REVIEW
THE SOCIAL THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

Author: Alexander Wendt
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The social theory of international politics by Alexander Wendt, was originally published in 1999 at the Cambridge University Press, and after 12 years it was translated by Mihai Cristian Brașoveau and published in Romania, by the Polirom Publishing House. This book is considered a canonical work for the International Relations Theory area.

Based on the theory of social constructivism, Alexander Wendt has suggested an alternative to the theory of international relations, which represented one of the most important contributions in this field for the last period of time. The work is first of all of theoretical nature, builds and rethinks the international relations as an academic/scientific discipline. Wendt considered that the theme of his work is “the ontology of international life” (p. 358).

The book is divided in two big parts that comprise in their turn seven chapters.

The first chapter, Four sociologies of international politics analyzes the project of state systems through statal centrum, the theory of states and neorealism and its critics, outlines the map of structural theorization by presenting the four sociologies, the localization of international theories, the expound of the three interpretations and the epistemology through the media.

The first part of the book presents the version of constructivism that the author believes to be the most credible, focusing on epistemology

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and ontology, offering examples from the international politics and the theory of international relations.

The second chapter, Scientific realism and the social forms analyzes the epistemological fundament of reasoning. The discipline that studies international relations is gathered in some incompatible epistemological perspectives, a positivist majority stating that social sciences offer a privileged access to reality, and a significant post-positivist minority says the contrary. Social sciences represent a privileged epistemic speech that can be used to obtain some knowledge of the exterior world, even if this knowledge is always exposed to error. Scientific realism plays an essential role in finding this middle way between positivist epistemology and post-positivist ontology. Realism does not imply certain ontology, certain methods or a certain theory of society or of world politics. But in the extent that it hinders, from the beginning, the reasons against the involvement in certain types of research, realism is a condition of possibility for the reasoning presented in the rest of the book; realism is not relevant for the aspects that separate the theories of international relations.

Chapter three, Ideas from one end to the other? On building power and interest, reasons the idea that the understanding of the distribution of power in international politics is build by the distribution of interests. Power an interest has the effects they have by reason of the ideas that make them. The author makes a distinction between the two types of raw materials present in the world: raw material forces and ideas. Within the chapter it is given the answer to the question from the title. The answer is negative, which means there can’t be a situation from ideas to one end to the other. After separating the material forces from the ideas, we can see that the first explain relatively little about the social life. The suggestion that the interests themselves are ideas, attract the question whether the theory of rational choice is a material theory or an idealistic one. The author chooses to consider it a form of idealism even if most people in this field consider it as a materialistic theory. Power and interest are important factors in the social life but because their effects are a function of ideas formed culturally; this is also the place where they should be analyzed.
Chapter four, *Structure, agency and culture* analyzes the ontological debate between individualists and holists regarding the difference between a constructivist approach of the culture structure analysis and an individualist one, based on the theory of games. Individualist ontology cannot treat the constitutive effects of the social life. The holistic theories manage to capture the constitutive effects and, because these effects represent a possibility condition for the rationalist reasons, the later ones should be regarded as dependent on the former ones, and this is possible because of the essentialist theory according to which individuals are beings that organize themselves. Contemporary states share many convictions on the international game rules, on who are the players that participate in this game, which are the interests of the participants within this international games and what makes a rational conduct from the part of the players within the international games. By this it cannot be denied the fact that the structure of the contemporary international system contains a lot of culture. Culture is deeply inscribed in the way in which both people of state and researchers understand the nature of today’s international politics, making this politics possible in its modern form, which suggests that the field of international relations could benefit from the anthropology institutions and of those that study political economy.

Chapter five, *The State and the problem of corporative agency*, opens *Part II: “International politics”*. The first objective of the chapter is to justify the practice to treat states as real, unitary players to whom we can assign internationality. This practice is essential for the explanatory aspects and for the political ones of the state system project. The second objective was to identify the fundamental interests of these corporative entities, suggesting a typology of identities and interests. The author defines national interest as being formed of collective interests of the state-society complexes in: survival, autonomy, economical welfare and self esteem at collective level. The state model offered by the author, basically, is “reduced” and leaves open the possibility that many of the properties that neorealists and neoliberals treat as being inherent to the states, to be, in fact, socially constituted at international level: selfishness, the meaning given to power, the terms of sovereignty, maybe even the nature of rationality. Individualists wish to convince
the reader that nothing of what is linked to the state is not build by the international system, while holists would suggest that everything is build by the international system.

Chapter six, *Three cultures of anarchy* uses the information that the reader assimilated in chapter four in order to explain the profound structure of anarchy as a phenomenon that is rather cultural or ideational than material, also because, once it is understood in this sense, we can observe that the logics of anarchy can vary. Also, there are 3 roles that states use to represent themselves and the other: enemy, rival and friend, and they form, in their turn, three distinct cultures of international politics at macro level: Hobbesian, Lokean, Kantian. Probably the most challenging question about the cultural type from international politics is the one referring to the measure in which anarchies move inevitably from a Hobbesian structure to a Lokean one and then to a Kantian structure – an “anarchy logics” quite different from what realists suggest.

Chapter seven, *The structural process and change*, has analyzed the process of international politics, being complementary to the studies of the last two previous chapters. Investigating the process is important because the structure of the international system is produced, reproduced and sometimes transformed only through the interaction of statal agents. The logics of this interaction shall reflect the characteristics of the statal agents and of the systemic structures of their interest. An important reason to point out the procedural character of identities and of interests is the fact that it helps problematize the privileged status that it holds in international relations and assumes that the states are motivated by own interest or selfishness, but most of the time the states could not be regarded as actors concerned by their own interest.

The book has an important epistemological consequence, mainly for the epistemology of social sciences, in particular for international relations, as part of social sciences and wishes to re-build idealistic ontology as being the basis of knowledge and understanding international relations, what makes it so important for the understanding of the International Relations area.
In Romania there have been other translations of remarkable works from specialists in the international relations field, such as the book *Social theory of international politics* by Alexander Wendt. Of these we can remind *The twenty year crisis* by E.H.Carr, which formulates a lucid critics of the utopist theories that ignore the exigencies of survival and interstate competition. Also *Realism and the balance of power* by J. Vasquez and C. Elman offer a variety of perspectives that lead to a better understanding of the context and of the debate coordinates on the reactions of the state in the face of power and of the threats that came from its external environment, and also a wiser consideration on the theoretical ambitions of realisms and its competitors, in the field of international relations.