate and role identities, see Wendt, "Collective Identity Formation."

intense if Ego faces an exogenous decline in relative power that would leave Alter preponderant later, should it acquire nonsecurity motives for war.[30]

This discussion reveals a deep irony in the constructivist take on international relations. It is constructivism's very emphasis on the mutability of interests and identities, when taken down to the domestic level, that reinforces why anarchy forces states to be on guard. States know that diplomacy alone will rarely be enough to ensure the long-term peaceful nature of the other (consider the difficulties that Washington faces today in stabilizing Russia's democratic institutions). This problem is heightened by a fact of which Wendt is aware: that domestic processes are typically far more "dense" than international ones (pp. 2, 13, 21, 27–28, 107–108). Wendt believes that this fact makes his argument for a systemic constructivism a "hard case." But he overlooks the more profound point: that the independence of domestic processes undermines his effort to show that material structures do not constrain and shape state behavior except by way of ideas rising through international interaction. If states know that the nature of the other is mostly a function of its own domestic processes, then they must pay great attention to their present and future material capability, in order to guard against a situation in which the other becomes aggressive later on.[31] Thus domestic-level constructivism reinforces the value of a systemic realist view of world politics, at least as a baseline starting point for theory building.

Reinforcing the dilemma of changing future intentions is the critical difference between a systemic realist conception of structure and Wendt's notion. Wendt stresses repeatedly that structure is always a function of interaction: that structure exists, has effects, and evolves only because of agents and their practices. Structures cannot be considered given realities independent of process. This is the mistake of actors reifying structures and then forgetting that they are historically contingent, that they are sustained or transformed only by human activity (pp. 150, 185–186, 313, 340, 364, 368). In previous work, Wendt takes Waltz to task for his statement that international structures, like economic markets, "are formed by the coaction of their units." If this is so, and

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30. See Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), chaps. 1–2; Van Evera, *Causes of War*, chap. 5; and Jack S. Levy, "Declining Power and the Preventive Motive for War, *World Politics*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (October 1987), pp. 82–107.
31. This problem is reinforced by the fact that intentions can change "overnight" (as a result of a coup or revolution, for example), whereas significant changes in relative power take many years to effect. Allowing oneself to fall behind in power, hoping that the other will always stay peaceful, is thus fraught with risks.

structures are not exogenously given but are generated and sustained by coaction, then actors can set about changing the structures that reinforce competitive and violent behavior.[32]

The problem here is that Waltz's economic analogy does not really capture what systemic realists mean by "structure." For such realists, structure is a function of the *potential* for coaction among units. In anarchy, states have to worry more about what the other might do tomorrow or in ten years than about what it is presently doing or has done in the past. The economic markets of Waltz's analogy, it is true, are not generated until there is buying and selling activity. This is simply because markets are designed to improve the utility of individual actors versus the noncooperative outcome, and no improvement can be made unless there is exchange (that is, interaction). Structures in international politics are different. The actors are not trying to increase their utility per se, but to avoid harm. Hence present and past interaction is not the core issue; the potential of others to do harm in the future is. This means, among other things, that actors in anarchy must worry about exogenous decline in their material basis for survival, and the probability that the other will be aggressive after such decline.[33]

The distinction between Wendt's focus on structure as the coaction (interaction) of units, and a realist focus on structure as the potential for coaction, is neither semantic nor trivial. It reflects a fundamentally different conception of the role of time in international politics. For Wendt and other constructivists, it is the past that matters—how interactions and gestures in the historical process have socialized actors toward certain conceptions of self and other. Realists certainly do not dismiss the ways that past interaction shape current beliefs.[34] Most fundamentally, however, realism is a forward-looking theory. States are rational maximizers of their security over the foreseeable future. Hence they remain constantly vigilant for any changes in their external situation that might damage their chances for survival later. Reduce to five words, then, the

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32. Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It," pp. 401–402, 406–407, 410; and Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 91.

33. Note that actors here are not automatically assuming "worst case," namely, that policies must reflect the mere possibility that the other might later aggress. Rather security maximizers, if they are rational, will always calculate according to the *probabilities* of certain undesirable things coming to pass. Given uncertainty, however, estimates of these probabilities will often be high. Cf. Stephen G. Brooks, "Dueling Realisms," *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (Summer 1997), pp. 445–477. For a model of rational decisionmaking that develops this defensive realist notion, see Copeland, *Origins of Major War*, chap. 2.

