

# Social constructivism

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## 1 Introduction

Constructivist approaches have become firmly established within the spectrum of IR theories.<sup>1</sup> The term covers a diverse range of theoretical perspectives whose common denominator is the assumption that we have no direct access to “reality”. Instead the “social world”, as accessible to us, is constructed through the way in which we deal with others, the ideas we share about the “world” and how we experience our environment. Beyond that, it becomes more difficult to define what “constructivism” in International Relations actually means (see Fierke and Jørgensen 2001: 4). This is bound up with the fact that social scientific constructivism<sup>2</sup> is not just a theory in the narrower sense of the term. According to Jørgensen, the term “constructivism” is used in four different ways, depending on the level on which a given author engages with it: philosophical constructivism, constructivism as metatheory, constructivist theory building and constructivist empirical research (Jørgensen 2001).

The first level, philosophy, revolves around debates within the theory of science over whether there is a reality outside of our perception and how we can make statements about the “world” in the first place. On this level, we might apply the term “constructivist” to post-modern, social constructivist and even certain critical approaches. Metatheory is a theory about theories that surveys alternative explanatory approaches and possible systematic research programmes. With the help of a metatheory we can specify epistemological goals and gain insights into how we might formulate, apply and verify theories. In the first instance, constructivism as a metatheory does not make statements about specific phenomena within international politics or how they might be explained. Based on a number of key premises, the constructivist perspective instead opens up possible ways of comprehending an object of study and making statements about its character. But this means that different authors have different ideas about what constructivism actually is.

The first thing we can say is that constructivist approaches in International Relations are underpinned by ideas about its objects of analysis (ontology) based on the assumption that the social world is constructed. This goes hand-in-hand with the epistemological insight that knowledge is socially constructed. Ultimately, all constructivist writings aim to describe and explain, with the aid of various methods, how these constructions are produced. Constructivist approaches thus comprise a triangle of ontology, epistemology and methodology (see Figure 1).

There is consensus that constructivism – like rationalism – is not in the first instance a *substantial* theory within International Relations, in other words one with a particular content. Substantial theories that make statements about the phenomena of international politics would include deterrence theory or theories of the “democratic peace”.

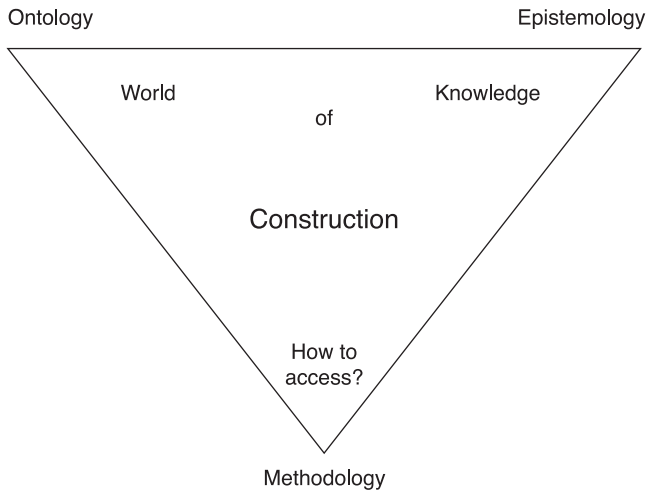


Figure 1 The constructivist triangle.

There are real historical reasons, as well as reasons related to the history of science or the discipline itself, why constructivist approaches have been accepted so rapidly within International Relations. As early as the 1980s, a theoretical debate began to take off within International Relations that Yosef Lapid described as the “third great debate” following those between realism and idealism and between traditionalism and behaviourism (Lapid 1989). This debate between positivist and “post-positivist” approaches saw an intensive effort to get to grips with the epistemological foundations of the discipline, an endeavour that called into question many assumptions about the nature of its objects of study such as anarchy or sovereignty (see, for example, Ashley 1988). In the 1980s, neo-institutionalism entered the theoretical debate within IR (see also the chapters on interdependence and regime theory by Manuela Spindler and Bernhard Zangl in this volume). It was in this context that Robert Keohane introduced the distinction between rationalist and reflexive institutionalist approaches in a much discussed essay (Keohane 1988), a distinction that was fundamental to subsequent debates on all approaches characterized by a nonpositivist conception of science or by interpretive and *Verstehen*-based methods.<sup>3</sup> Only in the second half of the 1990s did the term “constructivism”, which appeared in the work of Nicholas Onuf (1989), become established to refer to those approaches that underline the intersubjective quality of the social world and the reciprocal constitution of actor and structure, and that make the role of ideas, constitutive rules and norms, and the endogenous development of interests and identities, central to their analyses.<sup>4</sup> The events of 1989 accelerated the search for new theoretical explanatory models, since the discipline had to admit that it had not predicted the end of the Cold War with its existing analytical toolkit (Lebow and Risse-Kappen 1995). Socioeconomic and political changes such as globalization, environmental changes, an awareness of the rise of knowledge societies and the changed role of the state also confronted the discipline of International Relations with new theoretical challenges.<sup>5</sup>

Alexander Wendt, who will play a key role in the following discussion as our reference theorist, has been a source of stimulus for the theoretical debate on constructivist approaches

since the appearance of his first essay on the “Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory” in 1987 in the journal *International Organisation*. From the outset his conception of constructivism was marked by an attempt to define its boundaries with rationalism. Framed like this, it is claimed that constructivism occupies the middle ground between rationalist and postmodern approaches (see, for example, Checkel 1998; Christiansen *et al.* 1999; Reus-Smit 2009; for an in-depth analysis, see Adler 1997). An alternative view regards postmodern approaches as a variant of constructivism (Katzenstein *et al.* 1998; Adler 2013), if constructivism is understood in a broader sense as an epistemological stance.<sup>6</sup>

