

### Chapter 3: “Ideas all the way down?”: on the constitution of power and interest

This chapter shows that much of the apparent explanatory power of ostensibly “materialist” explanations is actually constituted by suppressed assumptions about the content and distribution of ideas.

The *realist and neorealist* approaches of IR are too exclusively focused on power (understood ultimately as military capability) and interest (egoistic desire for power, security, or wealth), and, to a lesser extent, international institutions. They do not recognize the difference ideas make. But *idealism* is also flawed, because it makes the same mistake of treating materialist factors and ideas separately, simply putting more emphasis on ideas. It cannot be ideas all the way down because ideas are based on and are regulated by an independently existing physical reality.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, both approaches fail to recognize that ideas make a difference mainly *through* power and interest, and that, in turn, the explanatory power of power and interest (materialist) factors is largely explained by the role of ideas, whereas “brute” material forces, that is, things which exist and have certain causal power independent of ideas have a very limited explanatory power.

Wendt proposes a *social constructivist* approach, which focuses on the extent to which ideas *constitute* the ostensibly “material” causes in the first place. This does not mean that ideas are more important than power and interest, which remain as important as they were, but that **power and interest have the effects they do in virtue of the ideas that make them up**. The meaning of power and the content of interests are largely a function of ideas:

1. The meaning of the distribution of power in international politics is constituted in important part by the distribution of interests.
2. The content of interests are in turn constituted in important part by ideas (which have a constitutive role, *not* a causal one).<sup>2</sup>

“The constitutive debate between materialists and idealists is not about the relative contribution of ideas versus power and interest to social life. The debate is about the relative contribution of brute material forces to power and interest explanations. Materialist cannot claim power and interest as “their” variables; it all depends on how the latter are constituted”.

Materialist explanations acquire their causal powers only in virtue of the *contexts of meaning* which make them what they are. Therefore, much of the apparent explanatory power of ostensibly “materialist” explanations is actually constituted by suppressed constructivist assumptions about the content and distribution of ideas. This is the case with Waltz’ materialist theory of structure, which rests on implicit assumptions about the distribution of interests –and confuses materiality and objectivity.<sup>3</sup> This is why Wendt tries to reduce

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<sup>1</sup> “Brute material forces” (military resources, technology, geography and natural resources, etc.) have independent effects on international life, mainly by defining for all actors the outer limits of feasible activity and the relative cost of pursuing various options that require physical activity. One could consider that material constraints can be eliminated over time by human intervention, so that in the long run it is ideas all the way down. BUT since the extent to which material constraints can be overcome is not clear, and since in the short run material constraints are not negotiable, brute material forces have some irreducible explanatory power.

<sup>2</sup> Ideas at the macro level of the international system get into the heads of states and become interests at this other, more micro level of international structure. Later on in the book, he argues that these interest-constituting ideas are in turn constituted by the *shared* ideas of the international system.

<sup>3</sup> “Waltz has made an assumption about the distribution of interests in the system as a whole, and in so doing he has added to his theory of structure two things which he says do not belong there: non-capability attributes

“materialism” to a rump definition focusing on materiality per se (cf. footnote 1): this gives a firm ground to the study of the impact of interests.

Since power and interest explanations presuppose ideas, ideas on the one hand and power and interest on the other should not be considered as rival causes. Wendt refuses to be caught in the either/or dilemma between idealism and materialism. “Material” explanations should be complemented by inquiries into the discursive conditions which make them work:

“when Neorealists offer multipolarity as an explanation for war, inquire into the discursive conditions that constitute the poles as enemies rather than friends. When Liberals offer economic interdependence as an explanation for peace, inquire into the discursive conditions that constitute states with identities that care about free trade and economic growth. And so on

Consequently, the “distribution of ideas” in the system is the most fundamental factor in IR, and understanding how this distribution operates should be the core of scholars’ inquiries.<sup>4</sup>

Against rational choice theorists, Wendt argues that only a small part of what constitutes interest is actually material. The core of rationalist explanations is the view that preferences and expectations generate behavior: “desire plus belief equals action”. Moreover, rationalists think that desire (or preference or interest) and belief (or expectations or ideas) as distinct variables, which suggest that desires do not depend on beliefs and are therefore material. (finally, they usually do not ask where interests come from). Wendt’s argument<sup>5</sup> is that desire is not separate from belief but constituted by it. Desire (interest) indeed has both a cognitive and a deliberative basis: interests are themselves cognitions or ideas, and they are the result of an internal deliberation (which implies that reason is added to the model: desire plus belief plus reason equals action). In short: **“interests are beliefs about how to meet needs”**.

