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Wars, hotel fires, and plane crashes

STEPHEN D. KRASNER

Alexander Wendt has drawn on an exceptional range of theoretical literature in his effort to reconceptualize the nature of the international system. His discussion of scientific realism ought to be required reading for any student of international relations, or political science for that matter. He puts to rest the notion that constructivism is necessarily postmodern, devoid of an objective referent. In John Searle's felicitous formulation it is possible to have a subjective ontology but an objective epistemology.[1] In emphasizing that all knowledge is theory laden, Wendt underscores the point that facts never simply speak for themselves. In both the social and natural sciences brute empiricism is never an adequate research strategy. Our theories shape the way we see the world but they cannot remake the world in their own image.

Although I am deeply sympathetic to Wendt's epistemological orientation I am sceptical about his substantive claims regarding the international system. *Social Theory of International Politics* is a challenge, even in its title—not A Social Theory but Social Theory—to Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*.[2] Wendt wants to displace what he sees as realism's excessively materialistic and individualistic perspective. Rather he elaborates a holistic approach that emphasizes the importance of ideas, especially constitutive norms and rules.

Wendt's argument, however, is unsupported by empirical data and confounded by the thinness of norms in the international environment. Wendt points out that the international system is a hard case for holistic arguments because the identities and interests of states may be more dependent on domestic than on systemic structures, and he notes that norms are often contested.[3] The robustness of norms is particularly problematic in the international system because there is no structure of authority that can adjudicate among competing claims; norms have been in conflict, for instance human rights or international stability versus autonomy and non-intervention; state power can be highly asymmetrical; and decision makers are primarily socialized into and responsive to their domestic rather than an international culture.

As has been the case for earlier constructivist formulations, like those of the English School, sovereignty is at the heart of Wendt's effort to socialize international

[1] John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995).
[2] Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).
[3] Wendt, *Social Theory*, p. 188.

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politics.[4] For Wendt the sovereign state system dictates logics of appropriateness.[5] These logics are generally followed by states, he argues, not simply because they are subject to coercion, or because they make calculations about their material interest, but because they are internalized and recognized as legitimate. Wendt identifies the modern sovereign state system, which he traces to the Peace of Augsburg and the Peace of Westphalia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as Lockean as opposed to Hobbesian. By this he means that states see each others as rivals rather than enemies. They may challenge each other, but they recognize each other's right to exist. 'When states recognize each other's sovereignty as a right', Wendt avers, 'then we can speak of sovereignty not only as a property of individual states, but as an institution shared by many states. The core of this institution is the shared expectation that states will not try to take away each other's life and liberty'.[6] He notes, following Robert Jackson, that the existence of many weak states seems inexplicable unless more powerful states are constrained by norms that precludes killing their weaker adversaries.

The view that states are autonomous actors is, of course, shared by realists and neoliberals, as well as constructivists. It is, however, very far from an accurate description of many of the states that exist, and have existed, in the modern state system. Many states, especially weaker ones, have not been autonomous in the sense that their domestic political institutions have been determined by independent choices of actors within their own polity, even if they are accepted as having equal standing in international law. More powerful states have not tried to take away the life of their weaker counterparts by conquering and absorbing them, but they have denied their liberty. Weak states have had formal juridical independence, but not *de facto* autonomy. One of the primary concerns of larger and more powerful states over the last several hundred years has been to dictate or constrain the domestic institutional arrangements of their weaker counterparts. The rule of non-intervention has not been honoured in the breach, it has been persistently challenged by alternative norms including the protection of human and minority rights, the importance of fiscal responsibility and the need for international stability. These alternative norms, especially minority and human rights, have been embodied in every major international agreement including Westphalia, Vienna, Versailles, San Francisco, Helsinki, and Dayton.[7] They have been articulated in formal doctrines by the rulers of the most powerful states, such as the Roosevelt Corollary and the Brezhnev Doctrine, that have asserted the right to intervene in the internal affairs of weaker polities. Enjoying international recognition and formal equality in international organizations, what can be termed international legal sovereignty, does not imply that a state will have Westphalian sovereignty, *de facto* rather than *de jure* autonomy.

[4] The classic example of the English school is Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977). For an exposition of this approach see Tim Dunne, *Inventing International Society: A History of the English School* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1998).

[5] For a discussion of the distinction between logics of appropriateness and logics of consequences see James March and Johan Olsen, *Rediscovering Institutions: the Organizational Basis of Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1989), pp. 22–6.

[6] Wendt, *Social Theory*, p. 280.

[7] Stephen D. Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 28–9.