## 2 Constructivism as *via media*: Alexander Wendt

Although Alexander Wendt deliberately got “out of the constructivist business” (Schouten 2008: 2) some years ago, he is still one of the most prominent figures to have introduced constructivism to International Relations. He is now regarded as one of the discipline’s most important theorists, having developed a model of international politics anchored in a theory of science (see Jackson 2001) twenty years after Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics* (Waltz 1979). At the height of his influence critics warned against regarding Wendt’s work as representative of the full range of constructivist approaches, thus establishing a new “orthodoxy” (Kratochwil 2000). Despite all the criticisms of his version of constructivist theory,<sup>7</sup> there is no denying that Wendt has consistently discussed crucial issues in highly regarded essays, which have sparked off intensive debates and led to the establishment of constructivist approaches within the theoretical spectrum of International Relations.

One of the central foundations of Wendt’s work is his critical examination of neorealism as formulated by Kenneth Waltz (see the chapter by Niklas Schörnig in this volume). In his studies, Wendt too seeks to explain the phenomena of international politics in light of the structure of the international system. So in terms of the analytical level, Wendt, like Waltz, is operating on the systemic level. The structure of the international system, which Wendt regards as the foundation of action, is the starting point for his explanations, which is why his approach may be described as *structuralist*. The crucial difference from Waltz, however, lies in the fact that for Wendt it is not just material but also *immaterial factors* that are crucial to explaining international politics. In 1999 he brought together the ideas he had formulated over a decade in numerous essays in a book whose title both borrows and distinguishes itself from Waltz’s earlier work, *Social Theory of International Politics* (abbreviated as STIP in what follows). Following the appearance of STIP, Wendt was increasingly concerned with issues in the theory of science and philosophy of consciousness and started working on the theoretical foundations of a “quantum social science”. As yet, however, this exists only as a rough conceptual outline (Wendt 2006). In the following discussion, Alexander Wendt’s theoretical work as collated in STIP will play a central role.

Building one on the other, we can essentially identify three key issues that characterize his structuralist approach. The first is the question of how “structure” must be conceptualized in order to adequately explain processes within international politics; this led him to discuss the actor-structure problem (Wendt 1987). Second, based on the neorealist assumption that anarchy is the crucial structural ordering principle guiding the action of states within the international system, Wendt then turned to the broader issue of the importance of anarchy in explaining state action. For him, this discussion culminated in the oft-cited insight that “anarchy is what states make of it” (Wendt 1992a). But if anarchy is not the crucial explanatory factor in state action within international politics, then – and this was the third step – Wendt inevitably had to confront the question of what state action is based on. These ideas

and the formulation of models of international politics derived from different cultures of social interaction form the core of STIP.

## **2.1 *The actor-structure problem***

The debate on the relationship between actors and structures that began in International Relations in the second half of the 1980s is often regarded as one of the theoretical starting points for the constructivist turn within International Relations and as one of the key substantive debates. First, Wendt discussed “The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory” (Wendt 1987). This essay and another one by David Dessler (1989) gave rise to a lively debate.<sup>8</sup>

At the heart of the actor-structure problem lies the fact that from a social scientific perspective action is always embedded in specific structures. Because of this there are essentially two approaches to explaining social phenomena: either with reference to various actors and their attributes (individualist explanation) or with reference to the structures in which actions are embedded (structuralist explanation). Right from the start, Wendt’s interests lay in structural explanations. He considers these so crucial because for him they are the only way we can get at the ultimate bases of social action (Wendt 1987: 363). But there are different variants of explanatory approaches among the theories of International Relations, all of which assume the explanatory force of structures but that differ in how they view the importance and character of structure (its so-called ontological status) and how far-reaching its effects may be. Though anarchy and the international distribution of power are important structural elements of the international system for neorealists, Wendt rightly points out that neorealist explanations are essentially based on an individualist ontology and explain behaviour in terms of attributes on the actor level. The structure of the international system is defined, with regard for example to the distribution of power, according to specific attributes of member states (“distribution of capabilities”). These determine what the structure looks like, for example whether we are dealing with a bipolar, multipolar or even unipolar system. Logically, these attributes are ontologically antecedent to structure and impact on the behaviour of actors via the structure. World-system approaches, conversely, adopt a holistic perspective.<sup>9</sup> For them the structure of the international system is based on the organizing principles of the capitalist global economy, especially the form of the international division of labour (see also the chapter by Andreas Nölke in this volume). So this structure is based not on the characteristics of actors but is instead responsible for the characteristics actors develop in the first place. From a holistic (or, better, structuralist) perspective, then, structures exercise constitutive rather than merely causal effects on actors and their behaviour (Wendt 1999: 165–178).<sup>10</sup>

Wendt, however, criticizes both perspectives for taking an overly narrow view of the complexity of international politics (reductionism). They either make actors the basic units and regard them as given, so that they precede structures ontologically (ontological individualism) or, as in world-system theory, make structures the basic units, which are ontologically antecedent to actors (ontological structuralism). But they fail to adequately explain the characteristics and causal effects of these different basic units. Both standpoints work on the assumption that their basic units are pre-given and unproblematic. Essentially, neorealism lacks a theory of the state, in other words an appropriate theory of action, while the world system approaches lack a corresponding system theory.

