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Desire all the way down

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Alex Wendt's *Social Theory of International Politics* demonstrates perhaps more long and hard thought about social theory and its implications for international relations theory than most international relations scholars have dared to venture into. He admirably attempts to do in an explicit manner what most scholars in the discipline do only implicitly and often accidentally: suggest a social theory to serve as the foundation for theorizing about international relations. However, there are problems with his approach, a hint of which can be found in the epigraph he has chosen: 'No science can be more secure than the unconscious metaphysics, which tacitly it presupposes'. Because metaphysics cannot ultimately be proven or disproved, it is inherently insecure. The insecurity and instability of the metaphysical presuppositions present in *Social Theory* are not difficult to find, and what Wendt ends up demonstrating, despite his objective *not* to, is the absence of any secure, stable, and unambiguous metaphysical foundation upon which IR theory could be firmly anchored. Indeed, what *Social Theory* does illustrate is that there is no such ultimate centre within the discipline except the powerful desire to maintain the illusion of first principles and the essential nature of things. If I may paraphrase Wendt, this is a 'desire all the way down' in that it permeates his relentless quest for the essence of international relations. Two goals characterize this desire: on the one hand, to take a critical stance toward more conventional international relations theory such as neorealism and neoliberalism; on the other, to maintain unity, stability, and order within the discipline. *Social Theory* oscillates between these two goals and in doing so deconstructs the very foundations it seeks to lay.

Categorization/classification is key for *Social Theory*. In order to develop a *scientific* theory of the international system, which Wendt very much wants to do, constructs must be clearly defined and distinguished one from another. However, the complexity of both the subject matter Wendt is dealing with and the nature of what he is trying to do, makes this a near impossible task. For example, the constructs of agents, structures, processes, and practices are central to *Social Theory*. While each of these is discussed extensively, I, for one, am left a bit confused. The state is both an actor with an identity, interests, and agency *and* a social structure (pp. 217–18). Corporate agents are a particular kind of structure. Systems can be intentional agents (p. 216). Agents and structures are themselves processes (p. 313). Practice and process apparently mean the same thing (p. 313). Practices are governed by pre-existing agents and structures, but these pre-existing agents and structures are themselves produced by practices. How can all this be? I feel a bit like Alice after she fell down the rabbit hole. Actually, however, there really is no problem with all of these things being the case. The problem arises when Wendt suggests and attempts to

make this complex, rather amorphous state of affairs amenable to positivist social science.

A similar problem arises with the constructs of ideas and materiality, also central to *Social Theory*. While Wendt concedes that ideas give material forces meaning—and indeed, this is one of his important contributions—he ultimately clings to a classificatory scheme whereby the two constructs are unproblematically dichotomized, a scheme which easily deconstructs itself. This self-deconstruction is evident in Wendt's assumption that human nature is a material force. It is truly puzzling as to how sociation, self-esteem, and transcendence can be considered material (according to Wendt's understanding of material as something that stands in opposition to ideas and sociality). Surely ideas are significant both in defining and satisfying these needs. Thinking of ideas and material forces in dichotomous terms points to a prevalent misconception regarding the postmodernist version of constructivism from which Wendt wants to distance himself: the notion that postmodernism is not anchored in the world, that according to the postmodernist view 'we cannot even know if seemingly observable entities, like cats and dogs, exist out there in the real world' (p. 49). This is surely an exaggeration. Though I know of no postmodernist who has actually written about the existence or non-existence of cats, I think it is safe to suggest that for a postmodernist it is not the physical existence of furry little animals with whiskers that would be in question, but what these furry little creatures *are*, e.g. sacred and revered deities as in ancient Egypt or overbreeding pests that befoul the streets and alleys and should be euthanized.

Personally, I have no problem maintaining an ontological scepticism when it comes to social and political theorising and at the same time asserting the unequivocal reality of my own four cats. The issue is, of course, quite a bit more serious than the rather arcane debates about the existence of cats and dogs, pencils and papers, tables and chairs. By not problematizing the ideas versus materialist opposition, an important aspect of postmodernism is misrepresented. The assumption is made that there is agreement within all branches of constructivism that it is *ideas* that socially construct things, whereas the focus for many postmodernists is *discourse*, which is not synonymous with ideas. This bears directly on *Social Theory*, because when the focus shifts from ideas to discourse it also shifts from pre-existing agents to the relative autonomy of discourse which cannot be reduced to the intentions, motivations, interests, desires, etc. of those human beings who do the speaking, writing, and other acts of signification. One does not need to assume pre-existing agents or structures as Wendt must do.

Arguably the most glaring example of contradictory desires is Wendt's goal of developing a social constructivist theory of international relations and his continued reification of the state. His definition of reification taken from Berger and Luckman (p. 76) is 'the apprehension of the products of human activity *as if* they were something else than human products—such as facts of Nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will'. Surely Wendt's *a priori* conceptualization of the state as a unitary actor is an example of reification. He seems to suggest that one should go with social construction when it is convenient and reify when it is not. This places severe limitations on what social construction can mean. States are socially constructed, *but* they can only be socially constructed as unitary actors. Wendt (p. 195) has trouble understanding how 'something can be an actor at all if it is not unitary'. Actually 'the state' is a good example of an actor that is, in fact, *not*

unitary (if we must think of the state as an actor at all, and it is by no means totally clear we should). Subjects acting in the name of the state are pulled by numerous opposing forces and in many contradictory directions. The overall effect of this is an abstract, conceptual entity, 'the state', that is in fact not unitary, but split, contradictory and even schizophrenic.

Arguably state agents, i.e. subjects who act in the name of the state, are aware of this lack of unitariness. It seems that international relations scholars are the ones who have trouble coming to terms with it. Wendt recognizes the problem of attributing unitariness to a corporate entity such as the state on pp. 221–2 but glosses over it, suggesting that 'even if a state has "multiple personalities" domestically they may manage to work together when dealing with outsiders'. The truth of the matter is that unitariness *must* be attributed to 'the state' in order for causality, prediction, and positive social science to work. What *Social Theory* demonstrates most forcefully, albeit unintentionally, is that 'the state', rather than being an essential entity that has desires, is itself a desire, a desire on the part of international relations scholars to secure our discipline. 'The state' arguably says more about us, our collective construction of international life and our desires than it does about what is happening in the world.

Social Theory tells an excellent story and will surely gain an important place in the annals of international relations theory. However, I would suggest that Wendt's very deep and important intellectual probings point to a story rather different from the one he has chosen to tell, i.e. a more radical, less acceptable one. Wendt may think that we are all really scientific realists, but I suspect he may be a closet postmodernist who fears the implications of his own questioning. F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote that 'the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function'.[1] *Social Theory* is the work of a first-rate intellect. However, it is stymied by the desire to remain firmly within a positivist tradition that has a great deal of trouble grappling with a world characterized by opposed ideas, contradiction, instability, contingency, and indeterminancy.

[1] F. Scott Fitzgerald, 'The Crackup', in Edmund Wilson (ed.) (New York: New Directions Books, 1936).