Problematising State-Centricity:
Not Seeing the Forest for the Trees

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Starting from J. David Singer's level of analysis problematique, Hintz critically analyses Alexander Wendt's constructivist approach. By pointing out the examples of transnational actors and failed states, she elucidates the importance of non-state or 'failed state' actors in transforming and constructing the international system – thus diverging from Wendt's, albeit constructivist, state-centric approach to international relations theory.

Introduction

Among the many debates grappling their way to the forefront of what constitutes the discourse of International Relations scholarship is the highly contested level-of-analysis problem. In one of the primary contributions to this melee, J. David Singer reminds us that, before formulating scientific theory in any discipline, an observer must first choose how to observe; we may, as he explains, choose to focus "upon the parts or upon the whole...the trees or the forest."[1] Although Singer's article describes only two possible levels of analysis—national states and the international system are his "trees" and "forest"—his overarching thesis is an important one: focusing on one level necessarily entails an at least partially reduced focus on another.[2] That which an analysis of the international system may sacrifice in detailed examination of domestic structures it gains in its capacity for broader, more comprehensive explanatory power— and vice versa.

Missing in Singer's counsel to would-be theorists, however, is a definitive position on whether explanatory power may be sacrificed, even at the systemic level, by a limited definition of the actors which are included in analysis of the system. A reformulation of Singer's analogy could then be: Might we lose sight of the forest by examining only trees? Do we lose a sense of the whole with a limited conception of the unit? What I wish to investigate in this essay, therefore, are the possible limitations to theoretical explanatory power that are imposed by a state-centric approach to the international system. The task of critiquing a systemic theory that focuses on states is a daunting one, however; this could quite conceivably involve refuting one of the main

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[1] J. David Singer. "The Level-of Analysis Problem in International Relations", *World Politics*, Vol. 14, Issue 1, 1961, p. 77.
[2] *Ibid.*, esp. pp. 89–92.

tenets of the realist tradition. [3] Given that such a refutation is not a feasible, nor a desirable, undertaking within the constraints of this essay, I choose to specifically examine the limitations to one of the most recent and prominent examples of the state-centric approach: Alexander Wendt's statist, social constructivist theory of the international system. I will argue that Wendt's use of the "states systemic project" [4] significantly limits the explanatory power of his theory by mandating a narrow focus on only one of the many types of actors that are capable of transforming the structure of the international system. [5]

To introduce a cohesive challenge to Wendt's state-centricity, a presentation of Wendt's conceptualization of structure and its transformation by state actors will be necessary. After establishing this basis, I examine two types of actor which are not considered in Wendt's analysis. Firstly, I examine the transnational actor, a non-state which consequently falls outside the scope of the states systemic project. A second type of actor I examine, failed states, receives no consideration by Wendt because this group does not meet his criteria for statehood. [6] I will show how each type of actor has proven capable of transforming social structures and why, therefore, Wendt's exclusion of the actor results in a loss of theoretical explanatory power for his constructivist argument. In conclusion, I will suggest some possible implications that a pluralistic, and hence more comprehensive, conception of world actors may have for our understanding of the international system as a whole.

Before I begin my analysis, however, it is important to note two things. First, while employing a structuralist rather than an individualist ontology, Wendt claims to give both agents and structures "equal ontological status"; i.e., he seems to deviate from Singer in asserting a recognition of the importance of both the forest and the trees. [7] Second, and perhaps contrary to this assertion, Wendt makes a rather offhanded, but perhaps incriminating, comment in defending his use of the states systemic project. Wendt claims that to criticize a theory of international politics for being state-centric makes no more sense than to "criticize a theory of forests for being tree-centric." [8] It will become clear, however, that just as a forest cannot be explained solely in terms of its trees, neither can the international system be explained solely or even primarily in terms of its states. I submit that, by focusing only on a limited conception of states as actors in

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[3] For discussions of the statism of realists such as Carr, Morgenthau, Waltz and Gilpin, see: Timothy Dunne, "Realism", in John Bayliss and Steve Smith (eds.) *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997.

[4] Alexander Wendt. *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 7.