Wendt’s proposal for overcoming this dilemma is based on Anthony Giddens’ theory of structuration (see Giddens 1984), the basic assumption here being that actors and structures

determine one another. This means on the one hand that structures are constitutive of actors and their interests while on the other hand actors constantly reproduce and maintain but may also change structures through their action. In this way structures not only act to limit behaviour. They also contain the “rules” that lay down for actors a particular repertoire of action options and thus constitute the foundation of social interaction. Each of these perspectives provides a different type of explanation as each provides answers to different questions. If structures are the point of departure, then the key question is how certain actions or certain patterns of action are possible in the first place. If we adopt the actor perspective, then the crucial issue is *why* a particular action *x* rather than action *y* occurred. In contrast to the structuralist variant, Wendt calls this actor-focused form of explanation “historical”. But the fact that Wendt links both perspectives to these questions also shows that he ultimately gives precedence to structures. It is structures that make action possible in the first place though they do not determine it. The choice of a particular action option becomes explicable from the actor-centred, historical perspective, according to which certain – exogenously pre-given – identities and interests of actors influence which of the structurally possible action variants is in fact selected. If we assume this reciprocal constitution of actor and structure there are consequences for how we might understand, for example, anarchy as a structural attribute of the international system and what this might mean for the action of states.

## **2.2 *Cultures of anarchy within the international system***

If Wendt’s ideas were initially informed by the insights of structuration theory, which is based on the interplay between actor and structure, then his essay “Anarchy Is What States Make of It” reveals a clear development in his work towards *processes* of social interaction and the endogenous development of interests and ideas. In this essay, borrowing from the term coined by Nicholas Onuf (Onuf 1989), Wendt for the first time refers to his theoretical approach as “constructivist” (Wendt 1992a: 393). The starting point for this theoretical development is the attempt to get to grips with neorealist and neoliberal approaches that shaped the theoretical debate in International Relations from the second half of the 1980s. Wendt asserts that both schools within this debate are incapable of explaining the development of interests and identities despite the fact that this is ultimately the foundation for understanding change within international politics. After the end of the Cold War, the discipline had to concede that its main analytical instruments had failed to recognize the processes that lead to this fundamental change in the structure of the international system. Wendt suggests that the rationalist orientation of both neorealism and certain neoliberal approaches was responsible for failing to acknowledge the complex learning processes that had brought about a redefinition of actor interests and identities. The dominant approaches had worked on the assumption that interests and identities are exogenously pre-given and focused on the behaviour-determining necessities produced by the structure of the international system as a seemingly anarchical self-help system. This diagnosis points up the attractiveness of “reflexive” or “constructivist” approaches since these were in a position to fill these very gaps and explain changes in interests and identities. Right from the outset, however, Wendt connects the turn to constructivism with the clear objective of building bridges both between the various “fringes” of the rationalist and constructivist camps and between “modern” and “postmodern” variants of constructivism (Wendt 1992a: 394). It is this aspiration to find an intermediary position, a *via media* (Wendt 1999: 47) between different and sometimes seemingly incompatible theoretical and epistemological positions that gives Wendt’s constructivist approach a very specific character while at the same time opening him up to attack from all sides.

Wendt grounds his analysis of the significance of anarchy within the international system in a number of key constructivist assumptions. He links this with the goal of proving the liberal-institutionalist thesis that international institutions are in fact in the position to change state identities and interests. Wendt thus assumes that actors act *vis-à-vis* objects or other actors on the basis of the meanings that these objects and actors have for them. Collectively shared meanings are constitutive of all the structures underpinning our action. Because meanings are collectively shared, actors experience a certain amount of identity formation, in other words, they achieve a relatively stable, role-specific understanding of themselves and the expectations others have of them. Identity formation is thus a process of the *social* definition of actors, which is based on actors' collective notion of themselves and the world. The study of identity is so crucial because identities underlie the development of interests. In contrast to the assumptions made by rationalist approaches, actors define their interests *at the same time* as they define the underlying situation. We may understand institutions as the relatively stable totality or "structure" of these interests and identities. Institutions are, as it were, congealed collective knowledge about oneself and the world and never exist independent of underlying identities. In other words, institutions and identities determine one another.

Based on these assumptions, Wendt criticizes the neorealist reading of anarchy, according to which the lack of a superordinate regulatory authority necessarily means that the international system is a self-help system in which states rely on power politics in order to survive. For Wendt, self-help is just one possible institution that may develop under conditions of anarchy – but it does not inevitably do so. As a result, Wendt doubts that there is just one inevitable "logic of anarchy" on the macro-level of the international system. Once it is clear, Wendt claims, that the foreign policy behaviour of states varies, then the question arises as to whether it is really true that this one form of international system, the anarchical self-help system, always develops on the micro-level of international interaction (Wendt 1999: 247). Wendt examines this question mainly in the final third of STIP. For him the answer is clear. According to his structuralist understanding, the anarchical structures do in fact constitute the key units, but these structures may very well differ in character on the macrolevel, which is why the international system may be organized in different ways.

This perspective on anarchy opens up if we understand the structure of the international system as a *social* rather than material structure. In line with this, Wendt works on the assumption that we can distinguish between at least three different structures within the international system, depending on which shared conception of rules actors are guided by. Within international politics, this conception of rules is shaped by how determinative violence is in the relationship between actors and their environment, which will influence whether states perceive one another as enemies, rivals or friends (see Figure 2).