34. As noted, realists employ costly signaling models to show how actors can rationally update their estimates of the other's character and motives, based on its past behavior.

divide between constructivism and systemic realism is all about past socialization versus future uncertainty.[35]

This analysis has a straightforward implication: There is no need for any interaction in the present or past for a constraining structure to exist. Power structures—the relative distribution of material resources—are not generated by social practices (even if practices can sometimes change the distribution over time). Structures exist by the mere presence of the other, and its potential to do harm in the future—its potential to "coact" by invading, if you will. Hence, in anarchy, even when a state has no relations with the other, even if the other does not know that the state exists, the state is forced by the situation to contemplate future scenarios in which the other could do it harm. When scouts returned to ancient Assyria with the first reports on the Egyptian empire and its phenomenal resources, Assyrian leaders would have been imprudent not to have at least considered the possibility of an Egyptian invasion. No interaction was required for Egypt's relative power to have a constraining effect on Assyria's behavior.[36]

The pernicious issue of uncertainty helps us evaluate the value of Wendt's discussion of the three "cultures" of anarchy and their three degrees of internalization. Wendt uses his three-by-three grid in chapter 6—Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian cultures on the horizontal axis, and first, second, and third degrees of internalization on the vertical—as a visual tool to show that interaction can socialize states away from conflictual to more cooperative forms of behavior. States in each of the nine boxes, he argues, share at least a basic notion of what the behavioral norms are in the system. In terms of the question of present and future intentions, however, there are two problems.

First, Wendt assumes that a state knows not only which of the nine boxes it is in, but which box the *other* is in. If Ego, for example, knows that it is in the top right box, where it follows and has deeply internalized the Kantian norm of not using violence to settle disputes, it may still be uncertain about Alter's

35. This does not mean that constructivism does not deal with the problem of uncertainty. But it does so by looking at how socialized notions of self and other shape actors' views of the future possibilities. The causal story remains one of historical discursive practices molding current mindsets; actors see the future only through the strong filter of past socialization. See Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, eds., *Security Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), chaps. 1, 2, 13. The realist view of the future focuses on the things that might occur independent of an actor's past interaction with the other. So while realists accept that historical interaction can reduce uncertainty about the other's character and motives, they argue that prudent actors can never ignore the many exogenous determinants of the other's future behavior. The security dilemma can be moderated, but never eliminated.
36. Note that this is not even a "first contact," because Egypt does not yet know of Assyria's existence. Cf. Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It," pp. 403–407.

true disposition. If Alter is following the norm in terms of its behavior, does this reflect its strong internalized belief in the norm (third degree), or just its induced compliance because of fear of punishment or loss of benefits should it defect (first or second degrees)? For Ego, this question is critical, because if Alter is only conforming to the norm for fear of punishment or expectation of benefits, Ego has every reason to fear that Alter's behavior will not be so cooperative should the material conditions that shape costs and benefits change.[37] Yet Wendt does not explain how states are supposed to know whether the other has deeply internalized a norm or not. Thus we are still in the dark as to how state uncertainty about present and future intentions is to be overcome.

This problem is compounded by the fact that the three cultures, as Wendt lays them out, are distinguished from each other in terms of behavioral norms. Which culture a system is in at any point in time, as Wendt's discussion reveals, is known only by the degree to which states follow, in terms of their external behavior, the norms Wendt specifies: in a Hobbesian culture, whether they observe no limits in their violence; in Lockean, whether they use violence but refrain from killing one another; and in Kantian, whether they do not use violence to settle disputes (p. 258; see also pp. 260–261, 268, 279–280, 283–284, 298–299). Thus in his three-by-three grid (Figure 4, p. 254), the horizontal axis, which details the three cultures, is defined by the degree of "cooperation," with Hobbesian cultures showing the most conflictual behavior and Kantian the most cooperative. Wendt thus uses behavioral/outcome measures to classify the changes in the world system over time. In the seventeenth century, the system moved from a Hobbesian to a Lockean culture, he argues, because even though many states were being eliminated prior to that time, few were after (pp. 279, 284, 323). Yet when the system experiences large-scale warfare, Wendt sees this either as an indication of a Hobbesian culture or a sign that the system is shifting back into one (pp. 259–260, 270, 279, 314). That Wendt uses behavior to define culture is also shown by the fact that states could be in a Kantian culture even if they are only at the first and second degrees of internalization—that is, even if they comply with the behavioral norm not to use violence to settle a dispute only because of fear of punishment and narrow self-interest (pp. 303–306).

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37. See Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, pp. 303–305, where he notes that Kantian cooperative behavior at the first and second degrees is purely instrumental. States are treating each other as "friends" only in form, not in substance: "For egoistic states friendship might be nothing more than a hat they try on each morning for their own reasons, one that they will take off as soon as the costs outweigh the benefits, but until that happens they will be friends in fact even if not in principle" (p. 305).

