

# “Anarchy is what states make of it”: true in a trivial sense; otherwise, wrong

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**Abstract** The claim “Anarchy is what states make of it” is true in the trivial sense that states’ identities are not carved in stone, but can change, and that international affairs are “cultural” or “social,” not natural phenomena. In this sense, the claim is trivially true; only the common 1990s misinterpretation of Waltz’s writings as a crude form of materialism could make it sound like highly original. The claim may also refer to something more specific, namely that states are embedded in shared normative belief systems. In this second sense, the claim is wrong. Wendt makes the non-controversial point that states must recognize each other as the key actors with which they interact, and in so doing they form a primitive “cultural” system, but his larger claim is that states act on the basis of their “culture” in the more specific sense of common norms that shape states’ identities. Wendt is known for the second point, but as I demonstrate he never shows that states share such common norms, only that they share a “culture” in a broad, socio-cognitive sense. Wendt’s famous claim is taken to be representative of a more widespread malaise that plagues IR theory, and the implications are discussed.

**Keywords** Alexander Wendt · Kenneth Waltz · Anarchy · States

## Introduction

The movement for greater replicability started in quantitative research and has broadened to include replications of qualitative process tracing, but no such effort has been made in the case of theory. In this article, I draw inspiration from the work

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of Ioannidis (2005) in clinical medicine, and of Wagner (2007) in IR scholarship, and apply the method of replication and negative findings to IR theory. In particular, I reanalyze the Wendtian claim that “anarchy is what states make of it,” try to make sense of what it means, and assess whether it is logically sound and empirically correct.

In a broader sense, the statement means that states identities are not carved in stone, but can change; and that international affairs are “cultural,” or “social,” as opposed to natural phenomena. When used this way, the claim is the result of a curious misunderstanding. Outside IR, constructivism is largely a matter of debunking putatively natural categories (e.g., gender, homosexuality, madness), in order to show that they have a social, not natural origin. In an effort to apply these “natural versus social” controversies to IR theory, Wendt (1999, p. 252) interpreted Waltz’s realism as similar to an extreme form of technological determinism. As I read Waltz, and contrary to Goddard and Nexon (2005, pp. 38–39) he was aware that international systems are “cultural” in the broader sense of the term; and, as surprising as this may sound, he was also aware that identities may and do change. So in this first, broader sense of the term, there is little point in arguing whether anarchy is what states make of it, for the statement is trivially true.

As Wendt uses it, the claim can also mean something more specific, namely that states are simultaneously embedded in shared normative belief systems. If states are embedded in a “bad” belief system, they will be war-prone; if they are embedded in a “good” normative belief system, they will live in peace. Two consequences follow. First, there are multiple anarchies depending on the type of shared normative belief system that states are embedded in. Second, it is not anarchy, but the underlying shared normative belief system that does all the heavy lifting in the explanation of either competitive or cooperative dynamics. Anarchy, *per se*, makes no difference.

When used in this second, more specific sense, the claim is wrong. It is logically possible, but highly unlikely, that all states within a system are simultaneously embedded within the same norms; empirically, there is no evidence that this is the case. In the first section, I discuss Wendt’s claim from a theoretical standpoint. In the second section, I put the notion of a “culture of anarchy” to the test of history and find it wanting. In the conclusion, I recap my argument and discuss some implications for the state of IR theory.

## Conceptual issues in Wendt’s theory

Wendt’s early arguments rely on Richard Ashley’s reading of Waltz. Wendt thinks that realists reify a social structure, X (where X stands for self-help), and want people to think that it is a natural state of affairs, not having realized that X exists only insofar as states have the identity x (where x stands for “bad,” “egoist,” or realist identity (Ashley 1984, pp. 240–241; cf. Wendt 1987, p. 343). Following Ashley and Wendt, many think that Waltz mistakenly concluded that states are forced to compete by tacitly assuming that states are bad and want to compete (Wendt 1999, p. 100) This is circular and incorrect reasoning, the critics say, because, if states have peaceful identities and refuse to play the power-politics game, the game ends, and



nobody is forced to do anything. But Waltz repeatedly said that. He simply noted that a uniform and enduring consensus is necessary to end the power-politics game, and pointed out that such a consensus is difficult to achieve. Waltz did not introduce a “tacit ontology”<sup>1</sup> according to which all actors ought to be “bad” for competition to occur; he introduced an explicit, and much more moderate, scope condition: the system remains competitive unless all (or almost all) the actors become permanently peaceful (Waltz 1959, p. 66; 194; 229, 1979, p. 118, 2001, p. x). Few have understood Waltz’s point.<sup>2</sup>

Let me translate Waltz’s arguments into Wendt’s language. Waltz has not tacitly assumed that all the states have a realist identity ( $x$ ), and on that basis concluded that a certain social structure self-help ( $X$ ) is a natural state of affairs. Waltz’s states come with all sort of identities:  $a, b, c, d, e \dots n$ , in various, mutable combinations. If the  $n$  states turn the other cheek, then, from the standpoint of an individual state, the remaining  $n - 1$  states pose no constraint. Short of being all pacifists, the  $n - 1$  states pose an objective constraint on each state.