But this leaves open the question of what needs are about. Wendt claims there are 2 kinds of needs: identity needs (which reflect the internal and external structures that constitute the actors as social kinds – and cannot be easily theorized) and material needs, which can be derived from “human nature”. Wendt then exposes a “rump materialist “theory” of human nature”, listing 5 kinds of material needs: physical security, ontological security (need for stable expectations), sociation (need for contacts), self-esteem, and transcendence (need for development and improvement of one’s life conditions).

Wendt points out that even if they are debatable, such theories are actually needed to explain human behavior –and for instance how interests are constituted, and that the introduction of “biological realism” does not rule out the importance of social construction.

The point of such an idealist approach to the study of interests in IR is threefold:

- It emphasizes the need for empirical research studying the content of real world state interests
- It suggests ways to operationalize the relationship between cognition (agency) and culture (structure)

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(egoistic motivations), and the quality of relations among units (self-help). In other words, he has made an assumption about the *social* structure of international politics. This does not make his theory of structure wrong, just underspecified.

<sup>4</sup> Wendt claims that this approach avoids the trap in which Neorealists are caught by arguing that ideas have a causal impact. It is indeed incoherent, says Wendt, to claim that ideas are relatively autonomous while affirming that the material base remains still determinant in the last instance.

<sup>5</sup> Backed by “a growing body of scholarship in philosophy, cognitive psychology, anthropology, and even economics”!

- It suggests new possibilities for foreign policy and systemic change. If, on the one hand, the self-fulfilling character of culture makes it difficult to change interests and beliefs, on the other hand it nonetheless opens the door for change through discursive processes of deliberation, learning, and negotiation.

Wendt finally formulates his view as follows: How agents perceive the world is important in explaining their actions, and they always have an element of choice in defining their identities and interests. However, holism or structuralism, which holds that social structures have effects that *cannot* be reduced to agents and their interactions, tempers or complements this idealist view. Among the effects of structures is the shaping of identities and interests, which are conditioned by discursive formations –by the distribution of ideas in the system- as well as by material forces, and as such are not formed in a vacuum.

Chapter 4 addresses the effects of the distribution of ideas in the system, and the sense in which it might be structured.

#### *Chapter 4: Structure, agency, and culture*

Social constructivism is about both idealism and structuralism. Structuralism means that “structures” have effects not reducible to agents. Wendt identifies three such kinds of structures: material structure, structure of interests, ideational structure, all being articulated and equally necessary to explain social outcomes. “Without ideas there are no interests, without interests there are no meaningful material conditions, without material conditions there is no reality at all”. Therefore, it is best to think of the social system as a singular structure. But how about the relative weight of each component of this structure?

The key is to understand how interests work. Materialists privilege material conditions, and try to show that they largely determine interests. Idealists privilege ideas, and try to show that they largely determine interests. To overcome this opposition, Wendt focuses on the ways in which distributions of ideas may be structured and relates to interests.

To address the complexity of cultural structures, in both their nature and their effects, Wendt sets up a typology based on three distinctions:

- (1) between the two **levels** on which they are organized, micro and macro, manifested as common and collective knowledge respectively. Common knowledge is a concept of game theory, which provides a useful model of how culture is structured at the micro-level. Common knowledge concerns actors’ beliefs, about each other’s rationality, strategies, preferences and beliefs, as well as about states of the external world. Specific cultural forms like norms, rules, institutions, conventions, ideologies, customs and laws are all made of common knowledge. Common knowledge is nothing but beliefs in heads, nothing but shared mental models. But constructivism adds to this an emphasis on the constitutive aspect of culture, at the macro level, through Durkheim’s idea of collective representations or knowledge. These are knowledge structures held by groups which generate macro-level patterns in individual behavior over time. In t
- (2) between their causal and their –often neglected- constitutive **effects**. Causal effects describe a change in the state of Y as a result of a change in the state of an independently existing X. Constitutive effects describe how the properties of an X make a Y what it is. These differences are reflected in the terms appropriate to characterizing the relationship between agency and structure. The former is a

relationship of interaction or co-determination, the latter of conceptual dependence, or mutual constitution.

(3) between their effects **on** behavior and on identities and interests

Wendt's approach gives equal weight to agency and structure, which are *mutually* constitutive and co-determined: structure exists, has effects, and evolves only because of agents and their practices. This means that the dependence of structure on agency and the social process is both constitutive and causal. In a both causal and constitutive sense, structure is an on-going effect of process, at the same time that process is an effect of structure (!). Wendt captures the two effects in the idea that culture is a self-fulfilling prophecy: culture tends to reproduce itself, and must do so if it is to be culture. The reason why culture reproduces itself is that socially shared knowledge plays a key role in making interaction relatively predictable over time, generating homeostatic tendencies that stabilize social order.

But a lot remains to be done to clarify the ways in which cultural structures affects international politics.