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Many of the major developments of the post Cold War world, most notably responses to a series of wars in the Balkans, have been about efforts to determine the domestic political structures of target states. The European Union conditioned recognition of Slovenia and Croatia in 1991 on constitutional provisions guaranteeing minority rights. Annex 6 of the Dayton accords provides for the creation of an Ombudsman for human rights who would have diplomatic immunity, would not be a citizen of any parts of the former Yugoslavia, and would initially be appointed to a five year term by the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe; as well as for a 14 member Chamber of Human Rights, eight of whose members, none of whom would be citizens of the states that had been part of Yugoslavia, would be appointed by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. Individuals could bring complaints to the Chamber whose decisions, taken by a majority vote, would be binding on the signatories. The arrangement ending NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 provided for autonomy for Kosovo while at the same time reaffirming Yugoslavian sovereignty over Kosovo, a self contradictory set of provisions with regard to Westphalian sovereignty, that allowed all sides to claim some sort of victory.

The post Cold War years have hardly been unique. The Cold War was as much about determining the domestic structures of weaker states as it was about nuclear deterrence between the superpowers. The United States actively intervened in Western Europe after the Second World War to undermine support for the Communist Party in Italy, France, and elsewhere. It went to war in Korea and Vietnam, not to conquer these countries but to prevent the establishment of a Communist regime. The Soviet Union imposed a set of institutions in Eastern Europe that mirrored the political structure of the Soviet Union itself. Indeed, Wendt along with his co-author Daniel Friedheim, has developed one of the most interesting theoretical conceptualizations of the Soviet bloc, albeit one that contradicts much of the argument in *Social Theory of International Politics*. Wendt and Friedheim note that despite the juridical sovereignty of virtually every modern state 'hierarchical political authority is also a pervasive phenomenon in international politics'.[8] They point out that great powers have claimed special rights and that these rights have sometimes been accepted by weaker targets, implying that all states do not have 'equal capacities'. Wendt and Friedheim introduce the illuminating concept of informal empires 'transnational structure of *de facto* political authority in which members are juridically sovereign states'.[9] The Soviet satellites did not have *de facto* autonomy. Their economic policies were strongly influenced by the Soviet Union. Their militaries, integrated into the structure of the Warsaw Pact, could not operate independently. In some cases their secret police reported directly to Moscow. The Eastern European states did not even have a formal monopoly over the legitimate use of force within their own territory. Wendt's deeply illuminating 1996 co-authored paper suggests just how fragile the norms associated with sovereignty can be and often are.

Earlier historical periods are also replete with efforts by more powerful states to constrain the domestic institutional arrangements of their weaker counterparts.

[8] Alexander Wendt and Daniel Friedheim, 'Hierarchy under Anarchy: Informal Empire and the East German State,' in Thomas J. Biersteker and Cynthia Weber (eds.), *State Sovereignty as a Social Construct* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 240–72.

[9] Wendt and Friedheim, 'Hierarchy under Anarchy', p. 245.

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During the long nineteenth century, for instance, religious toleration in the Netherlands was mandated in the Vienna settlement; the Holy Alliance intervened to prevent the development of republican regimes; Britain used its naval power to stamp out the slave trade being conducted by Portugal and Brazil; gunboat diplomacy was employed to control the government finances of Latin American borrowers; and by the end of this period the United States was routinely intervening in the internal affairs of the states of the Caribbean and Central America. Recent developments in the Balkans are reminiscent of earlier efforts to guarantee minority rights in the successor states of the Ottoman Empire. The major powers' conditioned their recognition of Greece in 1832, of Romania, Serbia, Montenegro, and Bulgaria (albeit as a tributary state of the Ottoman Empire) in 1878, and of Albania, on guarantees of minority rights.

In emphasizing the saliency of sovereignty, a critical point for his position as well as for any sociological approach to the international system, Wendt in *Social Theory of International Politics* ignores an analytic category that he himself pointed to in his 1996 co-authored article. Rules and norms can be longstanding and widely recognized but also frequently violated. Institutions and behaviour can be decoupled.[10] The international system with its multiple norms, power asymmetries, and absence of any authoritative mechanism for resolving conflicts, has always been characterized by organized hypocrisy. Norms have endured but they have not always had much impact on the actual behaviour of states. Wendt is empirically incorrect when he states that 'almost all states today obey those norms almost all of the time'.[11]

In an environment where normative constraints are weak, and where violent death, big time violent death, is always a possibility, actors ignore material resources at their peril. Wendt argues in *Social Theory* that the international system has evolved from a Hobbesian to a Lockean logic of anarchy. The central role in the former is enemy; in the latter rival. He dates this change to the sixteenth century and offers as empirical evidence the fact that recognized states do not disappear. Empirically, however, the number of political entities declined after the sixteenth century, even in Europe, the core area within which sovereignty as an institutional form first developed. In 1490 there were 500 political entities in Europe, by the end of the twentieth century there were a little more than 25.[12] Only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did the number of states increase, primarily as a result of decolonization. Wendt argues that the existence of these new states, many of which are extremely weak, can only be explained by a Lockean logic of anarchy in which states accept each other's right to exist even if they sometimes engage in violence. He asks why the United States did not conquer the Bahamas and answers: '. . . the US defines its interests in terms of the norms, and regulates its own behaviour accordingly. The US perceives the norms as legitimate and therefore the Bahamas, as a party to those norms, has a right to life and liberty that the US would not even