In order to make sense of Waltz’s reasoning, consider two international systems, each made up of states (or other groups) with different identities. Let us denote states and state identities by a letter:

$a, b, c, d \dots n$   
 $A, B, C, D \dots N$

When interacting with  $b$ , the state  $a$  might be prompted to do things that it would prefer not to do, for they clash with its identity (e.g., joining an alliance with  $c$  against  $b$ , despite the fact that there is a sharp ideological divide between  $a$  and  $c$ ).

Now, suppose there is a whole world of a difference between the identities of  $a$  and  $A$ : centuries of cultural, economic, and political evolution separate them. Despite this, it is possible that  $A$ , when dealing with  $B$ , faces a similar situation and is prompted to do things that would prefer not to do (e.g., forming an alliance with  $C$  against  $B$ , despite the fact that  $A$  and  $C$  are ideologically hostile). The ideological split between  $a$  and  $c$ , on the one hand, and  $A$  and  $C$ , on the other, are different, yet the pattern of action that emerges is similar. Waltz’s claim that certain outcomes recur in international affairs although the dramatic variation of unit attributes hinges on this reasoning.<sup>3</sup>

This is not reification of anything. Pace Wendt (1999, p. 43), Waltz has not tacitly assumed that all states have an egoist, “realist” identity. Waltz’s are descriptions of the situational constraints that operate upon states having different identities when they interact with one another, prompting them to behave *as if* they were egoists or realists.

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<sup>1</sup> Wendt (1999, p. 35; 115). In both cases, he applies the term to rationalism in general.

<sup>2</sup> Among the few, see Barkin (2010, p. 33).

<sup>3</sup> Goddard and Nexon (2005, p. 11; 33) maintains that this is the fundamental problem that Waltz failed to address, and the main reason why his theory is flawed.



In *Social Theory*, Wendt makes the more specific claim that Waltz tacitly assumed that all states are status-quo egoists:

Morgenthau [...] thought that human nature contained a will to power [...] Waltz wants to get away from such dubious psychology, but rather than leave psychology behind he simply substitutes a different one. Morgenthau's states are by nature aggressive and opportunistic, Waltz's defensive and cautious. Assumptions about motivation are necessary even in the most structural of theories [...] The criticism is that [Waltz] does not make clear that his conclusions about the effects of anarchy [...] *depend* on those assumptions (Wendt 1999, p. 105).

It is hard to believe that a World War II veteran put forth a theory according to which states are “by nature [...] defensive and cautious.” Waltz was aware of the existence of revisionists and unlimited revisionists (Waltz 1979, pp. 127–128), of peaceful states, which do not play the power-politics game (*ibid.*, pp. 70–71; 187), of the fact that states pursue a variety of goals (*ibid.*, pp. 91–92), and that states' goals change over time (*ibid.*, p. 190). Wendt relies on Schweller (1996) for this point, but Schweller did not read Waltz well. In the late 1990s, James Fearon (1998) noted that Schweller's reading of Waltz was wrong,<sup>4</sup> but his observation went unnoticed.

Structural theories avoid relying on “dubious psychology” by making *assumptions about how motivations are distributed across a population of actors* (states have all sorts of preferences, but not all states are permanently peaceful). When Wendt goes on to claim that an anarchy of status-quo states is more stable than an anarchy of revisionists, and an anarchy of pacifists is more stable than both (*ibid.*, pp. 105–106) a casual reader finds the point very sensible—and the battle is half won for Wendt, for the reader misses the point that a system in which all states are of the same type is a mere logical possibility, but not a likely one. To assume, instead of demonstrating, that all actors are of the same type due to underlying shared normative belief system is to beg the entire question.

Let us say that Waltz was a classical realist in disguise who attributed an immutable, “bad” identity to every state. There are plenty of reasons to disagree with this thesis. Wendt's criticism strikes me as the least plausible: he applied to IR Giddens' claim that agents and structures are mutually constitutive. Provided that one can make sense of what Giddens meant with “mutual constitution,” the best one can say is that the identity of the members of a family and the social institution “family” are mutually constitutive; the identity of the workers and the organization “trade union” are mutually constitutive. But groups are not persons and do not constitute (at least, not typically, not primarily) their domestic identities by interacting with one another (Wagner 2007, pp. 43–44).