Drawing on the concepts of the English School, Wendt calls the corresponding structures – which may then develop within the international system – the Hobbesian, Lockean or

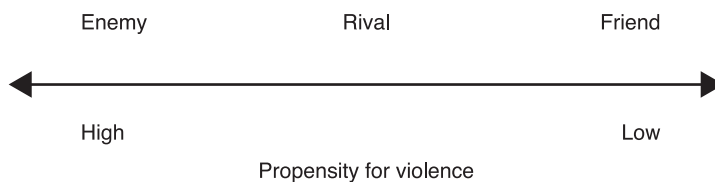


Figure 2 Conceptions of the roles of international actors.

Degree of cultural internalization of norms – based on	Belief in legitimacy			
	Interest			
	Coercion			
		Hobbesian culture (conception of role: enemy)	Lockean culture (conception of role: rival)	Kantian culture (conception of role: friend)
		Degree of cooperation (evident in increase in shared ideas)		

*Figure 3* The development of different international cultures.

Source: Wendt (1999: 254), expanded version

Kantian structure (see Wight 1991). These structures, and the norms they entail, embody different cultures of anarchy. Which type of structure is realized depends on two factors. The first is the extent to which these norms are internalized by the various actors. The degree of internalization can be determined by whether actors adhere to norms because they are forced to do so (neorealist perspective on norm compliance), because it is in their interest to do so (neoliberal perspective) or because they regard the norms as legitimate (sociological or constructivist understanding of norm compliance) (Wendt 1999: 250). For Wendt, the second key factor is the degree of cooperation. This finds expression in an increasing number of shared ideas, which in turn lead to a situation in which something like an international society or even community may develop (see Figure 3).

According to this distinction, only the Hobbesian structure would lead to an anarchical self-help system, because states perceive one another as enemies. The more states that do so, the more this perception shapes the dominant culture within the international system. As a result, the famous “war of all against all” would be due to ideas, not to the reality of anarchy, in other words the lack of a superordinate regulatory authority or human nature itself (Wendt 1999: 260).

A developmental process is inherent in the different cultures, and Wendt believes he can discern this process in the historical record. For him, the Hobbesian culture is characteristic of the period before the signing of the Peace of Westphalia (1648). With the development of the modern system of sovereign states, a qualitative structural shift occurred towards a legally safeguarded system of mutual recognition of the right to exist and the right to

property. This system is not free of violence, but its use occurs within the framework of international law, which makes states' behaviour predictable to a certain extent (ibid.: 279–281). For Wendt, historical developments since the end of the Second World War indicate the latest change in the quality of the international system. At least within the so-called OECD world, patterns of interaction appear to have developed that go beyond legally safeguarded cooperation. It is characteristic of this new culture that states deal with emerging conflicts without the use of violence and security is no longer a matter for the individual state but is regarded as a good to be produced jointly. Kant already described such a system in his *Toward Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* (Kant [1795] 2006), which is why this form of international system is also referred to as Kantian (Wendt 1999: 297).

Wendt's different cultures of anarchy demonstrate that states' action within the international system is embedded not just in material but also in ideational structures. It is these ideas that ensure that states' interests are defined in terms of content, that abstract concepts such as "power" are made meaningful and that states gain a clear idea of the strategies through which they are pursuing their interests. Which of these cultures dominates and to what extent a given culture is internalized is something that can only be clarified empirically. But we are still left with the question of how these cultural structures can be produced, maintained and reproduced through actors' action. In other words, how do we explain structural change within the international system?

### ***2.3 Identity formation and structural change within the international system***

The development of and changes in collective identities are key topics in constructivist research. As I briefly set out above, from a constructivist perspective identities determine actors' interests. Should these identities change, then actors' perspective on certain situations may also change, which may prompt a redefinition of interests. We can explain structural change within the international system in light of these processes. Wendt works on the assumption that processes of identity formation occur through interaction with other actors. This means that states are essentially constituted through engagement with other actors, not just on the state level but also – and, for Wendt, this is the starting point for all subsequent reflections – through interaction between states on the international level (Wendt 1994, 1996). In this context Wendt distinguishes, among other things, between so-called corporative and collective identity. States possess certain common attributes that are the foundation of their corporative (or individual) identity and through which they distinguish themselves as states. These common attributes can be traced back to certain material characteristics (political system, monopoly on violence, sovereignty, citizenry, territory) and motives for action (ensuring survival, autonomy, welfare, sense of collective self-worth), which are the same for all states and which lead to the state being understood as a coherent actor (Wendt 1999: 193–245). Wendt was later to defend this view vehemently against critics (Wendt 2004). Consequently, Wendt is no longer interested in how individual state identity comes about, now that he believes he has identified certain attributes of the "state as such". He now turns to the level of the international system and examines processes of cultural selection, which, he believes, lead to the development of collective or social identities. Here, two mechanisms of cultural selection – imitation and social learning – play an important role (Wendt 1999: 313–321). With reference to the fictional example of the first meeting between two actors who have never previously had contact, Wendt brings out how he believes social identities take shape (ibid.: 328–331, Wendt



1992a: 404f.). What emerges is that through social interaction actors do more than merely gain new information about one another. Through the mutual processes of role attribution in which they engage, and which they may accept through the way they respond to one another, they also reciprocally construct each other's key characteristics. This results in the development of specific actor identities. In terms of international politics, this means that a Hobbesian culture could become established only because, in their first encounter, states adopted a hostile stance towards one another. If we want to escape from the logic of this Hobbesian anarchy of the self-help system, what we need to do is redefine identities. In historical terms Wendt assumes that a shift has occurred away from a Hobbesian towards a Lockean culture and sees indications of a Kantian culture in at least parts of the international system. How might the requisite shift in identity take place?