If behavioral compliance defines the culture one is in, leaders are thrown right back into the problem of other minds that underpins the security dilemma. They are forced to rely on inferences, in the form of probabilistic estimates, of the other's true motives and strategic objectives based on the other's behavior. But inferences are a weak substitute for direct knowledge. The chances for misinterpretation within anarchic systems—perceiving the other's actions as reflecting hostile motives, even if they are not intended that way— remain high.

Wendt's practice of measuring culture by the level of cooperative behavior exhibited by states also poses a methodological problem. In essence, Wendt collapses the thing he wants to explain—why the system has apparently become more cooperative over time—into the causal factor he wants to triumph, namely, the instantiation of new ideas about self and other through interaction. This makes it hard to know what would falsify his argument. Whenever behavior turns conflictual, Wendt can argue that the culture has become Hobbesian; whenever the behavior becomes more cooperative, the system is moving toward a Lockean or a Kantian culture.

The deeper problem here is Wendt's willingness to call any system where states know and follow norms at the first and second degrees of internalization a "culture." States at these levels are acting only because they are compelled by coercive threats (the first degree) or seeking to maximize their net benefits (the second degree). Wendt argues that as long as they share at least a basic knowledge of the behavioral norms, they share a culture. This is an extremely thin definition of culture, one having nothing necessarily to do with the typical constructivist emphasis on actors' interests and identities. Indeed the term "internalization" is a misnomer for these first and second degrees. At these levels, there is no need for any internalization of the behavioral norm, but only some knowledge that the norm exists. By Wendt's definition, therefore, an opportunistic state that joins a collective security system just to buy time for a secret military buildup is "sharing" in a Kantian culture simply by virtue of knowing the norm not to use violence. If the term "culture" is to be used for any knowledge of phenomenon X that two actors have in common, whether or not they incorporate this knowledge into their value systems, then culture serves little value in social scientific analysis—it means almost everything, and therefore nothing.

Even more important, however, Wendt's explanations of behavior at the first and second degrees are driven precisely by what is not shared between the actors. As Wendt notes for the first degree in the Hobbesian world, a state complies "only because [it] is forced to, directly or by the threat of certain,

immediate punishment." Its behavior "is purely externally rather than internally driven." Thus "it is private meanings plus material coercion rather than culture which does most of the explanatory work" (p. 269). One might add that in these scenarios, it is private meanings and material incentives that do essentially all the explanatory work. Given this, and given the fact that actors are not internalizing the norm but only at most knowing of its existence, what value is gained by calling the first and second degrees "cultures"?

The above analysis indicates that Wendt's three-by-three grid is not a framework of three cultures and three degrees of internalization. Rather it is a typology that shows on the horizontal axis the dependent variable to be explained—the degree of cooperative behavior in a system at any particular time—and on the vertical axis the three main ways this variable can be explained: by the effect of threats and punishments (coercion in realist literature); by potential external benefits of cooperation (neoliberal arguments); or by the internalization through interaction of interests and identities that shape the way actors view strategies and outcomes (the constructivist view). Shifting to a focus on the degree of cooperative behavior in a system, and what factors explain it, allows us to see the real potential value of Wendt's constructivist argument. Only at his "third degree" is his cultural explanation operating, and such an explanation can be posed against the primary realist and neoliberal *counterexplanations* that involve self-interested actors calculating the costs, benefits, and risks of action. Then when we see a shift in the level of cooperation, we do not automatically assume a shift in "culture." Instead we look for evidence that could confirm or refute the three alternative theories.

This recasting of Wendt's framework, however, shows us how far he has to go empirically to convince us of his thesis. Even if we accept that the international system has become more cooperative over the last two decades, Wendt has provided little evidence that this cooperation reflects an increasingly deep internalization of other-regarding values. Moreover, he must show that this increasing stability is not simply the result of a self-interested adjustment by the remaining great powers to the reality of nuclear weapons, the benefits of global trade, and a reconnaissance revolution that has made surprise attacks less viable.[38]

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38. Wendt's empirical task is complicated by his assertion that the recent shift to cooperation was furthered by such "master variables" as interdependence and common fate (pp. 344–353). These variables are largely material in nature—depending as they do on globalization, increased trade, and the destructive qualities of modern weaponry (especially nuclear weapons). Wendt lays out a two-stage process toward cooperation: Initially, states respond to the external conditions out of self-interest, but later they may move beyond this to more other-regarding stances (pp. 345–346,

The problem is even more pronounced with regard to Wendt's ability to ex-
plain the shifts in relative cooperation over the last five hundred years. Be-
cause behavioral changes do not necessarily mean cultural changes, it is up to
Wendt to show that conflictual periods were the result of the internalization of
conflictual interests and identities, and not adjustments induced by changing
external conditions. To do so, he must plunge into the documents, which ulti-
mately are the only means to reveal why the actors did what they did. Staying
at the realm of behavior makes it impossible to sort out whether realism, liber-
alism, or constructivism provides the best explanation for the results observed.

