

Introduction

The structure of social systems consists of material conditions, interests, and ideas. Materialists (read rationalists) privilege material conditions in shaping interests; idealists (read constructivists) privilege ideas. Wendt seeks to identify how ideational structure relates to interests.

Good definition of construction/idealism: "People act toward objects, including each other, on the basis of the meanings those objects have for them." We can consider a distribution of knowledge (= beliefs that actors take to be true) just as we can consider a distribution of capabilities. We're interested only in socially shared "knowledge", or "culture," not individual (private) beliefs. Shared knowledge can be conflictual or cooperative. Culture can take the form of norms, rules, institutions, ideologies, organizations, threat-systems, etc.

The constructivist/rationalist debate about culture mirrors the holist/individualist debate over how agents and structures relate. Holists say that structure has irreducible properties; individualists believe structure can be reduced to properties and interactions of agents. Wendt wants to be synthetic. He makes three divisions: between micro and macro structure, causal and constitutive effects, and behavior and identities/interests (properties). His perspective is that the constructivist/rationalist debate is an empirical debate over different aspects of how reality is structured. (ists are most interested in macro constitutive properties). He also adds a third level of analysis to Waltz's unit level and systems level: the interaction level. (The latter two are both structural.)

Two Levels

Wendt separates Waltz's "system" into "system" and "interaction."

Micro-structure

The interaction level is Wendt's micro-structure. He identifies two different forms of interaction: where they treat each other as a part of an environment (market economics) and don't consider each others' choices and actions, or where they do (game theory). He notes that Waltz's theory of structure is dependent on unit-level properties due to the distribution of capabilities. Interaction theories explain choices and outcomes; unit-level theories explain choices (foreign policy).

Macro-structure

Wendt explains that Waltz's causal mechanism (a sort of natural selection effect) operates at the population level, and is thus a systems-level explanation. However, the macro-level states observed have *multiple realizability*: many different micro-structure foundations can explain the same macro-level state, so that macro levels cannot be reduced to micro-level explanations. Also, some causal mechanisms only exist at a macro level, even though they depend on micro-level mechanics and thus cannot exist without them (unique things happen at big scales which aren't predicted by small-scale theories) Wendt calls this dependency-without-reducibility *supervenience*. Classic example is the "mind," which supervenes the physical "brain." Minds depend on brains; minds cannot be reduced to brains; two minds are in the same state if and only if two brains in the same state. Thus, macro theory is important.

Culture as common and collective knowledge

Wendt separates social interaction from cultural interaction in that the latter requires shared beliefs. In the previously developed typology, collective knowledge (macro, "mind") supervenes common knowledge (micro, "brain"), which is reducible to individual beliefs (unit, "neuron"). Game theory provides a useful concept of how culture is structured at the micro level through its concept of common knowledge (which tells you which of the multiple equilibria are most likely based on common understanding). Constructivism should thus add to our analysis of macro structure of culture.

Collective representations are "knowledge structures held by groups which generate macro-level patterns in individual behavior.": e.g. capitalism, Westphalian sovereignty, states. Collective knowledge may not reflect individual beliefs; instead, reflects a group decision which individuals accept as legitimate (i.e. political platforms). [cf the problem of preference aggregation in microeconomics]. Group beliefs are inscribed in "collective memory." Thus, culture is more than the summation of shared ideas of individuals, but is communally sustained.

Two Effects

Culture has effects in two ways: causally (regulatory norms) and constitutively (constitutive norms). This is an artificial distinction; all norms have effects in both areas (since the question "who am I?" also affects "what should I do?") These effects can be on behavior, properties (identities and interests), or both. Rationalists take properties as exogenous, focus on causal effects on behavior, and are "individualists," while Constructivists concentrate on causal and constitutive effects on identities and interests.

The debate between individualists and holists is not about whether culture constructs agents, but rather whether it is limited to causal (individualists) effects or includes constitutive ones (holists).

Wendt, Alex, "Structure, Agency, and Culture," *Social Theory of International Politics*, Ch. 4.

Causal effects

(Exclusively) Causal relationships only exist between independently existing entities. Then for individualists, agents must not depend on each other for their existence. Therefore, at some level agents must be self-organized.

Wendt uses Schelling's example of two people meeting in NY on a given day: they agree to meet at the info booth at Central Station. This is a game-theoretical analysis of the causal effects of shared understanding on behavior; he notes that the meaning of the meeting is not included in the analysis, ignoring constitutive effects.

Individualists allow for social construction of agents, as long as the construction refers only to the properties and interaction of independently existing individuals. This ignores collective knowledge. Socialization can be divided into "simple" learning (conforming behavior to social expectations) and "complex" learning (identity and interest formation) Wendt claims that rationalists should pay attention to symbolic interactionists, who believe that identities and interests are formed both through causal mechanisms (how others treat them – "reflected appraisals") and constitutive mechanisms (identities are related to the identities of others – "altercasting" and "role taking")

Constitutive effects

Social structure constitutes agents, too; e.g. language constitutes thought. Interactions cannot be reduced to beliefs of independently existing agents. Do the desires and beliefs of states, who act with "intention," exist only in their heads, or are they constituted out in the world? Wendt argues yes, since desires and beliefs towards other objects are dependent on collective understandings of what those other objects are (definitions). The difference between an intent of "intervention" and "aggression" by a dominant state depends on systemic understanding. Similarly, whether a dominant state is a "hegemon," where states cooperate with it, or a "imperialist," where others resist it, depends on the system, not on whether the dominant state thinks it is one or the other.

Toward a synthetic view

Culture has causal and constitutive effects on agents; there are some irreducible systems effects (holism), but agents are ultimately self-organizing (individualism). What matters for an actor is what is going on inside that actor's head, but the system will respond regardless of the individual's construction. A purely constitutive analysis of intention is inherently static; a purely causal one leaves actions without meaning. We should differentiate between "narrow" content (actor's thoughts) and "broad" content (collective meaning of actions).

Sovereignty, for example, is self-organizing though obtaining exclusive authority over a territory, but it is also a right constituted by mutual recognition, which carries certain benefits (freedom from interaction) and capacities (standing in international law).

Conventional (von Neumann-Morganstern) game theory is individualist, making assumptions about the structure of the game, which has effects on the players. "Wittgensteinian" game theory is holist, treating structure as shared knowledge that constitutes agents with identities and interests. These are compatible since they have different goals. Each presupposes the other. The trick is to disentangle what is social about agents from what is not.

Culture as a self-fulfilling prophecy

We have a good framework in IR for thinking about agency and interaction, but not structure. Waltz's material structure is a start, but only a start. The problem with neorealism is not structuralism, but materialism; if it included idealism, it would predict more. But it is important to keep in mind that structure is instantiated by process and social interaction. Structural theorizing and process theorizing answer different questions.

Culture is self-fulfilling because it defines situations; as such, actors' actions will tend to reproduce culture. (e.g. traffic lights self-fulfill because if you violate them, you'll get into an accident.) Culture increases certainty and reduces transaction costs. It is an on-going accomplishment. But it is also contested for five reasons: 1) norms/rules/institutions can contradict each other. 2) agents are never perfectly socialized, 3) unintended consequences can change beliefs, 4) exogenous shocks can change beliefs, 5) new ideas can be created from within a culture.

Conclusion

Neorealists assume that the structure of international politics is determined by anarchy and the distribution of material capabilities. Wendt accepts that there is a material basis, but ideas supervene on this material base, and interests are constituted by ideas. But the separation between material and ideational structure is analytical; ultimately there is just one structure. The question is not whether culture exists in IR; the question is how significant cultural superstructure is in governing state behavior.