Wendt identifies four explanatory factors as he searches for causal mechanisms that might explain in concrete terms the shift he discusses in certain parts of the international system away from a Lockean culture towards a Kantian one: interdependence (mutual dependence), shared fate, similarities in institutional characteristics and self-restraint (Wendt 1999: 343–363). The first three factors are necessary but in themselves or in combination they are not sufficient to change the identity of collective actors. Only when one or all three of these factors are coupled with self-restraint will identity begin to change. It is only when states impose rules of conduct upon themselves that we have evidence that they do not feel threatened by an “other” and will not necessarily cling to their current identity.

In his later work, Wendt goes so far as to predict that a world state is “inevitable” within 100 to 200 years (Wendt 2003, 2005). Again, what he sees at work here is a “logic of anarchy”, though one that differs from the scenarios portrayed in STIP. On the micro-level of human action, this process is neither linear nor does it appear deterministic. Yet Wendt again emphasizes the structural factors on the macro-level as a result of which, he believes, a world state with a global monopoly on violence will ultimately and inevitably emerge. Wendt sees as a key driving force the development of military technologies that are making wars ever more destructive. But this material factor alone is not enough to convince states to transfer the monopoly on violence to a world state. A world state would develop only if, in addition, the identity of states was to change in such a way that the loyalties of their own citizens were transferred to all the peoples of the world. Wendt sees the mechanism that could help bring about this shift in identity as grounded in individuals' desire for recognition. As soon as this aspiration is satisfied by mutual recognition, a collective identity will arise (Wendt 2003: 507–516).

The way in which Wendt conceptualizes identity change is characteristic of his constructivist approach. His epistemological assumptions, which are shaped by scientific realism, entail a positivist standpoint: he assumes that there is a reality beyond the observable and that science is especially well suited to producing knowledge about this reality. On an ontological level he counts himself a member of the constructivist camp since he assumes that ideas play a prominent role within the social world. Yet his goal is to achieve social scientific explanations of the effects of non-observable ideational factors (Wendt 1999: 47–91; 1998). Yet this concern to uphold a certain conception of science, a concern shared by most of his academic colleagues, also lays the foundation for a certain tension within Wendt's approach that invites criticism both from other constructivist approaches as well as non-constructivist ones. The key difference between the two camps lies in the fact that constructivists (broadly conceived) question the key scientific and especially epistemological views expressed by Wendt, while non-constructivist critics welcome Wendt's views in this regard for opening up points of contact with the mainstream debate.

### 3 Constructivism beyond the *via media*

It is striking that Wendt's understanding of constructivism is limited to a purely ontological perspective. As a result he tends to lose sight of the core of constructivist endeavours in philosophy and the social sciences, namely the question of how we ultimately obtain knowledge. In contrast to traditional epistemological positions, which focus on finding ways to narrow the distance between the object of knowledge and "reality" as much as possible, on the epistemological level constructivist approaches foreground the role of the knowing subject within the process of obtaining knowledge. From a constructivist perspective, then, all processes of understanding and perception are relevant so that cognitive and discursive processes and especially language as a vehicle of thought and knowledge play a prominent role (see also Zehfuß 1998; Onuf 2001). But the role of language cannot be reduced to the intersubjective mediation of "reality". One key departure point for constructivist approaches is the assumption that all knowledge is "theory-laden", that is, located within a specific linguistic frame of reference characterized in part by specific social practices. This casts doubt on the notion that reality can be grasped independent of our point of observation. Language thus becomes a key medium through which "reality" becomes accessible *and* at the same time constituted through the speech act. On the level of a philosophical conception of constructivism concerned with epistemological issues, postmodern approaches might also be described as "constructivist" (see also the chapter by Thomas Diez in this volume). Taking the "linguistic turn" in international relations seriously, a growing body of conceptual and empirical studies now focuses on the role of social communication from a "radical" constructivist approach either rooted in systems theory (e.g. Albert *et al.* 2008) or in different variations of poststructuralist discourse theory and analysis (e.g. Epstein 2008; Holzscheiter 2010). More recently, constructivist authors have drawn upon pragmatist approaches to conceptualize knowledge generation as a social and discursive activity (Friedrichs and Kratochwil 2009). All constructivist approaches in this broadly conceived sense that work on these epistemological premises have a perspective on the actor-structure relationship, the issue of anarchy within the international system and how identities take shape and change that differs from that of Wendt with his "moderate" social constructivism.

#### 3.1 *The co-determination of actors and structures as practice: rules and norms within international politics*

The mutual determination of actors and structures is one of the central starting points for constructivism. Though Wendt has popularized this idea within International Relations, in his theory building he ultimately privileges structures. Underlying this is the fundamental problem that in the actor-structure relationship as described in Giddens' theory of structuration it is unclear which mechanism serves to facilitate this mutual influencing. The answer implicit in the work of Nicholas Onuf and Fritz Kratochwil<sup>11</sup> is: rules and norms are the key connecting link between actors and structures. But they gain this status only if we do not regard them as part of structure but instead grant them independent ontological status. From a constructivist perspective, actors are always rule-guided actors. Norms and rules lay down for actors what they should do. But this "should" is not to be understood solely as constraining action. On the contrary, because rules *open up* possible actions and choices to actors, they endow them with the quality of actor in the first place. Rules are thus not only regulatory in character but are also constitutive of actors. At the same time, rules and the practices associated with them often form identifiable patterns of action that

create an institutional context, in other words the structure in which actors' action is embedded.

