

Alexander Wendt's  
*Anarchy is what states make of it*  
Critical Analysis of the author's arguments

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**1. The author's main thesis and supporting arguments**

Anarchy in the international system does not produce by itself, self-interest and competitive power politics among states. Self-help and competitive power politics are not inherent to human nature as the classic realists would argue, and are not the inevitable result of the anarchic structure in the international system, as the neorealist would argue. They do not follow either logically or causally from Anarchy<sup>1</sup>. Instead, they are conceived as social constructions that are generated and affected by interaction among the social actors, and therefore, can be transformed into –or replaced by– other constructions or behaviors such as cooperative action.

The fact that we live in a self-help world today is only due to certain practices throughout the history that have shaped certain identities. These practices can perfectly change at any given moment, provided that the historical conjuncture allows this to happen, and by doing so, they would create a new set of identities that will conform the new structure through the process of interaction. In words of Alexander Wendt: "Transformations of structure of identity and interest through process are transformations of structure".

Institutions are relatively stable sets of identities and interests, and as such they are capable of transforming other identities and interests, for example, those of a state. The author examines three different ways in which institutions can transform identities and interests in order to escape the Hobessian world in the international order. These are: 1) Through the Institution of

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is what states want it to be", p.394

Sovereignty; 2) Through an evolution of cooperation and 3) Through the intentional efforts to transform egoistic identities into collective identities.

1) Through the Institution of Sovereignty

Wendt argues that sovereignty can transform identities because the concept of sovereignty itself is based on a social construction that resulted from certain practices. The concept involves certain elements such as “territorial property rights”, and the mutual respect of these rights, as a constitutive element that complete its meaning. Certain institutions such as the Peace of Augsburg and the Treaty of Westphalia serve as legitimizing documents of these principles.

2) Through an evolution of cooperation

Cooperation can follow from rationality among two international actors that although may fear a threat in each other, an initial attack from one side could close the possibility of achieving certain goals that could not be achieved unilaterally.

3) Through intentional efforts to transform egoistic identities into collective ones

Wendt admits that processes of identity-formation under anarchy are concerned first and foremost with preservation or “security” of the self, the power structure that will result depends on the extent and the manner in which this process takes place. In this way, the concept of security among different actors can be shaped according to collective premises. This initial behavior creates a precedent of intersubjective meanings, that if repeated over time, the mechanism is reinforced.

Wendt exemplifies this argument through the role of the USA in the international context. As a power, it does not have the same meaning for the State of Cuba or the State of Costa Rica, as it does nowadays Russia or it did back in the former Soviet Union.

The new political situation in the post cold war period has made it difficult for both the USA and the Soviet Union to redefine their identities and interests in a world no longer driven by ideological competition that could justify their mutual hostilities.

## **2. The main weak points of the author's thesis and arguments**

**a) Predisposition to one particular meaning of Anarchy.** Wendt admits that even recognizing the social construction of international concepts, neorealists may be right in holding that institutions might make just a small difference in shaping a other identity than that of self-help in the international system, and according to realists, this international institutions would be weak and inherently unstable, since without the power to transform identities and interests they would be manipulated by the stronger actors. Following from Wendt's analysis about the preexisting elements in the international state of nature, namely the body, and the sense of survival, the uncertainty of the other actor's body (the State), we can assume a natural predisposition to build a defensive identity designed to protect one's integrity from the threat of predatory actors even from before their interaction has taken place.

**b) Unequal actors would have unequal interactions.** Considering that in nowadays international system, power lies in economical capacity, population, size and peligrosity of the army, among other factors, this unequal position would limit States' capacity to cooperate in equal terms.

**c) State as the starting point unit can be seen as a barrier to global cooperation.**

Considering that in nowadays international order, the State is the basic unit through which international interactions take place, the States' identity is in direct relation with the identity of the people "belonging" to that State naturally creates a first identity over the "international identity" that individual can also claim to have. If we are dealing with social

constructions, why do we need to limit our identity to that of the State? The clash of nationalistic identities has been a major cause of war throughout the history.

**d) Power shift seen as a necessary condition to overcome the Hobessian world in the Anarchic international structure.** According to Wendt, the first cooperative interaction between two actors will leave a precedent for future interactions. If repeated for a period of time, they will become a practice. However, unless this practice turns into an institution with binding power –through which the actors that created it, renounce to their individual power and deliver it to the institution- the practice can be broken at any given moment. Power must be given to the institution for it to shape the structure. However I agree that in order for this to come to practice, the previous stage should have to be the one related to identity and interest formation one.

**e) Transformation of identities seems to be a hard if not impossible task to achieve.** Even when self-help systems can be understood as socially constructed, realists can still argue that after identities and interests have become institutionalized, they are almost impossible to transform.

**f) Flaws of cooperation as a means of creating identities in the Anarchic structure.** Even though, Wendt admits that the evolution of cooperation can eventually lead to transformation of identities and interests, the process can be a slow one, and it presupposes that actors do not identify negatively with one another, which in practice, it has become a constant.

### **3. Conclusions**

Wendt's constructivism is a powerful theory that could demonstrate that even the unquestionable concept of power creates its meaning through historical practices that can vary, thus varying its content (identities and interests). Self-help is therefore the result of

certain practices among the international actors that could be recreated through a different process of interaction. For example, USA's identity as the "leader of the free world" and "international savior" has been shaped through interactions. This concept of power has not been invented out of nothing, and it is not the responsibility of nor the USA, nor the actors that validate its power, but the totality of the interaction of those elements in a particular historical circumstance. The biggest challenge of this theory will be to create a new concept of power in which peoples identities are closely engaged, as international actors, overcoming the barrier of the State's identity.