

Theory Talks

Presents

THEORY TALK #3

ALEXANDER WENDT ON UFO'S, BLACK SWANS AND CONSTRUCTIVIST INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY

Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion on actual International Relations-related topics for both students and specialists. Theory Talks frequently invites cutting-edge specialists in the field to open a debate, discuss current issues or elucidate a theory.

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ALEXANDER WENDT ON UFO'S, BLACK SWANS AND CONSTRUCTIVIST INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY



In 1992, Alexander Wendt shook up the world of International Relations Theory by publishing an article titled 'Anarchy is what States make of it: the social construction of power politics'. Wendt argues that anarchy can be a structural fact about the world that states inhabit, but that it is up to politicians (and IR scholars) to decide how to deal with that anarchy. Since then, Wendt's social constructivist approach to International Relations has gained a lot of interest and one cannot talk about IR Theory without

mentioning his work.

Theory Talks offers an exclusive interview with Wendt about what influenced him, constructivism, the dangers of methodology and the world state.

What is, according to you, the biggest challenge / principal debate in current IR? What is your position or answer to this challenge / in this debate?

Actually, I'm hesitant to name a specific debate. A standard answer for me would be, of course, the rationalist – constructivist debate, but in a sense I don't care about that debate anymore. My own view – and what I tell my students – is that the most important thing to do, and maybe the hardest, is first to tell us something we don't already know, and secondly to tell us something that makes people think about the world differently (otherwise, what's the point?). That's why I don't feel much of a stake in the existing debates; my main interest these days is in new ideas, not old ones. And that's also why I have PhD students doing research on the most diverse subjects possible, because I basically just ask them to tell me something I don't know already.

How did you arrive at where you currently are in IR?

I think the person who most influenced me was my graduate school advisor, Raymond Duvall at Minnesota, who introduced me to Marxism and post-structuralism in IR in the 80s. At that time, I actually considered myself a Marxist. I read a lot of Marxist state theory and about the internationalization of capital, and I guess I remain sympathetic to Marxism this day. But since then, I've developed philosophical issues with the body of Marxist theory, so although I've been very much influenced by the Marxist problematic – like a lot of scholars of my generation by the way – I wouldn't call myself a Marxist anymore. Apart from that, I have also been influenced by the work of sociologists and scientific realists such as Anthony Giddens and Roy Bhaskar, but I guess the individuals who advised me were more important in the end.

Gradually I got very interested in the structure-agency issue, on which I published the article *The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory* in *International Affairs* in 1987. Since then, I continued studying constructivism, leading to the series of articles I published in the 90s and eventually my *Social Theory of International Politics* in 1999.

What would a student need to become a specialist in IR like yourself?

If someone wants to specifically become a theorist, they need to be able to think very systematically and logically about an argument, which is a conceptual or analytical skill, and I think it helps a lot if one is familiar with the full range of theories that are out there, since otherwise there is a danger of becoming dogmatic. However, I actually don't think that most IR scholars should be pure theorists: even amongst my own PhD students, there are relatively few that I tell to go and do pure theory. Not because they aren't smart enough to be theorists, but because the job market generally favors those with a substantial empirical contribution (as well), and in the end we (the collective of IR scholars) are supposed to be students of the real world rather than of theory per se.

But if you want to become an IR specialist in general, I would say: get a PhD. Apart from that, I think it is very important – and even more than when I was a student in the 80s – to look outside of what is published strictly by IR scholars. There's a lot of work that I would call "IR" that is published by sociologists, anthropologists, lawyers, philosophers, political theorists – I think that a lot of the most interesting questions are being raised outside of IR, so it is just a matter of getting outside of the little bubble that graduate students get trained in and we all live in. Even big canonical IR-theorists like Waltz and [Keohane](#) looked outside our field to rational choice theory, which stems from economics.

And why don't you 'do' economics or economical theory yourself?

I actually appreciate game theory very much, and see it to be one of the greatest single contributions made by social scientists to our understanding of social life. But on the other hand I do worry about the tendency especially here in the States of economics increasingly becoming hegemonic, crowding out other ways of thinking, and it's with that tendency to "do economics or nothing" that I would take issue.

You've indicated that you want to stay open to new stuff. Is it possible to stay flexible after having conceived, and being recognized for, a 'big theory'? I don't see, for example, Kenneth Waltz changing his theoretical stripes.

I think that's a big challenge for all academics, especially if they get to middle age and they don't have anything new to say. That's one of the reasons why I, self-consciously, wanted to get out of the constructivist business: I'm trying to stay alive by focusing on other issues as well, like for example the quantum perspective of social science I'm currently investigating. For me, the important thing is to keep doing different things, otherwise you just get stale. But I think it's hard, and there are a lot of incentives in the field to just keep defending what you've said in the past.

Due to the wide variety of different approaches available in IR, a student might feel kind of lost in the field. Is International Relations going through an identity crisis?

It certainly has become an incredibly diverse terrain. I don't get the feeling that IR is having an identity crisis, but maybe we should have one. There are a lot of different – sometimes even contradictory – positions in IR, while in the United States for example a lot of people demand very rigorous science in order to find the Truth with a capital 'T', but I just don't share that way of seeing things – in order to advance, one has to accept that there are interesting positions in other fields from which we can learn a lot.

Nasim Taleb argues in his popular science book 'The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable' that the most high-impact events in social science (or, in your formulation: a very small number of very important events) are unforeseen by dominant theories such as Neorealism and Neoliberalism. In your *Social Theory*, you show that similar 'UFO's' in IR are not accounted for by most approaches. That could make one doubt the predictive value of our work.