Sovereignty is one of the key practices within the international system. It is characterized by specific rules such as the precept of non-intervention and the attribution of particular rights and obligations, and these lay down certain action options. But at the same time sovereignty establishes key characteristics of states and constitutes states as actors within the international system. This is bound up with a bifurcation of political space into "external" and "internal" spheres. What this example demonstrates is that rules and norms make the process of the mutual determination of actors and structures comprehensible in the first place. In this process, language and communication must be understood as key social *actions* by means of which shared meanings are created. "Indeed, saying is doing: talking is undoubtedly the most important way that we go about making the world what it is" (Onuf 1998: 59). From this point of view, international relations are "structured by practices, which give meaning to international action" (Adler and Pouliot 2011: 1). Subsequently, constructivist scholars have increasingly engaged with cultural theories of social practices (Reckwitz 2002), "returning practice to the linguistic turn" (Neumann 2002).

### ***3.2 Anarchy and authority in the international system***

As we saw during the discussion of Wendt's constructivist approach, anarchy is considered the central ordering principle within the international system from which neorealism derives the inevitable logic of action known as self-help. Wendt accepts the assumption of anarchy in the sense of the lack of a central source of order and merely argues that the structure of the international system, as it forms under these conditions, depends on which conception of roles states are guided by. Onuf and Kratochwil, meanwhile, for whom rules are the main point of departure, or Richard Ashley from a postmodern perspective, arrive at a fundamentally different assessment of anarchy (Ashley 1988; Kratochwil 1989; Onuf 1989; Onuf and Klink 1989). As rationalist regime analysis has shown, there are many international institutions that regulate interactions between states. Though there may be no central regulatory authority within the international system, this system is nonetheless far from devoid of order. The opposition between anarchy as the ordering principle within the international system and hierarchy as the ordering principle characteristic of states in the domestic sphere casts a veil over what we see when we assume that different rules may lead to different forms of authority (*Herrschaft*). Political communities are distinguished by authority, but hierarchy is just one form of authority that is also found within the international system because of the power differences between states. So if we emphasize the rule-bound nature of international politics, there is no need to explain that anarchy is what states make of it. "Order" within the international system is based merely on a number of different forms of authority that go beyond hierarchy. For constructivist theorists, the fact that Wendt continues to make anarchy the starting point of his ideas is the key criticism of his conception of identity.

### ***3.3 Identity formation and change as communication process: "Ideas all the way down"***

Wendt's conception of how collective state identities develop is that this occurs through an interactional process between states on the level of the international system. What matters to the unfolding of this process and the "culture" of the international system is how states

encounter one another for the first time. Wendt's constructivist critics point out that communication plays no role in these interactional processes as a meaning-creating element, which is why actors' first encounter seems to entail specific moves of the kind familiar from game theoretical models (see also Zehfuss 2001, 2002: Chapter 2). What Wendt leaves out of account here is that no social action takes place in a "pre-social" space, so actors do not interact "presuppositionlessly" even during their first encounter. But Wendt must work on the assumption of this anarchical state of nature if he wishes to explain social actions causally.

This tension between a traditionally positivist conception of science that seeks causal explanations and predictions and a constructivist ontology that assumes that the world is constructed socially is particularly apparent in Wendt's conceptualization of identity. Wendt is unable to penetrate theoretically the construction of social identities in any complete way ("ideas all the way down"), which has partly to do with his dichotomous contrast between ideas and material factors, though he puts human nature down to the satisfaction of certain basic needs such as physical survival (Wendt 1999: 130–132). Consequently, he has to make certain fixed assumptions about his actors. This leads him to ascribe to states a particular form of corporate identity and thus to justify his idea of the state as a homogeneously acting actor. It is this decision that attracted sharp criticism. To simplify somewhat, this amounts to the claim that he "reifies", in other words objectifies the state by attributing to it certain character traits, and anthropomorphizes it by attributing to it certain tasks and intentions (Jackson 2004; Neumann 2004). Wendt's constructivist critics point out that while it is possible to say that a state acts, what is actually meant by this is that individuals act within a particular structural context (in this case the state) because every social explanation requires a structure (context) and actors (Wight 2004). Wendt's specific action theoretical assumptions, of course, also place major limitations on the concept of social construction, as Wendt's postmodern critics in particular have pointed out (e.g. Campbell 2001; see also the chapter by Thomas Diez in this volume).

Wendt's "Anarchy" essay of 1992 already attracted the criticism that he cannot adequately explain the construction of state interests and identities as long as he conceptualizes the state in realist fashion as a uniform actor while every domestic political process disappears into this "black box" (Weldes 1996: 280). Wendt regards the problem of identity formation merely from the perspective of the system, not that of an individual state or representatives of a state as other constructivist authors do.<sup>12</sup> As a consequence, he has not developed an action theory from which we might derive causal mechanisms responsible for the choice of a particular identity or role.<sup>13</sup>

In the last few years Wendt has turned to the development of a "quantum social science" (Wendt 2006), motivated in part by the desire to provide a theoretical foundation for a conceptualization of the "state as person" (Wendt 2004). The goal of this endeavour is to apply to the "body–mind problem" the findings of quantum physics about the character and behaviour of the smallest particles, the so-called "wave–particle dualism", which deals with the relationship between mental and physical conditions. Ultimately, Wendt seeks to construct a coherent argument that there is something like a "collective consciousness" that makes states autonomous actors (Wendt 2006: 203f.). In the early version of this argument he still maintained the division between facts and ideas, something which attracted criticism from a radical constructivist perspective. According to critics, we are still left with the problem that even body and mind are first constituted by language and the distinction between physical and mental worlds is possible only through language (see Kessler 2007: 260–265). Therefore, in a more elaborate version of his "quantum mind",

