

Insights into the Innovation of International Relations Theory from the Perspective of Alexander Wendt

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Abstract: Alexander Wendt is a representative figure of constructivism in international relations theory and has made distinctive achievements in theoretical innovation. In 1999, Wendt published *Social Theory of International Politics*, which focuses on expounding the constructivist theory. In 2015, he published another book, *Quantum Mind and Social Science: Unifying Physical and Social Ontology*, further expanding the depth of his basic theoretical research and the breadth of his applied theoretical research. This paper intends to analyze Wendt's two theoretical innovation methods separated by 20 years and draw relevant insights.

Keywords: Theoretical Innovation; Methodology; Insights; Constructivism

Alexander Wendt is a pivotal figure in the development of international relations theory and a representative figure in the innovation of international relations theory. As early as the 1980s, Wendt became a representative of constructivism, and his elaboration on constructivism is concentrated in his 1999 book *Social Theory of International Politics*. In 2015, Wendt launched his second theoretical monograph, *Quantum Mind and Social Science: Unifying Physical and Social Ontology*, which marks another innovation of his in international relations theory based on his personal research. From the perspective of the theoretical contents expounded in the two books alone, Wendt's innovation in international relations theory took a completely different direction 16 years later. However, when analyzing the innovative theoretical methods of the two books, there are many commonalities.

1. Wendt's Theoretical Innovation in Constructivism

Constructivism emerged in the mid-to-late 1980s, gradually gained the attention of scholars, and became one of the theoretical paradigms on a par with realism and liberalism. Among them, Wendt played a crucial role.

Wendt's purpose in developing constructivism is to establish a middle way between rationalism and reflectivism. As Wendt once said, his goal in developing constructivism is to build a bridge between rationalism and reflectivism; this bridge, or "via media" (middle way), is social constructivism. At the very beginning of the Chinese version of *Social Theory of International Politics*, Wendt clearly pointed out that the main argument put forward in the book is that the shared social ideas construct the structure of the international system and endow this structure with dynamics. Wendt's use of sociological theory for theoretical innovation in the field of international theory is based on the following three aspects.

First, accurately defining the scope of theoretical innovation. When proposing constructivism initially, Wendt classified various theoretical schools of international relations based on methodology and worldview, and defined the theoretical framework of constructivism on the basis of a reasonable distinction between these theoretical schools. Wendt categorized the various theoretical schools of international relations into four frameworks: 1) Holistic-materialist theories, including world-systems theory and neo-Gramscian Marxism; 2) Holistic-idealist theories, including the English School, world society theory, postmodern international relations theory, etc.; 3) Individualistic-materialist theories, including classical realism and neorealism; 4) Individualistic-idealist theories, including classical liberalism and neoliberalism. Wendt defined constructivism as a holistic-subjectivist-idealist theory, which delimits the scope of his theoretical innovation: methodologically, it adopts a holistic methodology, emphasizing the role of the whole on the individual, that is, the role of the international system structure on states. In terms of ontology, Wendt attaches importance to the role of ideas.

Second, introducing social theory as the core of theoretical innovation. After clarifying the scope of theoretical innovation, Wendt

pointed out the way in which state actors interact, forming an interaction theory about the international society, and put forward his famous assertion: Anarchy is made by states. In this article, Wendt's theoretical elaboration is based on symbolic interactionism, a theoretical school that focuses on studying society from a psychological perspective.

Third, clarifying the theoretical positioning of innovation. The social constructivist theory exhibits the following three important characteristics, based on which its basic theoretical positioning can be clarified. The author points out that the three important characteristics displayed by constructivism are: constructivism is a systemic structural theory, constructivism is a theory that attaches importance to practical activities, and constructivism is an evolutionary theory.

Fourth, clarifying the key and difficult issues of the theoretical system. In *Social Theory of International Politics*, Wendt systematically expounds on the key and difficult issues of constructivism, with the focus on defining whether the theory is objective. Wendt believes that although social sciences are quite different from natural sciences, essentially, the existence of social sciences is also based on the primacy of matter, so social sciences possess objectivity. At the same time, the self-organizing ability of social categories determines the characteristics of their objective existence. A state is a social category and an abstract social entity that cannot be directly observed, but the existence of a state is an objective fact. For example, aggression will be resisted and crimes will be punished—these are all observable manifestations of the objectivity of a state.

2. Wendt's Theoretical Innovation in Quantum Mind and Social Science

Wendt pointed out that the development of quantum mechanics is the most exciting chapter in the history of physics development, and at the same time, it has brought unparalleled changes to our society. From computer technology to biotechnology, quantum theory will bring about drastic changes in various aspects. Moreover, quantum theory will also bring about drastic changes in the field of international relations theory and even the social sciences. Wendt stated: "Using the 'quantum consciousness hypothesis' as a concept in social sciences can not only explain individuals, groups, and societies but also explain states and the entire world system."

