

Review Essay for Western International Relations Theory

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Alexander 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.

Alexander Wendt's constructivism theory has been one of the most influential theories in international relations. Stefano Guzzini even says that "the social construction of ..." is littering the title pages of our books, articles and student assignments as did "the political economy of ..." in the 1980s. In Wendt's remarkable article, *Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics*, he directly argues against rationalism's fundamental assumption about the nature of anarchy and addresses his best known view that anarchy is what states make of it. Moreover, introducing symbolic interactionist sociology to constructivism, Wendt seeks to prove that the conflictual system is possible to transform into a peaceful one through social practices.

1. The nature of anarchy and Wendt's contribution

Realists claim that because of the absence of centralized political authority, anarchy is necessarily self-help system and generating security dilemma.

As a result, our world seems to be full of endless conflicts along with fierce competition. Only by applying power politics can states survive. However, Wendt argues that anarchy has no logic in itself. According to constructivism, identities are created through interaction among states and they are the basis of interests. In addition, it is the identities and interests that determine institutions. Self-help is one but not the only kind of institutions. Whether the system is a conflictual one or not depends on the shared culture cultivated through social practices. This implies that the culture of self-help system is possible, though may be difficult, to transform into a cooperative one.

To some extent, Wendt's theory makes an important contribution to international relations by presenting the above ideas. It seeks to show that spirals of hostility, arms racing and wars are not inevitable in an anarchic system. If states fall into such conflicts, it is a result of their own social practices (Dale C. Copeland 2000). When realists considering anarchy as the permanently given feature of international system, they won't make efforts to change it and thus we might be stuck in the power politics forever. By challenging realists' assumptions, Wendt points out a way to save us from the pessimism and brings hope for the future.

2. The transformation of system and Wendt's limitation

Wendt lays out three kinds of cultures of anarchy in his article, which becomes core concept of his theory after further development in his book *Social theory of international politics*. The Hobbesian, Lockean and Kantian logics are identified with three roles of the state: enemy, rival and friend, according to Wendt. Then, he explores three ways to transform the cultures: by the institution of sovereignty, by an evolution of cooperation, and by intentional efforts to transform egoistic identities into collective identities. Unfortunately, in spite of his significant achievement, there exists several limitations and flaws in his argument.

- **The problem of uncertainty**

The most destructive shortage of Wendt's theory is his failure of addressing a critical aspect of the realist world view: the problem of uncertainty. For example, Wendt states that "transformative practices should attempt to teach other states that one's own state can be trusted and should not be viewed as a threat to their security." (p421) However, the interaction between Ego and Alter which Wendt describes is all about physical gesture. He provides no mechanism through which actors can increase their confidence in the correctness of their estimates of other's type (Dale C. Copeland 2000). As the realists emphasizes, intentions are impossible to devine with 100 percent certainty. Besides, intentions can change quickly, so a state's intentions can be benign one day and malign the next (John J. Mearsheimer). Furthermore, actors in the international

system can manipulate their identities for instrumental reasons (Paul Kowert and Jeffery Legro 1996). It's no easy task to identify the true nature of foreign policies. Given the tremendous risk of misunderstanding, the worry of states is reasonable, especially when Ego is relatively weaker than Alter in power. Then it emerges the second critique against moderate constructivism.

- **The limited effect of ideas and discourses**

Constructivists including Wendt view idea as the driving force of history while some doubt that it is the power behind discourses that truly affects states' behavior. After all, there must be some factors other than ideas responsible for the fact that Hobbesian culture dominates international politics for the longest time and that we can still see its existence in today's world. Moreover, Wendt together with other constructivists provides few insights on why discourses rise and fall (Thomas Risse-Kappen 1994). Hence, most decision makers still value the dimension of power distribution more than identities confronting with big issues. In some cases, discourses just serve as disguise.

- **The problem of state centric systemic approach**

The state centric systemic approach which Wendt adapts into his argument about transformation of systems causes ignorance of the complexity inside the state. Wendt's conceptualisation of identity assumes it to be a bounded category and, more importantly, needs it to be

so (Maja Zehfuss 2001). It is an identity as a whole. At the same time, the theory doesn't show concerns about what is really going on among people in states. Therefore, it would be unprepared for a sudden change in the international system derived purely by domestic change or change in a non-state arena. (Bon Kwon Koo, 2006) Or, it would be worry about other's future intention all the time. As being promoted by Copeland (2000), even Ego is confident that Alter is currently a security seeker, it must worry that Alter become pathologically hostile later on.

- **The lack of empirical records**

Scholars such as Chaim D. Kaufmann and Robert Pape point out that Wendt's constructivism is too abstract yet does not provide empirical cases to prove the validity. Mersheimer also mentions constructivists' lack of historical guarantee of their claimed-to-be sound ideas about world politics as well. Since Wendt's theory is built on concept rather than material, it is more likely to show impressive performance theoretically but act poor in practice.

3. Conclusion

Through his article, Wendt attempts to inform us that state identities and interests can be collectively constructed and transformed by different possibilities of anarchy. While his illustration of the nature of anarchy greatly contributes to international relations theory, several major

limitations can still be distinguished in his arguments. Firstly, he fails to address the uncertain problems among nations. Secondly, his argument about the effect of ideas and discourses is still unconvincing. Thirdly, the state centric systemic approach he uses may cause confusions. And finally, his constructivism is too abstract yet does not provide empirical cases to prove the validity.

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