Wendt conceptualizes social objects like the state or the international system as constituted by language, which for him is analogous to quantum mechanics:

In its wave aspect the state (or international system) is a socially shared structure of potentiality, and as such not real in the standard, classical sense. As wave function the state can be actualized in many ways, no one of which constitutes the “true” state of the state. In its particle aspect, in contrast, the state does have an actual, definite reality, but this reality only manifests itself in the material behaviour of individuals.

(Wendt 2010: 293)

Although Wendt’s new metaphysical insights from the world of quanta have already been taken up in a cautiously positive way (Keeley 2007), in the foreseeable future these are likely to have less influence on empirical research than his STIP.

As far as his positioning in philosophy of science is concerned, critics have also highlighted Wendt’s own location within the tradition of scientific realism. In the opinion of critical or radical constructivists it is exactly this point of view that causes him to neglect the role of language and argumentation processes in the scientific determination of “truth”. Why, as Fritz Kratochwil asked in his critique of Wendt’s conception of science, has Wendt not sought to develop *a* social theory of international politics instead of a *singular* “social theory” (Kratochwil 2000: 89–90)? We can find an answer to this if we look at the other side of the *via media*, namely the camp of traditional theorists of international relations.

#### **4 The *via media* as a bridge to mainstream theories in International Relations**

Having crucially shaped the debate on constructivism within International Relations for many years, Wendt’s STIP received a great deal of attention. The book was not only discussed at academic conferences; the *Review of International Studies* devoted a special issue to exploring it.<sup>14</sup> Wendt’s constructivist approach met with a largely positive response from the exponents of traditional theories within International Relations. Though some suggested that Wendt’s work puts too much emphasis on clarifying the ontological question of the nature of the international system rather than analysing international politics, they still identified “points of contact” with the key debates in the discipline. His approach was viewed as a positive “strategy of engagement” (Jackson 2001: 109) in the sense of a systematic engagement with theoretical assumptions shared by mainstream researchers within International Relations. The discipline has taken to heart the idea that “ideas matter” at least since the appearance of *Ideas and Foreign Policy* (1993) by Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane. To put it in somewhat simplistic terms, from the perspective of those who would locate themselves beyond the *via media*: if we reduce constructivism to an engagement with the role of ideas, if we ascribe an independent status to material and immaterial factors and make the search for causal explanations a significant component of our conception of science, then constructivism becomes far less frightening than it is if informed by the kind of epistemological assumptions to which postmodern or radical constructivist approaches are so attached. The kind of “moderate”, “soft” or “conventional” constructivism on the level of theory building that Wendt’s social constructivism represents is not regarded as a refutation of or danger to existing theoretical assumptions, but instead as a complimentary alternative to or further development of existing approaches. This opens up new perspectives on familiar subjects such as anarchy, the security dilemma or questions of cooperation under

conditions of anarchy. But it also allows us to tackle new research problems such as the development and impact of collective identities (Hopf 1998, 2002; Copeland 2000). It comes as no surprise, then, that the criticisms of Wendt's theoretical approach are less fundamental than those made by constructivist critics. Certainly, a few mainstream voices suggest that the dichotomous contrast between idealism and materialism is untenable in the form presented by Wendt. But this does not inspire them to problematize his approach in any more extensive way; they merely emphasize that classical realism or neoliberal institutionalism cannot be regarded as purely materialist theories (Keohane 2000: 126–129).

For some time, accounts of the theoretical landscape within International Relations focused on the formation of “camps” that privilege constructivist or rationalist theories (Katzenstein *et al.* 1998). But the thrust of this discussion was that constructivist approaches sought to demonstrate their “surplus value” vis-à-vis the established rationalist approaches (see, for example, Adler 1997; Checkel 1998; Ruggie 1998). Though reference was often made to a constructivist challenge to rationalist approaches, the exponents of such approaches did not really feel that their assumptions were being questioned. They responded either by expanding on their own rationalist assumptions<sup>15</sup> or pushing for a division of labour between the two schools of thought. A symptomatic example of this was the contribution by James Fearon and Alexander Wendt in the first edition of the *Handbook of International Relations* on the basic assumptions of rationalist and constructivist approaches, which teased out the commonalities and differences as well as the strengths and weaknesses of both perspectives (Fearon and Wendt 2002). Interestingly, this article was deleted in the second edition of the *Handbook of International Relations* (Carlsnaes *et al.* 2013). Instead, in his revised contribution on “Constructivism in International Relations” Emanuel Adler celebrates the fact that “the so-called debates of the ‘isms’, including a debate between constructivism and rationalism, have decreased markedly” (Adler 2013: 112) and that constructivism has become “naturalized”, i.e. the idea that social reality is constructed or that social action has to be assessed in context “has become received wisdom even among rationalists” (*ibid.*: 112).