[5] It should be noted here that the notion of "explanatory power" as a desirable criterion for theory derives from, among others, Waltz. See: Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Boston, Addison-Wesley, 1979, p. 7. One could easily substitute "capacity for understanding" in this context, as Wendt sees "no fundamental epistemological difference between Explanation and Understanding." Wendt (1999) p. 85. On the basis of Wendt's attitude toward these concepts, explanatory power and capacity for understanding will be considered interchangeable in this essay. See also: Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992, esp. Chapters 3 and 4.

[6] Because failed states do not meet Wendt's criteria for statehood, they, too, will be henceforth considered in this essay as "non-state" actors.

[7] Alexander Wendt. "The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory", *International Organization*, Vol. 41, 1987, p. 339.

[8] Wendt (1999) p. 9.

his constructivist depiction of the international system, Wendt cannot see the forest for the trees.

Structure According to Wendt

Thanks to Alexander Wendt, it is by now part of common parlance in many sectors of the IR discipline that identities and interests may be endogenous, rather than exogenous, to interaction; that is, that the structure of these identities and interests is intersubjectively constituted by collective meanings and shared understandings developed by actors through a process of social interaction. [9] Wendt's constructivist worldview makes a significant effort towards altering the "undersocialized" nature of much IR theory to date and, as such, is extremely valuable. [10] Unfortunately, however, Wendt's appropriation of state actor primacy as negative heuristic from the realist tradition hinders the substantial contributions his otherwise progressive ontology could lend towards a more comprehensive understanding of the international system. In fact, his contention that a "core claim" of constructivism is that "states are the principal units of analysis" [11] discredits the work of constructivists such as John Ruggie and Friedrich Kratochwil who eschew the limitations of state-centricity in favor of a more pluralistic conception of actors. [12]

It must be noted here that, as a sort of disclaimer, Wendt concedes in the introductions to his book and several articles that non-state actors may have "important, even decisive" effects on the structure of the international system. [13] Such an advisory as to the possible influences of other actors is well-placed, certainly due, and could be extremely progressive if Wendt only carried it through to some kind of fruitful conclusion. What becomes abundantly clear in the body of his work, however, is that even Wendt does not take his own disclaimer seriously; this nonchalance is evidenced by his remark that state-centrism does not necessarily imply that states are more important than "other international actors, *whatever that might mean.*" [14]

Like the cigarette manufacturer who is forced to include the perfunctory advisory label with his product, Wendt contents himself by briefly mentioning potential influences of non-state actors, then continuing to ignore these actors in the construction of his theory. Indeed, like faithful consumers, much of the IR community seems willing to overlook such potential influences, accepting the state-centric model as something which, although perhaps flawed, is nevertheless familiar and even necessary. Despite his meager protests to the contrary, Wendt's social theory of international politics in no way reflects a substantive consideration of the importance of non-state actor influence.

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[9] While these foundational concepts are present in much of Wendt's work, perhaps the most succinct iteration of his ideas can be found in: Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It", *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 2, 1992.

[10] Wendt (1999) p. 4.

[11] Alexander Wendt. "Collective Identity Formation and the International State", *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 84, Issue 2, 1994, p. 385.

[12] See, for example, Friedrich Kratochwil and John Ruggie. "International Organization: A Start of the Art on an Art of the State", *International Organization*, Vol. 40, 1986.

[13] Wendt (1999) p. 9.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 194. Emphasis added.

To return, then, to Wendt's conception of structure, we see that it is effectively the social interaction of states, only, that contributes to the formation of social structures; these structures, in turn, condition the way in which states perceive and behave towards each other. The process of production and reproduction of the identities and interests that are the underlying basis of these structures continues unless a transformation of structure takes place, either through "self-conscious efforts" by states to transform their identities and interests, or through "unintended consequences" of state action. [15] While Wendt perceives the nature of structure as a dynamic one, he explains that transformation can often be extremely difficult due to certain factors, similar to the competition and socialization pressures illustrated by Waltz, [16] which Wendt characterizes as an institutionalization of interaction between states. [17] Nevertheless, transformation of social structures has been accomplished; many of the actors contributing to these transformations, perhaps not coincidentally, [18] have been *non-state* actors.

Now that we have explored the way in which Wendt conceives of structure and the primary role of states, we can move on to an investigation of how other actors have contributed to a process that Wendt reserves only for his narrowly defined states. Presented below, therefore, are examples of non-state actors which have facilitated the transformation of social structures. I shall begin with the transnational actor.