<sup>4</sup> James D. Fearon, “Domestic Politics, Foreign Policy, and Theories of International Relations,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 1: 289–313, at 299, fn. 6: “Schweller (1996) argues that Waltzian neorealism is further defined by the assumption that all states share a lexicographic preference for security (versus territorial aggrandizement). As I read Waltz (1979), this is a mistake; for Waltz, a properly systemic IR theory's predictions should not depend on the exact preferences or goals of the states and these may vary, although states are all assumed to put some value on survival.”



This is arguably why Wendt had to redefine concepts in order to make his case. First, in order to apply sociological theories that were meant to be applied to human beings, he argued that states are persons (Wendt 1999, pp. 193–145; cf. Wendt 2004). Second, he applied to states a stronger notion of socialization (Wendt 1999, pp. 100–102) than that employed by Waltz (if one thinks that states are persons, she will apply a strong notion of socialization to large bureaucratic organizations like states). Third, in order to bypass the fact that states’ domestic (or corporate) identities are not constituted by state interaction, a fact he openly admits (Wendt 1999, p. 226), he applied Giddens’ argument to *role* identities (e.g., enmity, friendship, and rivalry), instead of domestic identities. Because Wendt (2015, p. 23) has eventually resolved that states are not persons (now he claims they are quantum holograms), I will not criticize the first and second point. Let me focus on the third one.

One cannot reasonably claim that, say, the Soviet Union and the USA shared the same domestic culture. So Wendt applied Giddens’ argument by saying that states become enemies/friends/rivals by interacting with one another. If put this way, Giddens’ thesis becomes trivially true. How else could two actors become enemies, if not by interacting with one another? Wendt, however, thought that Waltz was committed to a “materialist ontology,” according to which things like biology and weapons mechanically determine human affairs. His example (Wendt 1992, pp. 404–407, 1999, p. 267) of an alien civilization that comes to Earth is a test for an extreme version of technological determinism (the aliens’ weapons do not trigger a biologically driven fear that prompts us to make worst-case assumptions prior to interaction), and later he insisted that Waltz’s realism is akin to an extreme form of technological determinism (ibid., p. 252). This way of reading Waltz’s theory is why he attached great importance to the fact that actors become enemies by interacting with one another.<sup>5</sup>

If the USA was anything like a communist dictatorship, and it came to have a communist identity by interacting with the USSR, it could make sense to say that the USA and the USSR shared the same culture. But when applied to role identities, the argument does not work. The fact that two enemies share the same mode of thought (e.g., they fear each other) does not imply they adhere to the same system of norms and values and share the same culture. Wendt instead thinks that if states entertain social relations (e.g., enmity), then they share the same culture (a culture of enmity). Of course, social relations are part of culture in a socio-cognitive sense (and even realists, since Robert Jervis if not before, agree with that), but one would not typically say that two actors, just because they have socio-cognitive skills, share the same culture.

To summarize what we have seen so far, Wendt argues that states are always, by definition, embedded in the same culture. Of course, they are not. The reason why Wendt reached such a dubious conclusion is that he narrowed the concept of materialism to make it equivalent to brute nature, and pitted nature against a broad concept

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<sup>5</sup> The security dilemma is a vicious circle: things become more and more dangerous as time goes on. Anarchy is thought to influence action and reaction over time, not to prompt actors to make worst-case assumptions from the onset.



of culture, in a socio-cognitive sense. In *Social Theory of International Politics*, he proceeded along the same path.

### A “key rhetorical move”: rump materialism versus culture

Wendt’s *Social Theory* betrays the same misunderstandings as his earlier writings. He puts forth a narrow definition of materialism in terms of biology, natural resources, and technological artifacts with intrinsic properties (Wendt 1999, pp. 110–111). He then defines culture in a broad, socio-cognitive sense, as made up of ideas, common knowledge, and collective knowledge. This way, he inadvertently misleads the reader into thinking that, because international affairs are cultural in a socio-cognitive sense, then they are cultural in the more specific sense that states, by definition, share the same normative belief system, or “culture of anarchy.”

We can restate this problem as follows: Wendt has conflated human culture (the distinctively human cognitive skills, e.g., the ability to create ideas, common and collective knowledge) with common culture (e.g., adherence to the same norms). This confusion plagues virtually every page that he has written on this topic. Consider how he reads Bull and Waltz:

Like Realists, Bull associates highly conflictual anarchies (“systems”) with a state of *nature*, in which no shared ideas exist, and more cooperative anarchies (“societies”) with the presence of shared ideas [...B]oth sides are assuming that shared ideas depend on working together toward a common end. That suggests that in the absence of cooperation whatever order in the international system must be due to material rather than cultural factors. On that view, the relevance of an idealist approach goes up and a materialist one goes down, as the system moves from conflict toward cooperation (Wendt 1999, p. 253, emphasis in the original)