Conclusion

Social Theory of International Politics provides an important starting point for
further debate and constructivist empirical analysis, but only a starting point.
Wendt has not shown that anarchy tied to changing distributions of power has
no logic, only that constructivist variables can perhaps, under certain condi-
tions, moderate actors' level of uncertainty about others' intentions. Yet
constructivism is inherently an argument about how the past shapes the way
actors understand their present situation. By its very nature—its focus on his-
torical process—constructivism has trouble analyzing how rational, prudent
leaders deal with the pernicious problem of future uncertainty. And this uncer-
tainty is given by the human condition. Human beings are not born with the
ability to read the minds of other actors, and they have only limited means for
foreseeing the future. Moreover, human beings, as constructivists emphasize,
are mutable—they can be changed through interaction. Yet if much of this in-
teraction takes place at the domestic level and is independent of diplomatic in-
teraction, then prudent states must be worried. They know that the other may
become aggressive despite all diplomatic efforts to instantiate other-regarding
values and to communicate their own nonaggressive intentions. The material
distribution of power then becomes critical to their calculations. It represents
the other's potential to do harm in the future. Hence, if power trends are nega-
tive, a declining state must worry that the other will turn aggressive after it
achieves preponderance, even if it seems peaceful right now.

The task ahead lies in testing the propositions that fall out of Wendt's
constructivist argument. In explaining variations in the level of cooperation

350, 360–361; see also pp. 303 and 311). Yet Wendt offers little evidence that cooperation between
modern great powers such as the United States, China, and Russia has gone beyond this self-inter-
ested first step.

over the past two millennia, there are three main competing arguments—Wendt's systemic constructivism, systemic realism, and neoliberalism—to which we could add a fourth, namely, a more domestic constructivist argument (one that shades into unit-level liberalism). Systemic constructivism (or what might be called "neoconstructivism") focuses on interstate interactions as the source for new, or reproduced, conceptions of self and other, which in turn affect state propensities to fall into conflictual or cooperative behavior. Systemic realism predicts changes in the levels of cooperation based on changes and trends in the distribution of material power over time, set against a baseline of actor uncertainty about the future. Neoliberalism, accepting the neorealist foundation of rational actors worried about the future, stresses the role of institutions as mechanisms that reduce the uncertainty that can lead to conflict. Finally, domestic constructivists and unit-level liberals emphasize changes within particular states that alter aggregated state interests and identities. When domestic processes produce states with motives beyond mere security, we should expect more conflictual behavior, all things being equal.

None of these positions needs to reject the causal factors highlighted by the alternative approaches. Indeed, as I have argued, systemic realists recognize the domestic constructivist/liberal point that internal processes can change the nature of the opponent over time, and they use it to show how a system of purely security-seeking states can still fall into conflict and war. But instead of trying to collapse these different theories into one model of "culture," as *Social Theory* does, we need to recognize that each of these approaches focuses on separate and often independent causal variables. In this way, we can see that egoistic and militaristic mind-sets are sustained and transformed not only by international interaction, as Wendt claims. They may be, but how often and to what extent is a question for empirical analysis. And because Wendt's book does not offer such an analysis, the debate is still very much an open one. Sometimes egoism and militarism will be caused by domestic processes alone (e.g., if an aggressive ideology triumphs through revolution). Sometimes they will result from prudent fears of the future, especially during periods of dynamic change in the relative power balance. Sometimes they will reflect a lack of institutional mechanisms for learning about the other state, and thus rational misjudgments about the other's type.

Although the road ahead for Wendt's neoconstructivism is still long, *Social Theory of International Politics* provides a solid constructivist vehicle for traveling it. The book allows scholars to differentiate clearly between truly material and ideational explanations, and between accounts that emphasize the role of states as actors and those that incorporate transnational forces and divisions

within polities. It has reinforced the importance of diplomacy as a tool for reducing high levels of misunderstanding that can impede cooperation. Yet by bracketing off domestic processes, Wendt has overlooked the irony of constructivism: that the mutability of human ideational structures at the domestic level reinforces leaders' great uncertainty about future intentions at the interstate level. The security dilemma, with all its implications, is real and pervasive. It cannot be talked away through better discursive practices. It must be faced.