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Ideas part-way down

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Social Theory of International Politics is in my view a major work in our field, fully deserving of this symposium in the *Review of International Studies*. Indeed, I think that Alexander Wendt's book is virtually certain to become a classic work on international relations theory, standard on graduate reading lists. Wendt's distinctive combination of scientific realism, holism, and what he calls 'idealism', will certainly spark much conversation and, it is to be hoped, a great deal of thought.

Wendt's project, as I read it, is very ambitious: to show that the valuable aspects of both realism and institutional theory (which he misleadingly but conventionally refers to as 'neoliberalism') can be subsumed within a 'constructivist' framework that emphasizes the role of ideas, and of holistic thinking, as against materialism and individualism.[1] Wendt begins by recognizing that both realism and institutionalism are rationalist, individualist theories and therefore have a lot in common. Perhaps surprisingly, he then *accepts* many of their assumptions and arguments: that states exist prior to the system; that material interests and power (as well as institutions) are important causal factors; that states can be viewed as acting rationally for the most part; and that meaningful science requires propositions that are potentially falsifiable with evidence. These admissions bring him substantially closer than in his previous writings to what he calls 'mainstream' IR, and will surely provoke a negative reaction not only from postmodernists but from radical constructivists who may have previously regarded him as one of their champions.

If he stopped there, Wendt would just be a rationalist who had read Foucault. But of course he has a larger goal. Essentially, having shown how valuable elements of rationalism are, he then argues that it is a very thin, indeed largely empty theory. Anarchy has no logic of its own; interests are inexplicable except with respect to ideas; individual ideas and identities, and collective beliefs, drive the processes of international relations but are unexplained by rationalism. Having argued that realism is an elegant but rather empty vessel, he then fills it with content of his own: ideas play a crucial role in constituting interests, and actors, even states, are largely constituted by the nature of the system as a whole, or what he later calls the 'culture' of international relations. Indeed, he identifies three different cultures of international relations (Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian) that structure state behaviour and may even affect the identities of people who make state policy. These three

[1] The 'neoliberal' label is misleading because in linking institutionalist theory to liberalism rather than to realism (with which it has at least equally close ties) the label all too often leads naive or careless commentators to assume or claim that neoliberalism ignores power or reflects a belief in harmony. Neither proposition could be further from the truth. See Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), and Keohane, *International Institutions and State Power* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1989).

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cultures are differentiated from one another by the roles that dominate the system: enemy, rival, or friend.

Wendt is seeking a synthesis of rationalism and constructivism on his own antimaterialist and holist terms. Equally important, he advocates a scientific, theory-testing method—typically referred to as 'positivism', irrespective of the more specific philosophical meaning of that term. Wendt convincingly shows that constructivist theory can be formulated in scientific terms: that it is not necessarily coupled with postmodernist epistemology.

Although I admire *Social Theory of International Politics*, I hope it will have few imitators. As Wendt says, his book is about ontology and very few books in IR should be. There are no propositions about state behaviour in *Social Theory of International Politics*—not even the 'few and big' propositions that Kenneth Waltz develops in his *Theory of International Politics*,[2] which is both Wendt's model and his target. Although everyone in the field would benefit, I think, from coming to grips with Wendt's arguments, it is to be hoped that his work will do more to stimulate thinking about the analysis of international relations, than simply to renew ontological debates.

The editors of this symposium have wisely asked the contributors not to review *Social Theory of International Politics*, but rather to select a theme that we wish to discuss in some depth. As the title of my essay suggests, my focus will be on the role of ideas in world politics. How should we think about ideas and how they matter in world politics?

Chapter one of *Social Theory of International Politics* discusses the role of ideas in world politics, and chapter three is entitled 'Ideas all the way down? On the constitution of power and interest'. Wendt draws a dichotomy between 'materialist' and 'idealist' arguments, identifying himself with the latter. By materialism he means the doctrine that 'the most fundamental fact about society is the nature and organization of material forces' (p. 23). Idealists, in contrast, 'believe the most fundamental fact about society is the nature and structure of social consciousness'—that is, 'the distribution of ideas or knowledge' (p. 24). Idealism in this sense refers to idealist social theory, not the notions that human nature is good, social change easy, or that expressions of normative preferences can be substituted for scientific knowledge.

In a chart on p. 32, Wendt characterizes classical realism, neorealism, and neoliberalism as 'materialist' as well as 'individualist' doctrines. This characterization may or may not be fair to neorealism—Kenneth Waltz can respond for himself—but it is in my view a distortion when applied to classical realism and institutionalist theory.

Creating dichotomies is a time-hallowed rhetorical strategy. But any such endeavour should raise warning signals. The social world is not one of either/or. We are all aware of the mixture of material factors and ideas that affects our everyday lives; so it is not immediately clear why we should have to choose between materialism and idealism. Indeed, both positions seem to be based, untenably, on the assumption that either ideas or material forces are 'the most fundamental'. We cannot imagine society—and we could certainly not explain social relationships—without reference to both material forces and human consciousness. So how can one

[2] Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979.