Bull argued that states may converge toward a normative consensus despite lacking a centralized authority, while realists deny this. Thus, for Bull, the relevance of a normative approach, and not that of an idealist approach, goes up as the system moves from conflict toward cooperation. Bull and Waltz agree that international systems/societies, including conflictual ones, are made up of ideas: anyone would agree with that, for shared ideas are a ubiquitous, cognitive feature of any social system (Moravcsik 1999, p. 674). Wendt instead uses the term “shared ideas” as a synonym for “shared norms” and claims that the absence of shared ideas/norms implies nature as opposed to culture. Part of Wendt’s confusion may be due to him having also conflated the “state of nature” term with “nature” in the sense of the natural realm (see the passage quoted above, second line).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The word “nature” may suggest otherwise, but when applied to international affairs the term “state of nature” refers to a pre-civil, not pre-social, or natural condition. Groups are formed by socialized individuals who have the cognitive ability to think; therefore, when interacting with one another, groups do not behave like apes or brutes in nature. The confusion comes from the fact that some philosophers (Hobbes, Spinoza) conflated pre-civil and pre-social state. Note, however, that jurists and philosophers who dealt specifically with international relations (Grotius, Pufendorf) correctly use the term to refer to a pre-civil,



The common culture versus human culture divide roughly corresponds to societal versus social relations (Mann 1986, pp. 14–15). Even if they do not share the same language and norms, two adults who have been socialized to a given culture during early childhood have the cognitive ability to recognize each other as humans, and engage in social actions (in a Weberian sense). A society, however, requires not only that individuals have socio-cognitive skills (e.g., ability to form common knowledge), but also that they converge toward a normative consensus (common knowledge that reflects the same norms). So shared ideas, in a socio-cognitive sense, are ubiquitous, but shared norms are not.

When states entertain social relations, or societal relations are precarious, one of the consequences may be that states become attentive to power and to military issues. So realism may be said to be a “materialist” theory simply in the sense that realists see international politics as social, but not strongly societal. Yet largely due to Wendt’s influential early writings, still today IR theorists are the sole among social scientists to use the term “social” as it had something to do with norms and values (Table 1).

This series of misunderstandings (materialism=biology, natural resources, and technological artifacts; state of nature=nature; human culture as opposed to nature=common culture) leads Wendt to make bizarre claims. He imagines anarchies “that have no culture at all,” in which war is impossible, or is “akin to the slaughtering of animals.”<sup>7</sup> Some of his examples, like the Aztec–Spanish encounter (ibid., p. 158), Mongols and medieval Europeans, and European colonization (ibid., p. 266) are borrowed from Hedley Bull. But Bull claimed that, in cases such as these, there is no common frame of rules and institutions, not that two groups of socialized individuals interact with one another like wild animals!<sup>8</sup> Wendt instead believes that states (or other groups) interact like animals or non-socialized infants at the beginning and that, after some rounds of interaction, they adhere to the same norms, even if they are enemies and fight. Arguably due to a misreading of Searle’s ontology, he thinks there can be wars and balances-of-power only after states have formed shared ideas about these concepts.<sup>9</sup>

Before proceeding, let me summarize the matter. For Waltz, international systems are social systems (states entertain social relations). For Bull, there is an international society (states entertain societal relations). Reading Wendt is like entering a parallel universe, where everything one is used to is different. Waltz’s, we are told,

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Footnote 6 (continued)

not pre-social condition. As Aron (1966, p. 482) pointed out, both civil society and the state of nature “sprang from culture, not from animal nature.”

<sup>7</sup> Wendt (1999, p. 266).

<sup>8</sup> Bull (1977, p. 42): “The Spaniards and the Indians were able to recognize each other as human beings, to engage in negotiations and to conclude agreements. But these dealings took place in the absence of any common framework of rules and institutions.”

<sup>9</sup> Wendt (1999, p. 266): “War is a form of collective intentionality, and as such is only war if both sides *think* it is war.” To back this claim Wendt cites Searle. Searle says that war: “is always a form of collective intentionality; hence it is a war only if people think it is war.” But as far as I can tell, he meant the people on each side of the conflict: see Searle (1995, p. 89). Cf. also Wagner (2007, p. 44): “War [...] is a ‘form of collective intentionality’ *on the part of each of the warring groups*, but not between them” (emphasis in the original).



**Table 1** Common culture and human culture

Human culture (as opposed to nature)	→	Social relations (distinctively human cognitive ability)	→	E.g., Wendt's "ideas in the heads," common knowledge, and collective knowledge
Common culture (a special case of human culture)	→	Societal relations (a special case of social relations)	→	"Ideas in the heads," common knowl- edge, and collective knowledge that reflect a stable, thick normative consensus

is a "materialist theory," and "materialism" means biology, natural resources, and technological artifacts with intrinsic properties. Against Waltz's alleged "materialism," Wendt claims novelty for the trivial point that states entertain social relations, and thinks that states either interact like animals in nature, or, as soon as they entertain social relations, they become part of the same culture—that is, social relations are taken to imply societal ones.