Transnational Actors

Although transnational actors may be constituted by a conglomeration of several state actors, Wendt excludes them from his analysis of the international system, choosing to focus only on the sovereign state. By doing so, Wendt neglects the possibility that these actors can play a crucial role in the transformation of social structures. Several transnational actors — a relatively self-explanatory heading which can include multinational corporations, trade organizations, military alliances, political movements and humanitarian missions[19] — have indeed proven capable of contributing to transformations in the norms and understandings that are constitutive of these structures. While several UN-backed humanitarian missions, such as Operation Provide Comfort, have successfully transgressed the borders of territorial sovereignty[20], perhaps the most explicit example of norm transformation is NATO's intervention in Kosovo.

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[15] Wendt (1992) p. 418.

[16] Kenneth Waltz. "Reductionist and Systemic Theories", in Robert Keohane (ed.) *Neorealism and Its Critics,* New York, Columbia University Press, 1986, pp. 6567.

[17] Wendt (1992) p. 423.

[18] Whether those non-state actors which work within an institutional identity may, in fact, be less constrained and therefore more likely to contribute to transformations of structures than state actors is a very interesting idea but remains, regrettably, outside the scope of this essay.

[19] Robert Gilpin. *The Political Economy of International Relations*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1987, p. 261.

[20] Barry S. Posen. "Military Responses to Refugee Disasters", *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 1996, p. 77.

NATO's unilateral intervention[21] in Kosovo constituted what could be seen as a flagrant violation of the principle of nonintervention, whose only permitted abrogation lies in the hands of the Security Council as codified in Article 27(3) of the United Nations Charter. During the Cold War period, for example, "strict definitions...tended towards the idea that intervention was illegal *per se*." [22] However, the international community's response to NATO's "illegal" action was far from uniformly critical. On the contrary, even legal scholars regarded the breach of the nonintervention principle, "one of the most significant tenets of the Grotian model" of international law as acceptable and necessary. [23] Even the bypassed Security Council itself tacitly approved the intervention, drafting Resolution 1244 without any reference to NATO's action, concluding the situation's story with a "happy ending" to a "bad movie", in the words of international lawyer Peter Hilpold. [24] As a general consensus, the international community accepted the breach of the nonintervention principle without much protest, recognizing the necessity of putting a stop to a humanitarian crisis even if no law allowing such action exists. Such an acknowledgement— of the primacy of human rights, as contestable as they may be, over international law— represents a fundamental change in the norm of non-intervention. [25]

This transformation of an international norm, to which NATO's actions in Kosovo directly contributed, cannot be explained by Wendt's theory of international politics. Because Wendt does not consider transnational actors such as NATO in his analysis, his theory lacks the capacity to explain the way in which the intersubjective understandings surrounding the issue of nonintervention have changed. This is not the only case, however, in which Wendt's exclusive focus on states limits the explanatory power of his theory. I shall now consider the way in which failed states, another category of actor neglected by Wendt, have contributed to the transformation of norms.

Failed States

On one extreme end of a *de facto-de jure* statehood continuum is what is referred to as the failed state. In other words, a failed state maintains its juridical sovereignty but has lost all semblance of empirical sovereignty. [26] George Helman and Steven Ratner, in

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[21] The term "unilateral" is used here in congruence with W. Reisman's characterization of an act by a "normally unauthorized participant which effectively preempts [an] official decision". W. Michael Reisman. "Unilateral Action and the Transformations of World Constitutive Processes: The Problem of Humanitarian Intervention", *European Journal of International Law*, Vol. 11, No. 1, p. 3.

[22] Oliver Ramsbotham and Tom Woodhouse. *Humanitarian Intervention in Contemporary Conflict*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1996, p. 111.

[23] Antonio Cassese. *International Law*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 98.

[24] Peter Hilpold. "Humanitarian Intervention: Is There a Need for Legal Reappraisal?", *European Journal of International Law,* Vol. 12, No. 3, 2001, p. 441.