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be more fundamental than the other? Creating this dichotomy is a little bit like arguing whether the heart or the brain is more fundamental to life.

Wendt's response to this objection is to concede that a synthetic position might seem attractive, but that it is 'hard to sustain, because materialists will always object to arguments in which the ideational superstructure bears no determinate relation to the material base, and idealists will always object to arguments in which it does' (pp. 25–6).

But how many relationships in social life are 'determinate?' Certainly, we have not discovered determinate social laws of international relations. Our propositions at best are valid only probabilistically; and when we think about the causal mechanisms involved, we typically see ideas and material forces as linked in complex ways. For instance, Soviet foreign policy was long seen in the West as reflecting both the geographical position of Russia, and the material resources at the disposal of the Soviet Union, on the one hand; and sets of ideas, both from Marxism-Leninism and from traditional Russian views of world politics, on the other. Few Western analysts would have seen the ideas guiding Soviet foreign policy as having a 'determinate' relation to the material base; but even fewer would have regarded the material base as unimportant. Indeed, the material base could be the most important influence on these guiding ideas, without there being any 'determinate' relationship between them. The issue for students of Soviet foreign policy was not one of 'material forces versus ideas' but of how they were linked together. So also, I contend, for students of world politics more generally.

In realist theories of international relations, the lynchpins between ideas and the material world are found in the concepts of interest and power. Wendt is surely right to point out that neither power nor interest necessarily reflects material forces alone (p. 23). Power can be defined as the ability of A to get B to do what she would not otherwise do; or more precisely, as an inverse function of the cost of being able to get someone else to do what she would otherwise not do. In *Politics Among Nations,* Hans J. Morgenthau emphasized that 'armed strength or threat or a potentiality is the most important material factor making for the political power of a nation'. But on the same page he argued that 'political power is a psychological relation;' that it should not be reduced to force; and that it often depends on non-material factors such as charisma and prestige.[3] In this respect, Morgenthau was just following Max Weber, who made clear the importance of legitimacy in his view of politics. Wendt characterizes classical realism as 'materialist', but as perusal of *Politics Among Nations* demonstrates, this is a misreading at least of the classic Classical Realist treatise.

The concept of 'interest' is remarkably elastic. Wendt declares that in his view, 'the uniquely realist hypothesis about national interests is that they have a material rather than social basis, being rooted in some combination of human nature, anarchy, and/or brute material capabilities' (p. 114). But, like Wendt's discussion of power, this is a caricature of classical realist views. Arnold Wolfers, usually considered a classical realist, drew a distinction in his essay on 'the goals of foreign policy' between 'possession goals' and 'milieu goals'. One could argue whether possession goals are necessarily material: is 'security' a material interest? But there is

[3] Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Knopf, 4th edn., 1967), p. 27.

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no doubt that milieu goals are often nonmaterial: Wolfers mentions aid to poor countries to satisfy 'a generous public impulse to help underprivileged peoples'.[4] Neither with respect to power nor interests do classical realists belong in Wendt's pigeonhole of 'materialist'.

Nor of course does institutionalist theory. In our own work on ideas and foreign policy, Judith Goldstein and I wrote that 'we recognize that ideas and interests are not phenomenologically separate and that all interests involve beliefs, and therefore ideas as we conceive them'. We argued that ideas, categorized as world views, principled beliefs, and causal beliefs, can affect policy 'by acting as road maps, helping to cope with the absence of unique equilibrium solutions, and becoming embedded in durable institutions'.[5]

Wendt wishes to go beyond the conception that ideas shape strategies on the basis of interests—for instance, by changing causal understandings. In this view, which he attributes to David Hume, beliefs and desires are separate. Beliefs would simply affect how one goes about obtaining one's desires. Wendt emphasizes, on the contrary, that beliefs can constitute desire: that is, beliefs that something is desirable play a key role in constituting interests (p. 119). Indeed, in Wendt's view rational people reflect on their desires and can actually act in contradiction to them. He sees such a 'deliberative' model—'the addition of Reason to rational choice theory' (p. 128)—as especially appropriate for international relations, due to the prevalence, in group decision-making, of attempts to define what their interests are.

For Wendt, this set of understandings comprises a 'constitutive' view of the relationship between ideas and interests, in contrast to the 'causal view' allegedly taken by rationalists, including myself and Professor Goldstein.