Not "societal" in Bull's sense, for Bull's appraisal of the societal element was very guarded. Wendt thinks that states are always embedded in the same norms, more or less internalized,<sup>10</sup> and, differently from Bull, Wendt (1999, pp. 253–254) claims that not only cooperation, but even conflict is the product of "bad" shared norms—a very strange thing to say, for one would not typically describe conflict as a societal convention, or think that states need to adhere to the same norms in order to fight.

The effect of this series of misunderstandings is that Wendt's influential early writings tend to mislead. He shifts the reader's attention towards a "culture versus physical materialism" controversy in which his case for culture sounds supremely compelling. But because he continuously conflates culture in a socio-cognitive sense (e.g., shared ideas) with a more specific definition of culture (shared norms), the reader is misled into thinking that, if she accepts the argument that states' relations are cultural in a socio-cognitive sense (a thesis that one must accept, because it is trivially true), then she must also agree that all states are always, by definition, embedded in the same norms.

Thanks to this "key rhetorical move" (Wendt 1999, p. 95), as he honestly calls it, Wendt gains acceptance for a cultural thesis which sounds pretty reasonable (against the absurdity of Waltz's alleged materialism), and claims to have driven home a much stronger, and contentious thesis—one which few readers would have accepted, had Wendt put it in plain English from the onset. It is possible, but highly improbable that all actors are, by definition, uniformly embedded in the same norms, more or less internalized. Long-term cooperation arguably requires that actors adhere to the same "good" norms, but conflict does not require that actors adhere to the same "bad" norms. Moreover, "bad" and "good" norms typically coexist, along with ambiguous norms, norms that have perverse effects, competing

<sup>10</sup> Wendt (1999, p. 254) distinguishes three degrees of norm internalization, but always within the context of a homogeneous model in which all actors are embedded in the same norms.





“good” norms adhered to by different actors, and cases in which action is simply not normative-driven.

The fact that Wendt cheated a bit with concept construction, however, is not a capital sin. At the end of the day, the issue of whether long-term, shared normative beliefs systems exist is to be decided empirically, not theoretically. The next section wades deeper through the historical record in order to evaluate Wendt’s claims.

## Empirical issue in Wendt’s theory

For Wendt, self-help stems from a commonly held, “realist” power-politics culture. If that is the case, one should expect that states over long periods of time are all (or almost anyway) of the same type. In other words, in a Hobbesian culture we expect to find mostly revisionists and unlimited revisionists; in a Lockean culture, mostly shallow revisionists and status-quo states. Let me thus scrutinize Wendt’s claims.

According to Wendt’s periodization, a Hobbesian culture of anarchy characterized Europe before 1648; a Lockean culture began in 1648; and a Kantian culture in 1945. Equating Waltz’s security-seeking assumption with the generalization that all states are status quo-oriented is a convenient procedure: since Wendt associates Lockean culture with status-quo egoism, at a single stroke Neorealism becomes a special case of Wendt’s broader framework. In a Lockean culture: “The death rate of states is almost nil; small states are thriving; interstate war is rare and normally limited; territorial boundaries are “hardened”.”<sup>11</sup> Krasner (2000) has criticized the death rate argument by pointing out that powerful nations do not need to conquer secondary states, for they have cheaper ways to control them and interfere with their affairs. I agree with that criticism, but there are other problems with Wendt’s periodization.

It is doubtful that the Peace of Westphalia paved the way for nonintervention, respect of sovereign rights and the politics of status-quo egoism Beaulac 2000; Croxton 1999, 2013; Glanville 2013; Keene 2002, pp. 16–21; Krasner 1999, pp. 9–42; Nexon 2009, pp. 273–281; Osiander 2001).

The Wars of Louis XIV do not square with Wendt’s characterization of a Lockean culture, but one might argue that this is just a time lag adjustment, albeit a long one. The eighteenth century, however, is a different matter. Many studies, particularly early studies, are in line with Wendt’s characterization (Morgenthau 1948, p. 139; Robson 1957, pp. 165),<sup>12</sup> but modern scholarship increasingly represents the eighteenth century as an age of almost unrestricted warfare. The occasional balance of power that resulted is seen more as a product of conflicting bids for hegemony than of a genuine restraint (Anderson 1961, pp. 212–213; Black 2005, pp. 50–53; Sofka 2001). The War of Austrian Succession, the 7 Years War, the partitions of Poland, and the Napoleonic Wars hardly square with the logic of Wendt’s Lockean culture.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 279.

<sup>12</sup> Not all of the early works depict the eighteenth century as an epoch of restraint and gentlemen’s wars. See Hassall (Hassall 1896, p. 2 and *passim*).