[25] While debate continues over whether the norm of nonintervention must change, has changed, or is in the process of changing, the important point here is that the debate exists. For a discussion of this debate, see: Antonio Cassese, "*Ex iniuria ius oritur:* Are We Moving Towards International Legitimation of Forcible Humanitarian Countermeasures in the World Community?", *European Journal of International Law*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 1999.

[26] For a detailed discussion of empirical and juridical sovereignty, see: Robert Jackson and Carl Rosberg. "Why Africa's Weak States Persist: The Empirical and the Juridical in Statehood", *World Politics*, Vol. 35, Issue 1, 1982.

their definitive article on the subject, cite the following conditions as being characteristic of a failed state: economic failure, internal violence, governmental collapse, citizen endangerment, and threats to neighboring states. [27] Catalogues of failed states commonly include, *inter alia*, Afghanistan, Albania, Cambodia, Chad, Colombia, Haiti, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Sudan. While other scholars have suggested terms such as "soft states" and "quasi-states" [28] to describe these and other countries, use of the term "failed state" in this essay rejects the most recent discourse on the subject.

Despite the significant number of failed states in the international system, Wendt's employment of the states systemic project tacitly rejects consideration of this troubled multitude. Because Wendt does not specifically state that he excludes failed states from his analysis, my contention that he does so requires a bit more explanation than the previous section.

The epistemic implications of the states systemic project dictate what appears simply to be a division of the international system along states' territorial borders, but what amounts effectively to a reification of this juridical or "external" sovereignty. [29] Essentially, what goes on inside the state is black-boxed by Wendt. All states, even failed states, are treated as equals by Wendt as long as their juridical sovereignty, a legal condition of legitimacy, is recognized by the international community. Such a qualification is, if questionable, not unusual. Curiously, however, Wendt also justifies his statesas-equals analysis on the basis of the state's monopoly of the legitimate use of violence. [30] For a state to be considered an equal in Wendt's states system, therefore, it must possess both empirical and juridical sovereignty.

Such a basis for equal treatment is problematic for two reasons, both in its derivation and its practicality. Firstly, Wendt derives a monopoly on violence as a definitive criterion for statehood from the renowned Weberian conception of a state. However, Weber's definition of the state is one of "means" and not "ends", with means being the use of violence. [31] As Jackson and Rosberg astutely point out, such a definition stresses the "empirical rather than the juridical", the *de facto* and not the *de jure* element of statehood. [32] These authors maintain that, given an absence of internal authority, Weber would deem it "more appropriate to speak of 'statelessness'". [33]

Secondly, because of Wendt's misappropriation of Weber's concept of the state, Wendt's resultant criteria for statehood effectively exclude failed states from his analysis of the state system. Failed states exhibit a definitive lack of a monopoly on even the *legitimate* use of violence. In countries such as Somalia, for example, no form of government exists at all, much less a government that could claim such a monopoly. Barry Posen has called Somalia a "textbook case" of "primitive logistics", noting that multiple warring clans, each claiming to be an official army, have resorted to stealing

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[27] See: George Helman and Steven Ratner. "Saving Failed States", *Foreign Policy*, Vol. 89, 199293.

[28] See: Robert Jackson. "Quasi-States, Dual Regimes, and Neoclassical Theory: International Jurisprudence and the Third World", *International Organization*, Vol. 41, Issue 4, 1987, esp. pp. 526533.

[29] Wendt (1999) p. 206.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 8.

[31] Max Weber. *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, Talcott Parsons (ed.), New York, Free Press, 1964, p. 155.

[32] Jackson and Rosberg, p. 2.

[33] *Ibid.*

from the civilian population in order to feed themselves. [34] Somalia, like a discouragingly large number of other Africa states that "would not qualify as states" according to the Weberian monopoly of violence criterion, represents a legally bounded territory in which an utter lack of authority and order—i.e. empirical sovereignty— reigns supreme. [35] Wendt's use of this Weberian criterion in addition to the juridical criterion effectively excludes Somalia, and other failed states, from his analysis.