From this point of view, Alexander Wendt's attempts to build bridges with traditional political science research in International Relations have certainly been successful in the sense that the discipline is returning to its “idealist roots” and paying more attention to social processes. That this sometimes involves old wine in new bottles is evident in the renaissance of the English School (see also the chapter by Christopher Daase in this volume). And in fact, at least in International Relations in the United States, Wendt's moderate constructivism has established a certain orthodoxy of the kind that Kratochwil warned about (Kratochwil 2000). As the debate has advanced, “Wendt (even) meets East” (Rother 2012), in other words Wendt is influencing IR communities in other parts of the world (see Cho 2012; Flawith 2011).

Wendt's efforts to achieve a synthesis between a positivist epistemology and constructivist (ideational) ontology (see also Guzzini and Leander 2006a) have prompted him to produce a steady outflow of new scientific ideas up to and including the project of a social theory based on the findings of quantum physics (Wendt 2003, 2006, 2010). Although he consciously left the framework of constructivism (Schouten 2008: 2), the debate he instigated on the ontological and epistemological premises or non-premises of the discipline opened up space for a new generation of researchers who rediscovered *social* processes in international and global politics. The discipline's new interest in furthering research on the transformation of social, political and global orders has also resulted in the establishment of a new journal on *International Political Sociology* under the auspices of the International

Studies Association in 2007. Wendt himself was one of the founding editors of a new journal on *International Theory*, which was first issued in 2009 to foster a dialogue between international political theory, international relations and international law (Snidal and Wendt 2009: 5). Opening up the various disciplinary “silos” has produced new empirical research, not only on norms and identities, but also on power and practices. Theoretical approaches following Foucault and Bourdieu – to name but two former “strangers” to IR theory – have appeared even in mainstream journals like *International Organization*. Critical Theory, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism, which were missing as distinct theoretical approaches in the first edition, are referred to in a separate chapter of the second edition of the *Handbook of International Relations* (Zehfuss 2013), which also acknowledges the new theoretical pluralism in International Relations (Checkel 2013).

Even if the turf war over which “ism” is best suited to explaining and understanding international relations and global politics seems to have lost its acridity, theoretical cleavages still remain: “In fact, theoretical fragmentation now seems deeply embedded within the field, and explicit attempts to build research programs across theoretical approaches are limited” (Wight 2013: 46). Thus, although some authors see the discipline “beyond paradigms” and celebrate its analytic eclecticism (Sil and Katzenstein 2010), the new theoretical pluralism seems to come at a very high price, as Colin Wight laments: “The idea that one has to declare which tribe one belongs to and that this determines one’s ontological frame of reference, epistemology, and appropriate methods seems a bizarre way for a discipline to proceed” (2013: 47). But ultimately, scholars embracing the idea that the “world out there” is deeply social should not be astonished to discover that even science is a social process.

## 5 Notes

- 1 My sincere thanks to Siegfried Schieder and Manuela Spindler for their helpful comments on the first version of this chapter.
- 2 Seminal and standard texts on constructivism in the social sciences include Berger and Luckmann (1966) from a sociology of knowledge perspective and Searle 1995 within a philosophy of language framework. These texts illuminate both the sociological, philosophical and analytical philosophical roots of constructivism.
- 3 This discussion was initially strongly focused on the distinction between “explanation” and “understanding” (for the essentials, see: Hollis and Smith 1990). For an overview of the beginnings of this debate and its various facets, see Schaber and Ulbert (1994).
- 4 For recent accounts of constructivism, see Adler (2013); Barnett (2011); Hurd (2008); Krell (2009: Chapter 11); Reus-Smit (2009). For a survey of constructivist research in International Relations, see Ulbert and Weller (2005) and Risse (2009), who looks at constructivism in the analysis of European integration.
- 5 For a more in-depth examination of points of contact with the social sciences and an attempt to locate these developments within the history of science and identify pioneering thinkers, see Adler (2013) and Ruggie (1998).
- 6 In the German discipline of International Relations too it was the desire to distance oneself from the rationalist paradigm that prompted many scholars to engage with constructivist approaches. The so-called “ZIB debate”, kicked off by an article by Harald Müller (Müller 1994) in the *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen*, was an original take on these issues that explored the importance of communication and agreement-oriented action, drawing on Jürgen Habermas (see also Risse 2000; Müller 2004; Herborth 2007).
- 7 See Sections 3 and 4.
- 8 See especially Hollis and Smith (1990, 1991); Wendt (1991, 1992b). An overall summary of the first phase of the debate is provided by Gould (1998). For later contributions, see Doty (1997); Jabri and Chan (1996); Suganami (1999); Wight (1999); Herborth (2004); for the essentials, see Wight (2006).

- 9 Holism is a school of thought within philosophy that emphasizes that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Parts can be understood only in the context of the whole.
- 10 On the essential features of causal and constitutive explanations, see Wendt (1998) and Wendt (1999: 77–88), see also Ulbert (2005: 19–22).
- 11 Central to the approaches of Onuf and Kratochwil are their magnum opuses *World of Our Making* (Onuf 1989) and *Rules, Norms, and Decisions* (Kratochwil 1989). Because they focus on philosophical and epistemological matters, however, neither text can really be recommended as introductory reading.
- 12 See, for example, the contributions in Katzenstein (1996) or the very different approaches of Campbell (1992) and Checkel (1999).
- 13 See, for example, Shannon's critique of Wendt's prognosis that the development of a world state is inevitable (Shannon 2005).
- 14 See the contributions by Alker, Doty, Keohane, Krasner and Smith, and Wendt's reply in *Review of International Studies* 26(1), 2000.
- 15 This was apparent in the German debate on communicative action in the *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen* in Otto Keck's replies (Keck 1995, 1997) to Harald Müller (Müller 1994).

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