Schroeder (1986, 1992, 1994, pp. 572–582) and Mintzen (2013) have described the Vienna settlement and the Concert of Europe in terms largely compatible with Wendt’s Lockean culture. Even in this case, however, there are some problems. First, Wendt’s Lockean culture begins in 1648, not in 1815: 167 years is no time lag adjustment. Second, European overseas expansion and the rise of colonial empires are incompatible with Wendt’s Lockean culture.<sup>13</sup> Schroeder (1986, p. 13) claims that: “In the nineteenth-century system, international politics was essentially separate from colonial, maritime, and commercial competition between European powers in the non-European world.” Where did this separation come from? Part of the answer is normative<sup>14</sup>, but there are other things that may explain the relative peace in Europe and simultaneous overseas expansion by European powers: the distribution of power (Krahe 1992); change in warfare (Blainey 1973, p. 118); industrialization, nationalism, and urbanization, which made it harder to conquer, and more costly to rule, European populations, unlike non-European ones (Gat 2005).

Assume that Schroeder’s thesis is convincing. What about the crises of the late twentieth century, World War I, and World War II? They are not a problem for Schroeder’s thesis, which covers a limited period of time, but they are major problems for Wendt’s periodization. After three centuries of cultural evolution, at the climax of Wendt’s Lockean culture and just a few steps from establishing a Kantian culture, Europe was torn by war and filled with concentration camps. Moreover, Hitler would have probably won if not for the intervention of the USA (an external actor with preponderant power). Shortly after the USA got rid of the anarchic condition that in Wendt’s narrative “is a nothing,” Europe began the process of integration, and, a few years later, six European countries signed the Treaty of Rome.

### Temporary regressions

One finds no more than a few isolated passages where Wendt tackles these problems (Wendt 1999: 270; 272, first par.; 286, end of the page). He admits the possibility of:

[...] temporary regressions to a Hobbesian condition when a powerful state had an internal revolution and rejected Lockean norms altogether. The clearest examples are the French Revolution and subsequent Napoleonic Wars [...] and the rise of Hitler and World War II. In both cases exogenous changes in a few states led to a rejection of existing shared meanings in favor of private ones, and unlimited aggression in an effort to “share” the latter, which forced status quo states to comply with Hobbesian norms. (A similar story might be told about “rogue” or “pariah” states today) (Wendt 1999, p. 270)

Let us say that we accept that the Napoleonic Wars and World War II are the only exceptions. Isn’t this still a huge problem for Wendt’s narrative? And what remains

<sup>13</sup> Wendt (1999, p. 314) describes colonialism as a “Hobbesian process.”

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Keene (2002, p. 76ff) for the legal and normative aspects of European colonial expansion in the East Indies since the seventeenth century.



of Wendt’s thesis once we take into account the wars of Louis XIV, the wars of the eighteenth century, European colonialism, and the crises of the early twentieth century that culminated in World War I? When there are several exceptions to the rule, one has to wonder whether the rule holds—that is, whether the concept of a “culture of anarchy” makes sense or is a case of the “fallacy of the overwhelming exception” (Fisher 1970, pp. 127–130).

A second problem comes from the fact that the “temporary regressions” were temporary because Napoleonic France and Nazi Germany were defeated, but both went close to unifying the European system. In the case of Nazi Germany, the intervention of an external actor, the USA, led to the victory in World War II and made it possible to create a security community in Western Europe. Otherwise, the death rate of European countries could have been close to 100%. According to Wendt (1999, p. 134), “culture is rigid and difficult to change” and “Once a Lockean culture has been internalized there is little chance of it degenerating into a Hobbesian one, and similarly for a Kantian into a Lockean” (ibid., p. 312). But—and this is the third problem—culture’s resilience hardly squares with the two “temporary regressions” and with the other cases that Wendt omits to discuss.

A fourth problem is that Lockean countries may be simply nations that, having previously waged “Hobbesian wars” have become satisfied with the status quo, or unable to expand further. Wendt never thinks that Britain and Russia were as “Hobbesian” as Napoleonic France, or that the colonial demands of Imperial Germany pale in comparison with the British Empire. Either we simply define every status-quo state as intrinsically moral and every revisionist as a “rogue state,” or we must accept that the status quo is often the outcome of the last war and related territorial settlement, and that a nation can be unsatisfied with the status quo without being criminal.