The way in which failed states, although not addressed by Wendt, have contributed to a transformation of social structure of norms and understandings is twofold. First, as we have seen in my discussion of transnational actors, an absence of domestic authority that leads to internal collapse and mass violations of human rights presents the international community with a dilemma. While intervention in Somalia, unlike in the case of Kosovo, was approved by Security Council Resolution 794, the conditions of other failed states at the present moment do not make another unauthorized intervention unthinkable. Even the unfortunate circumstances of what has become known as the "Somalian debacle" of 1992 have not proven to deter the international community from intervening in times of crisis, as evidenced by NATO's decision to enter Kosovo. [36]

Secondly, and more specific to failed states, is the fact that we are witnessing a definite rise in the attention paid to concepts such as *de facto* and *de jure* statehood, quasi-states, and intervention. Such increased attention is substantiation of a change in the norm of sovereignty, an institution which Wendt considers to be a "property of a structure". [37] Scholars of IR have, quite rightly, begun to problematize the notion of sovereignty. [38] That which was once a personal, monarchical sovereignty has since been transmuted into a state sovereignty. We are now faced with evidence that the institution of sovereignty is changing again. The problematizing which has increased with recognition of the uniquely acute problems faced by failed states [39], and the relevance of those problems for the rest of the international system, reflects a transformation of the ways in which sovereignty is understood in the international community.

The problems that such "states" pose can, according to Wendt, be "sidestepped for IR purposes" by focusing on the "state's claim to a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence". [40] Some scholars have placed over 20 states into the category of failed states; [41] simple math tells us that failed states, then, constitute more than one-tenth of the

[34] Posen, p. 86.
[35] Jackson and Rosberg, p. 2.
[36] Patrick M Regan. *Civil Wars and Foreign Powers*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2000, p. 126.
[37] Wendt (1999) p. 207.
[38] See, for example: Martin van Creveld, *The Rise and Decline of the State*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999; Robert Keohane, "Hobbes's Dilemma and Institutional Change in World Politics: Sovereignty in International Society, in H.H. Holm and Georg Sorenen (eds.) *Whose World Order?,* Boulder CO, Westview, 1995. For an examination of how sovereignty can be (temporarily) appropriated by the international community in cases of "malformed and incomplete" statehood, see: Mervyn Frost, *Towards a Normative Theory of International Relations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 299.
[39] For an examination of the problematic relationship between borders and sovereignty, especially in post-colonial Africa and Latin America, see: Steven Ratner, "Drawing a Better Line: *Uti Possidetis* and the Borders of New States", *American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 90, Issue 4, 1996.
[40] Wendt (1999) 206.
[41] Robert Jackson. *The Global Covenant*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000.

international states system. That's a big amount to sidestep. Not only does Wendt's use of state-centricity prevent him from seeing the forest— he's missing a lot of the trees.

Conclusion

Although by no means claiming to comprise a universal critique of the state-centric approach, this essay has, specifically, demonstrated the limitations to the explanatory power of Wendt's social constructivist theory of international politics. We have seen how transnational and failed state actors do not meet Wendt's criteria to be considered as primary actors in the international system, and are therefore not addressed by his theory. Because these actors have proved capable of transforming the social structures that Wendt, himself, describes, we see that Wendt's capacity to explain and/or understand the transformation of social structures has been restricted as a direct consequence of his state-centricity. By examining the limitations to a comprehensive explanation and understanding of the whole that become requisite with such a narrow conception of the unit, the need for a more pluralistic conception of the actors in the international system becomes clear.

The implications of a broader conception of actors capable of transforming social structures are profound. Other non-state actors to consider could include sub-states that essentially possess empirical sovereignty, but lack juridical sovereignty. The multiple recognitions the UN has given to the PLO, for example, could be seen as a transformation of the conception of sovereignty. Accompanying the changing significance of sovereign borders, the blurring of the boundary between the domestic and the international, must come a theory that is willing to change as well. Perhaps non-statist constructivist Kratochwil expresses it best when he points to the flawed "disjunction between organizing principles and social reality".[42]   Continuing to examine a system in a manner that recognizes only one element of the whole overlooks the influences of many other system constituents on both the elements and the system. Being tree-centric is fine if you are concerned only with trees. But for a theory that promotes its ontological equality of agents and structure, a bit more focus on the rest of the forest might be in order.

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[42] Friedrich Kratochwil. "Of Systems, Boundaries and Territoriality: An Inquiry into the Formation of the State System", *World Politics*, Vol. 39, Issue 1, 1986, p. 27.

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