Innovation in basic theory: Introducing quantum theory (quantum mind or quantum consciousness) into social sciences. In *Quantum Mind and Social Science: Unifying Physical and Social Ontology*, Wendt pointed out that there is an underlying assumption in the original field of social sciences: consciousness and social life are ultimately physical or material phenomena. In this subversive book, Wendt challenges this assumption and proposes that consciousness is actually a macroscopic quantum mechanical phenomenon. Social sciences have long been using traditional physics methods and concepts, which are obviously no longer adaptable to the development of the times and the advancement of knowledge. Furthermore, traditional assumptions may even be wrong, and the reason lies in the fact that human beings have consciousness. The traditional philosophical approach holds that the subject and object can be distinguished from each other, and humans can observe the object directly while being independent of it. However, as demonstrated by quantum mechanics, the objective is not completely independent of the subjective. When a person observes an objective thing, the observer and the observed object influence each other. The way a person views an objective thing already exerts a certain influence on the thing itself. The subjective and the objective construct each other; when an observer observes a thing, he or she will change the state of existence of the observed object in a certain way. That is to say, the world we perceive is a projection of our own mind, and the states we perceive are actually products of the human mind. Because in most cases, a "state" often exists as a concept, and its essential attributes will change due to the participation of the human mind—this kind of mental participation is what Professor Wendt repeatedly refers to as "consciousness". Therefore, the way a scholar studies a state already changes the state of existence of that state. The above content also constitutes the main content of the first half of *Quantum Mind and Social Science: Unifying Physical and Social Ontology*.

3. Insights from Wendt's Innovation in International Relations Theory

From *Social Theory of International Politics* to *Quantum Mind and Social Science: Unifying Physical and Social Ontology*, these are two major achievements of Wendt's theoretical innovation over more than 20 years. Although the scope of theoretical innovation seems to span a wide range, there is a logical connection within it. As Wendt pointed out in 2016 when talking about his book *Social Theory of International Politics*, which has had a wide impact in the field of international relations: If he could still be called a constructivist scholar, he might be a radical "post-constructivist" or "quantum constructivist". The research methods and analytical frameworks used by Wendt in the process of theoretical innovation in the field of international relations theory also have positive implications for conducting international relations theory research.

Insight 1: The continuity of theoretical innovation goals should be maintained: Building bridges between the barriers of theoretical systems. Fundamentally speaking, the logical starting point of Wendt's theoretical innovation lies in philosophy. Wendt once pointed out in an interview: "As for my theory, it more or less manifests itself as a kind of philosophical analysis. Construc-

tivism can be applied to the analysis of families, politics, economies, and even nature. I call it philosophy in a broad sense. If it is applied to world politics, it will be useful for the analysis of state institutions; of course, you can also apply it to other types of analysis, such as families. In this case, compared with international politics, you will have different agents and different structures. A good analogy is game theory, which is a general analytical framework that can be used to analyze anything, from humans to animals. However, if you want to use game theory to analyze international politics, its methods and entities will change; for example, the role of states cannot be ignored.” This viewpoint is particularly evident in the introduction of quantum theory to innovate social science research. It can be seen from this that although there may be significant differences in the fields, scopes, and methods of theoretical innovation over time, the goal of innovation maintains consistent continuity, that is, building bridges between the barriers of theoretical systems.

Insight 2: The uniqueness of theoretical innovation methods should be highlighted: Making full use of the theoretical research results of other disciplines. From the establishment of constructivism in the field of international relations to the introduction of quantum theory into social sciences, Wendt’s methods of theoretical innovation have uniqueness, that is, making full use of the research results of other disciplines. In his article “Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics”, Wendt drew on the theoretical school of studying society from a psychological perspective and introduced Mead’s and Blumer’s symbolic interactionism into the theoretical system of international relations research. After establishing the theoretical system (methodology) of constructivism, Wendt introduced quantum theory, which has brought about a revolution in modern physics, into the field of social sciences. Currently, the main role of Wendt’s introduction of quantum theory is to break the traditional philosophical approach and change the view that the subject and object can be distinguished from each other and that humans can observe the object directly while being independent of it. As the laws of quantum theory in the field of physics continue to be explored, Wendt may further apply the theoretical research results of quantum entanglement and superposition to the field of social sciences. For example, the question raised by Wendt in Chapter 2 of *Social Theory of International Politics* is: How can we be both positivists and constructivists? Perhaps quantum superposition theory can deepen the understanding of the answer to this question.

Insight 3: The relevance of the borrowed theoretical systems should be emphasized: Focusing on systemic structures and systemic units in theoretical research. In the field of constructivist theoretical innovation, the sociology borrowed by Wendt focuses on systemic structures and systemic units in theoretical research. Wendt emphasizes that constructivism is a structural theory, focusing on the impact of the international systemic structure on systemic units. Similarly, in Wendt’s current research direction of quantum mind and social science theory, he still focuses on systemic structures and systemic units in theoretical research. Although there seem to be significant differences between Wendt’s earlier and later theories on the surface, in essence, Wendt’s theoretical innovation is based on a holistic methodology. Whether in advancing constructivism or introducing quantum theory into social sciences, he takes systemic structures and systemic units as the focus of his research. Moreover, the construction process of his international relations theory can be summarized as follows: defining based on focusing on the whole—delimiting the scope of application of the theory—introducing research results from other fields as a breakthrough for innovation—forming a theoretical framework.