A fifth problem is that a nation’s foreign policy fluctuates over the decades (if not from year to year) and by geographic area. France was a shallow revisionist during the War of Polish succession; a very moderate player, and actually a mediator, at the time of the peace of Belgrade (1739); a revisionist state that threatened the existence of a core actor during the War of Austrian Succession; an unlimited revisionist during the Napoleonic wars; and so forth. Prussia was a revisionist power during the first period of Frederick the Great’s rule; a status-quo power before the 1860s; a moderate revisionist during the wars of German unification. Germany was a revisionist power in the early 1900s; a revisionist power with unlimited aims in the 1930s (a legitimate case can be made that Germany’s aims were unlimited in 1914, too); and a peaceful country after World War II. The same goes for other states. One has to wonder whether it makes sense to associate systemic cultures to categories, like collectivism, revisionism, and status quo, so closely related to the ebbs and flows of politics, the personality of leaders, and mutable diplomatic conjunctures.

A sixth problem is that Wendt’s “exogenous shocks” are exogenous to socialization. The whole point of Wendt’s theorizing is that states’ role identities are constituted by, and sustained through socialization. After centuries of socialization to a culture of anarchy, how can it be that a state simply decides to adopt a radically different culture? We can relabel Nazi Germany as a “Hobbesian state,” but this becomes a category devoid of empirical content, for the role identity, in this case,



is not embedded (as it should be according to the logic of Wendt's framework) in a broader systemic Hobbesian culture, the product of a century-long process of socialization; we have just arbitrarily relabelled as "Hobbesian culture" the domestic preferences of an individual state.

The seventh and last problem concerns the states dragged into the Hobbesian culture. States embedded in a Hobbesian culture are willing to "threaten the life and liberty" of other states (Wendt 1999, pp. 266–268). But during Wendt's "temporary regressions," secondary states did not attempt to threaten other states' life and liberty; they were just reacting to aggression. In Wendt's odd narrative, Hitler attempted to "share" his private meanings with the other states, while a state's response to the aggressor becomes a form of norm compliance. Among Belgian and German decision-makers it was commonly known that their countries were enemies in May 1940. If we define common knowledge as a synonym for common culture, the two countries were part of a Hobbesian culture (Belgium was "forced [...] to comply with Hobbesian norms" as Wendt put it). But according to Wendt's framework, to say that Belgium in 1940 was part of a "Hobbesian culture" means that Belgium wished to "revise the life or liberty" of other states. We can stretch the concept of common knowledge as much as we want and pretend that it corresponds to a common "Hobbesian culture," but again this becomes a label devoid of content, because this "Hobbesian culture" is clearly not a shared normative belief system.

### **Systemic constructivism: a circular enterprise?**

Let me single out a few points to assess whether or not Wendt has discovered the "tacit ontology" of Waltz's model, generalized it, and demonstrated that anarchy is not problematic.

According to Waltz (1979, p. 131): "From the Treaty of Westphalia to the present, eight major states at most have sought to coexist peacefully or have contended for mastery." What is the difference between this statement and Wendt's Lockean culture + temporary regressions? There isn't any. Waltz sought to explain why the European states, differently from the US-USSR case, periodically slipped into major wars. Once we notice that Wendt's "temporary regressions" are not so temporary and are more numerous than he is willing to admit, Wendt's story becomes virtually indistinguishable from Waltz's. Wendt has just created the appearance of cultural uniformity, and of progressive cultural evolution, through definitional sleights of hand.

The fact that the World Wars are chronologically close to the establishment of a security community in Western Europe is an anomaly for Wendt's periodization. Even worse, the establishment of a security community in Europe is also chronologically close to Germany's defeat and occupation by the Allies, and to the establishment of informal American hegemony in post-WWII Europe. This seems compatible with Waltz's view that peace in Europe was largely a by-product of the geopolitical decline of European countries, as well as of American hegemony (1979: 70). How can a Lockean culture be "a condition of possibility for the truth of Neorealism" if



Lockean culture is all about status-quo egoism, while Waltz was very much aware that there are states who proceed toward economic and political integration?

By changing the meaning of “culture” and “materialism,” Wendt has (unwittingly, not deliberately) misled the reader into thinking that he has demonstrated something very important about anarchy, self-help, and international relations, when, in fact, he has not. He never gets tired of repeating how rare it is that biology, inanimate objects, and natural resources determine a social situation (Wendt 1999, pp. 121–122; 129; 157; 237; 256) and with emphasis makes the unoriginal point that social structures are made up of ideas: “Anarchy is a nothing, and nothings cannot be structures. Distributions of ideas are social structures” (Wendt 1999: 309). Some (not all) social structures are made up of ideas, but this is a simple cognitive fact. What one would like to know is whether “distributions of ideas” in a decentralized setting correspond to centuries-long, symmetric normative belief systems, but Wendt is not willing to discuss that thesis in detail. He seems aware that Europe from 1648 onward hardly squares with a narrative of status-quo egoism and progressive cultural evolution. His solution is to focus on a couple of anomalies, and arbitrarily relabel some states as “Hobbesian” and others as “Lockean.”