My own view is that most of Wendt's argument is sensible, but I am not sure who the opponents are. Goldstein and I emphasized in 1993 that 'new ideas may even lead—even if not immediately—to a significant change in the very constitution of interests'.[6] Interests are certainly not 'idea-free baselines', despite Wendt's characterization of the Goldstein-Keohane work. They are more appropriately viewed as 'applications of values in context', implying 'a choice among values standing behind those interests'.[7]

Institutionalists have been quite aware that what is now referred to as common knowledge is presupposed by institutionalist theory: coordination takes place as a result in part of the ideas people have not only about their own beliefs but about the beliefs of others. In this sense, to use Wendt's language, he is right that 'the distinctive contribution of neorealism lies in an idealist argument, although in saying this it is worth reiterating that shared ideas are just as objective, just as constraining, just as *real* in their effects as material forces' (p. 160).

It should be clear that Wendt's dichotomy between 'material' and 'idealistic' arguments is exaggerated and misleading. Neither classical realism nor institutional

[4] Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962), p. 75.
[5] Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, 'Ideas and Foreign Policy: An Analytical Framework', in Goldstein and Keohane (eds.), *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 26.
[6] Goldstein and Keohane, 'Ideas and Foreign Policy', p. 16.
[7] Alexander L. George and Robert O. Keohane, 'The Concept of National Interests: Uses and Limitations'. Ch. 13 of Alexander L. George, *Presidential Decision-making in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1980), p. 221.

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theory is materialistic in the sense in which Wendt defines the term. Both theories take for granted that foreign policy derives from a combination of material capabilities and interests, on the one hand, and ideas and values, on the other. Selecting which of these is 'fundamental' would not be a sensible enterprise.

The field of international relations has an unfortunate tendency to cast its most fundamental questions in the most primitive way. Some of these questions are faulty because they have obvious answers. For instance, do states only worry about relative gains? Of course not, since in a multiparty situation the very notion of relative gains is uninterpretable. Relative gains for A in its relationship with B could help B in a contest with C, if A is a crucial ally of B *vis-à-vis* C.[8] Do institutions matter in an era in which most major international issues, from the world monetary crisis of 1997–98 to Kosovo, are dealt with in the first instance by international organizations? Of course they do. The question is how they matter. Does the difference they make reflect the mere fact of coalition diplomacy, the specific rules of the organizations, the activities of their bureaucracies, the inertia inherent in any organization, the precedential character of certain institutional decisions, the values incorporated in the institutions themselves, or the ways in which they interact with domestic politics? Some combination of these factors is presumably at work, and it is not a trivial task to examine which ones are important, and how they work together. But if the so-called debate remains on square one—'do institutions matter?—we will never reach those interesting questions.

The question—do ideas matter more fundamentally than material forces?—is also misguided but for an opposite reason. It is not that the answer is obvious, but that, for the reasons given above, there is no answer to the question as posed. But if one asked about how ideas matter—through what causal mechanisms—answers might well begin to appear. What is important is how ideas and material capabilities intermingle. Ideas do play an instrumental role, linking preferences about states of the world with strategies. But they also, as Wendt argues, constitute interests, by making particular potential objectives meaningful and rendering others less consequential. At the general level, it is clear that both mechanisms can operate. The interesting question, then, is not whether ideas 'matter', much less whether they matter more than material interests, but 'how' they matter. For instance, what difference do competitive electoral practices make—as in the democratic peace literature? Liberal domestic institutions (in which values are incorporated, and which manifestly shape interests)? Cultural practices, including the respect in the culture for warriors and the status of women? Transnational social movements or issue-advocacy networks, as in recent human rights and environmental activism?

I think that Alexander Wendt has made a major contribution to our understanding of world politics by providing the philosophical basis for sustained scientific attention to issues involving the role of ideas. He has shown convincingly that one does not have to swallow the contaminated epistemological water of postmodernism in order to enjoy the heady ontological wine of constructivism. One can be a sophisticated scientific realist without believing naively in a one-to-one correspondence between observation and reality, or in unproblematic scientific knowledge. And one can recognize that the social world has been socially con-

[8] See David Baldwin (ed.), *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), especially the contributions by Duncan Snidal and myself.

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structed—by ideas and institutions—without denying the importance of state action, material forces, or rational calculation. Furthermore, the roles that predominate in a system and that others expect to prevail are of crucial importance, leading to disparate systems of relationships, ranging from what Karl Deutsch called 'security communities'[9] to Hobbes's 'war of all against all', recently observed in Kosovo. Wendt's work is important because it provides a coherent, philosophically grounded way to understand world politics in a socially constructivist way.

However, when Wendt criticizes 'materialism', he seems to be tilting at windmills. Surely some crude materialists could be found—it is always easy in our field to find someone adopting an untenable position as the 'key to reality'—but the most sophisticated formulations of both classical realism and institutionalism have explicitly followed Max Weber in recognizing that ideas, not determined by material reality, play a major role in international relations, as in the rest of social life. It is 'ideas partway down'. The issue is less 'how far down', than how these ideas are mixed with material forces, and embedded in enduring institutions, to produce the variations in outcomes that we observe.

[9] Karl W. Deutsch, et al., *Political Community in the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in Light of Historical Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967).

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