I don't think IR theory has ever predicted anything we didn't already know was going to happen. It's important here to separate anomalies in specific theories from unforeseen events in history. There will always be new ideas and events that no one can foresee, because social life is intrinsically open-ended. Any given generalization about the whole world might cover the past, but never the future – which makes life interesting.

With respect to anomalies, constructivism can handle some that other theories cannot, but it doesn't cover everything any more than any other theory does. I do hope the quantum argument I am developing will provide an umbrella to synthesize everything, but even that perspective won't allow us to predict the future with any great ability, simply because of free will and creativity. So, if people criticize IR theory for not predicting wars, conflicts and the like, I would say that's not what IR theory is for; predicting events in real world politics is what intelligence agencies are for, not social scientists (or at least theorists). Thus, I'm skeptical about IR scholars being able to prevent wars, except insofar as they can help us to think differently about world politics, which in the long run might stimulate a more peaceful situation.

In 2003, you've published an article with the daring title *Why a World State is Inevitable*. Why is a world state inevitable?

I think there are two main reasons. First of all, there's the material argument: the cost of not submitting to a world state will become higher and higher over time, because the potential for catastrophic violence in the system is growing due to weapons of mass destruction, terrorism and so on. My main argument is basically that what individuals and groups most want is not security or power or wealth, but recognition of, and respect for, their rights. And since that can only be realized under law, we have a material basis for a world state.

Secondly, there is no good normative argument against a world state. The present system in effect empowers groups or states with the authority to kill foreigners without accountability. In

an ideal world I think there is no good justification for having such a right. Especially liberals should not have any normative reason not to go for a world state. But it will take a long time.

Keeping in account the current configuration of the international system which seems increasingly dominated by resource scarcity, and your long term prediction of a world government, how do you see the near future?

I've actually not thought systematically about the impact of resource scarcity on my world state argument. I would think, though, that for the time being conflicts over resources will increase, but that in the long run human technological innovation will solve a lot of problems, including conflicts over resources.

In your *Social Theory of International Politics* you've distinguished between three cultures which can each be internalized in three degrees: a hobbesian culture, in which states perceive each other essentially as enemies; a lockean culture, in which states are rivals; and a Kantian one, in which they regard one another as friends. Parting from the title of a book on African IR, *The African Challenge to IR Theory* (2001), I would like to ask you how Africa can be better understood by your constructivism. For example, is Africa at state-level a lockean culture internalized to the 1st degree, with frequent local setbacks to a hobbesian, or violent, culture?

I have little in-depth knowledge about Africa, but that I would agree that Africa is not a Hobbesian nor a Kantian world, but rather a Lockean, because African states in general do survive. However, I don't know the level up to which this culture is internalized. Because of my teleological view of the world, I tend to agree with the view that African IR is just one or two steps behind Europe, but will eventually get there just like everyone else.

What are your thoughts on the different proposals for constructivist methodology?

My view on methodology has always been eclectic, in the sense that I believe that research should always be question-driven and not method-driven. Thus, I have no stake in which method comes to be seen as most appropriate; my only concern is that one method not drive out the others, and in particular that quantitative formal-theory methods not become seen as the only way to do things. That would make IR method-driven and effectively exclude all kinds of interesting questions just because they don't fit inside that methodological frame. So if constructivists want to do quantitative work, great, but they shouldn't feel obliged to do so.

You're a purely theoretical IR-scholar. How do you feel about politics in 'the world out there'?

Yes, especially these days my work is entirely theoretical. I treat what I know about real-world politics as a source of interesting problems for both me and my students, although I am relatively skeptical about using the "real world" as data against which to test theory. Sometimes it can be

useful to test theories if it answers a specific question to which we don't already at least implicitly know the answer, but I'm not sure we've learned as much about the world by testing our theories all the time, as some people seem to think.

You're setting up a new IR Journal, called *International Theory*, which will be ready in about a year. Can you give the readers of Theory Talks a foretaste?

Well, the idea is to bring together people from IR Theory, International Legal Theory and International Political Theory, all of which have their own universes and journals; Duncan Snidal and I thought that it would be a good idea to let these communities interact. Also, it is quite frustrating that IR journals especially in the States seem to have all adopted something of an implicit formula that requires about five pages of theory followed by some twenty of empirical testing. That's fine for many purposes, but I had the feeling that there was a need for a journal that would allow people to do straight theory if they wanted to.

Alexander Wendt is the Ralph D. Mershon Professor of International Security at The Mershon Center and Professor of Political Science at the Department of Political Science of the Ohio State University, and he is currently working on questions of global governance, IR Theory, and the philosophy of social science.

Who Influenced Wendt

- [Prof. Raymond Duvall's homepage](#)
- Read Roy Bhaskar's book *A Realist Theory of Science* (1975) online [here](#) (free)

About Wendt

- [Wendt's official homepage](#)
- [Official homepage of the journal *International Theory*](#)

Wendt's Work

- Read Wendt's *Anarchy is what States make of it: the social construction of power politics* (International Organization, 1992) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Wendt's *Why A World State is Inevitable* (European Journal of International Relations, 2003) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Wendt's *Social Theory as Cartesian Science: An Auto-Critique from a Quantum Perspective* [here](#) (2005, pdf)

About Social Constructivism

- Read R. Jackson's chapter 'Social Constructivism' In R. Jackson & G. Sørensen (Eds.), *Introduction to International Relations - Theories and Approaches* (pp. 161-177) (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006) [here](#) (pdf)