Had Wendt been willing to discuss more anomalies (or dubious cases), he would have been forced to add even more caveats, that is, to relabel even more states. Of course, the more we relabel, pretending that it makes sense to tailor-make a “culture of anarchy” for a state, or for various groups of states, or for various sub-periods of the 1648–1945 time span, the more we water down the concept of culture of anarchy. Split here and split there, the culture of anarchy dissolves into Waltz’s view of states as a heterogeneous group plagued by mid- to long-term instability.

And this is exactly what has happened. In a later article, Wendt (2003, p. 506) has argued that a world state is inevitable: “[...T]he political development of the system will not end until the subjectivity of all individuals and groups is recognized and protected by a global Weberian state. The key problem for any other architecture is unauthorized violence by rogue Great Powers. Until Great Power violence is accountable the system will be prone to instability [...]” Let us leave to one side Wendt’s claim about the world state. That aside, Wendt has admitted that anarchy is problematic: not all states are of the same type, some states do not rule out the use of force, and this is a major source of instability. But, this way, he has unwittingly rediscovered a variant of Waltz’s scope condition that anarchic systems remain unstable if at least some states is willing to use force (Waltz 1979, p. 118), and given up any argument for centuries-long systemic cultures in which all the actors are embedded.

This contradicts the key argument of Wendt’s career, for it amounts to rediscovering Waltz’s thesis. As Sárváry (2006, pp. 165–166) put it: “[In] Social Theory [...] progress towards peace rested on the assumption that ‘anarchy’ is not necessarily unstable. Wendt now returns to a Waltzian conceptualization of structure in his reliance on a structural explanation of war in the absence of centralized authority or the monopoly of legitimate use of violence.”



## Conclusion

The claim can mean that states' identities are not carved in stone, but can change; and that state relations are part of human culture, broadly conceived (they are not natural phenomena). The claim is the product of a questionable application of a "natural" versus "social" controversy that was best left to philosophers. No IR scholar thinks that international affairs are natural phenomena. In this sense, the claim "that anarchy is what states make of it" is trivially true.

The claim may also mean something more specific, namely that all states are of the same type across long periods of time, due to an underlying normative belief system they are simultaneously embedded in. In this second, more specific sense, the claim implies that anarchy plays little to no role in fostering conflict, for all the heavy lifting in the explanation of either competitive or cooperative dynamics is done by shared normative belief systems. Yet, Wendt provided little to no evidence for such shared normative belief systems and there is actually evidence they do not exist. Wendt himself in his later writings argued that states of different types interact with one another (which means that not all states are embedded in the same norms, as he had previously asserted) and basically returned to a Waltzian conceptualization of anarchy as unstable.

If I am right, Wendt's is not an isolated case, but should rather be seen as the poster boy of a broader tendency. R. Harrison Wagner has claimed that many political science theories (but he meant particularly IR theories) are "mythological creatures."<sup>15</sup> I agree. I think that many IR theories are the product of early intellectual mistakes that nobody spotted and that went viral. I believe, but I cannot demonstrate here for reasons of space, that the split between defensive and offensive realism largely hinges on misreadings of Waltz's own work and on pseudo-problems; that many "neoclassical realist" works are theoretically incoherent (see Narizny 2017); and that many constructivist theories, not unlike Wendt's, have just the appearance of originality, but, cloaked under a very complicated terminology, they are mostly reinventing the wheel.

The reason why many IR theorists "got away with it" is that negative findings and reassessment of previous works are virtually impossible to publish in peer-reviewed journal. Journals crave for positive findings, better if they are (or appear to be) strongly counter-intuitive, or contradict other findings. The result is that strongly counter-intuitive findings get a free pass even if they are wrong, while lesser truths which could add up to cumulation in science does not make it to the academic journals. As a consequence, the backlog of academic "mythological creatures" grows year after year without correction, and paradoxically this hinders the possibility of discovering the positive findings that journal editors crave so much for.

Wendt's is a case in point. His early writings were hailed as the epitome of originality in the 1990s, but the reader who plough through his early texts will discover that much of the originality is spurious. The problem is that nobody wants to wade into such details. Every IR scholar is familiar with the claim that "anarchy is what

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<sup>15</sup> Wagner (2007, p. 83).



states make of it,” but when drafting this article I found out (much to my surprise) that many, including scholars who have written articles and books on constructivism and on Wendt in particular, ignore its precise meaning. The claim is one of the many imprecise, vague, or “mythical” propositions that everybody in the field has heard, that many still cite approvingly (e.g., Donnelly 2012, p. 617; Donnelly 2015, p. 412), but whose exact meaning remains unclear to most.

Years ago, when discussing the roots of the IR theory crisis, theorists came up with every sort of fancy explanation, but none used Occam’s razor and mentioned the simpler one: that the theory crisis stems from the confusion and overall poor quality of many theoretical works. And yet, to the degree that one can generalize from Wendt’s case that explanation seems to be correct.

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