[10] John W. Meyer and Brian Rowan, 'Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure in Myth and Ceremony', in Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell (eds.), *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 41 and Nils Brunsson, *The Organization of Hypocrisy: Talk, Decisions and Actions in Organization* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley and Sons, 1989), pp. 33–8.

[11] Wendt, *Social Theory*, p. 286.

[12] Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1990* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 42.

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think of violating'.[13] Life, understood as international legal sovereignty yes, but liberty, hardly, as the willingness of the US to invade virtually every one of its smaller southern neighbours, including Grenada and Haiti in the last couple of decades, demonstrates. The existence of many weak states is more easily explained by the fact that the major powers do not want to bear the costs of directly governing these areas by any internalization of norms. Governance costs have always discouraged powerful states from engaging in unlimited conquest, but they have used military force to deny *de facto* autonomy to weaker states while at the same time continuing to recognize their international legal sovereignty.[14]

Violent death has hardly receded despite what Wendt sees as a change from a Hobbesian to a Lockean logic of anarchy. States may survive, Germany has been around in one form or another for quite a while, but populations may not. The twentieth century has been exceptional in terms of the number of individuals killed in violent conflicts, in the millions for major European powers, Japan, and China.[15]

Wendt recognizes that there are rump material needs and he includes among these physical and ontological security, the latter referring to the need for a stable environment. He knows that under some circumstances material needs will overwhelm ideational factors, but he argues that there 'are few "hotel fires" in social or even international life, however, and as such material conditions *per se* typically explain relatively little, even though they are an essential part of the structure of social systems'.[16] This observation, however, ignores the fact that there are few hotel fires because people are very careful about how they build hotels. There are also very few deaths resulting from commercial aviation crashes, but this hardly suggests that designers, pilots, engineers, and controllers are unconcerned about the material factors that keep planes from crashing. There has been no war among major powers since 1945, the longest period of peace in modern history. Perhaps this is because basic norms have changed and rivals are increasingly being regarded as friends, but this hardly seems persuasive given the antagonism between the Soviet Union and the United States, the ongoing tension between the United States and Russia, and the large number of conflicts that have not involved a direct clash among the major powers.

The big single unambiguous change in the international environment is not ideational but material. As Waltz has pointed out, nuclear weapons are not only unprecedented in their level of destruction but they also promise certain large-scale death in a way that has not been true for any previous weapons system. Nuclear weapons have induced a level of caution that has not characterized earlier periods of international politics because they have removed any ambiguity about the costs of war.[17] Material forces, especially the prospect of the destruction of everyone and everything that rulers might treasure, have induced more powerful constraints than the weak and contested norms associated with sovereignty.

[13] Wendt, *Social Theory*, pp. 289–90.
[14] For an excellent analysis in which governance costs are explicitly introduced see David A. Lake, *Entangling Relations: American Foreign Policy in its Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).
[15] Tilly, *Coercion*, p. 67.
[16] Wendt, *Social Theory*, p. 157.
[17] Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Nuclear myths and political realities', *American Political Science Review*, 84 (1990).

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As Wendt recognizes, logics of appropriateness and logics of consequences are not mutually exclusive. In most social environments both will influence behaviour. The saliency of rules and norms that dictate logics of appropriateness, on the one hand, and consequences, especially material consequences, on the other, will depend on the clarity of the rules and how deeply they are embedded, and on the differential consequences of alternative options.[18] When the Balinese nobility marched into the machine guns of the Dutch military at the beginning of the twentieth century logics of appropriateness were so compelling that they overwhelmed any logic of consequences including the preservation of life itself.[19] When the United States sent troops into Grenada in 1984 (pretty close to the Bahamas) it simply ignored the logics of appropriateness associated with sovereignty. Despite Wendt's erudite attempt to socialize international politics, its remains an arena in which norms are weakly embedded and often contradictory, and where the material consequences of wrong choice can mean the deaths of tens of millions and the extinction of political regimes, even if the governance costs of absorption have meant that most states have retained their international legal, if not their Westphalian, sovereignty.

[18] James March and Johan Olsen, 'The Institutional Dynamics of International Political Orders', *International Organization* 52 (1998).

[19] Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth Century Bali* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980).

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