

Latest Thoughts on the World State Project

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Alex Wendt is Mershon Professor of International Security and Professor of Political Science at The Ohio State University. His presentation "Why a World State is Democratically Necessary" became the *World Orders Forum's* inaugural essay, back in 2015. The following essay constitutes his most recent thinking on the topic, as presented on his webpage www.alexanderwendt.org/world-state-project/, and reprinted here with his permission.

Constructivism is all about agency and contingency, about how the social world doesn't have to be the way it is. It might not be easy to change, but we *made* the way it is, and not just made but constantly *re-made* it, every day in our individual and collective actions. So there is nothing "natural" about the societies we live in, since they could always be constructed differently.

I didn't come up with that idea, of course, nor is it particularly profound. In fact, it's kind of obvious – after all, what *else* would society be if not "*socially constructed*"?! But my work did play a role in popularizing constructivism in IR, especially through my 1992 article "Anarchy is What States Make of It." In retrospect the title choice was brilliant (if I may say!), though I can't claim credit for it. Although I used the phrase in a draft of the article, it was an anonymous reviewer – who I learned later was John Ruggie – who suggested making it the title. That probably doubled the article's citation count, since the phrase captured the essence of a constructivist approach to international politics very well. But talk about the contingencies of social construction!

I intentionally "got out of the constructivism business" in IR in the early 2000s – although, *without* intending it as such, then wrote a book about a much more radical, quantum "constructivism." However, my primary area of political and theoretical interest is still international politics, and in that context I have been interested for many years in the possibility of a world state, to which I plan to return hopefully soon.

More specifically, back in 2003 I published an article called "[Why a World State is Inevitable](#)" (*link*) in which I argued that in 1000 years it was inconceivable that the international system would still be anarchic. My argument assumed that people and states want not just wealth, power, and security (the interests that IR scholars usually assume), but also respect for their individual and collective identities. The failure to grant such respect leads to what Hegel called a "struggle for recognition" (though he was no believer in a world state), which I tried to show would propel the future development of the international system toward a world state. In effect, the "logic of anarchy" is not to produce conflict and war, as realists believe, but a world state.

However, one issue that I set aside in my 2003 piece was the normative or political question of whether a world state would be a good thing; my argument back then was simply, “like it or not, it’s coming to a neighborhood near you.” But since then, and partly in response to an explosion of scholarship since about 2000 on the idea of a world state, I’ve come to think that the normative question is actually central, since if people think a world state is a good idea they are more likely to push for it – and fight it if they don’t. So, it is this normative question I intend to tackle first, through the lens of the concept of sovereignty.

Political scientists will never agree on what it means to be a “state,” but most would probably say that sovereignty is one of its defining features. But what is “sovereignty”? There too you will get disagreement, but to me it’s about two things, a right and a power.

The ultimate right is to decide for itself whether it faces a threat so grave, that it justifies going beyond law and politics to war. In Carl Schmitt’s terms, sovereignty is the right to “decide the exception.” Whatever *you* thought about the Iraq War decision in 2003, most people did not question that the U.S., like any state feeling threatened, had the right to make the final call in its own defense. However, for that right to be more than a piece of paper, the state must have the power to back its sovereignty up, with – in Max Weber’s famous definition of the state – a monopoly on organized violence within its territory.

Putting these two qualities together means that when you strip away all the great stuff about sovereignty for its members, it comes with the right to decide that non-members are potential enemies and thus may be killed if necessary. So the bumper sticker reads: “sovereignty is the right to kill foreigners.” That doesn’t mean states should or will kill foreigners very often, and nowadays organized killing is actually far more common within states than between them. The point is rather that we are so accustomed to thinking about world politics in terms of separate countries (with conveniently different colors and shapes on maps to help us remember who’s who), that it is easy to forget that this is not “natural,” but a result of distributing the sovereign right to kill to 190 separate states rather than concentrating it in one, world state.

It might seem obvious that anarchy is a dysfunctional way to organize world politics, since it regularly produces war. And indeed, some political realists, like Hans Morgenthau, have favored a world state precisely because they thought it would keep the peace – while lamenting that (in their view) it was utopian. However, it’s clear that with the recent rise of populism many people today have little interest in a world state, and it’s not just regular folk who are skeptical. The conventional wisdom among political theorists going back to Kant has been that a world state would inevitably be a “despotism” or tyranny, and anarchy, for all its problems, would at least be better than that.

In my view this conclusion is upside down and fundamentally wrong-headed: it is international *anarchy* that is the despotism, far more so than a world state ever could be. That’s because it empowers (today) 190 separate sovereigns to make life and death decisions about foreigners, over which almost by definition there is no accountability. So let me here just try to convey the basic idea with a thought experiment.

Imagine that all 7 billion of us were given the opportunity, with equal votes, to re-design the political structure of the world completely from scratch. Let's assume further that the global discussion has narrowed the options down to just two: a) the status quo of divided sovereignty/international anarchy, or b) a unified sovereignty/world state. Finally, let's also assume a version of John Rawls' "veil of ignorance," in which we vote not knowing which state we will be a citizen of if we vote for more than one (much easier to like the status quo if you're a citizen of the United States than of Chad). Under those conditions, my claim is that most people would choose a world state, especially if they believe in liberalism and/or democracy. Here's why, quite apart from the benefits of keeping the peace.

Normally we think of liberalism and democracy as applying only within states, not between them. But both are universalistic ideologies, and so there is actually no reason that the people to whom they apply should stop at the water's edge. To see this, ask yourself what *liberal* justification is there to draw a line between some people that we'll call "Us" and others we'll call "Them," and then, if We decide They threaten Us, we can kill them? There are lots of *non-liberal* justifications for such Othering and killing (race; religion; language; and so on), but on purely liberal grounds it's hard to defend. In a truly liberal world all people would have the same rights *before* citizenship, including presumably the right not to be killed arbitrarily. Similarly, what *democratic* justification is there to exclude people from politics in "our" country if our decisions affect them? Democracy is about making power accountable to those it affects. Today's Canadian and Mexican citizens are hugely affected by decisions taken in the U.S. – so why shouldn't they have a say in how that power is used?

Note that this does not mean that in *today's* world the right choice is a world state. That would only make sense if we could be sure that the citizens of every other state would not take the opportunity of letting our guard down to stab us (any "us") in the back. But while unrealistic, the thought experiment highlights that an ideal world system would have just 1 state, not 190 (much less the thousands in the past), since there no good ethical grounds for opposing it if the conditions for one could be brought about.

These are still very rough ideas that will ultimately need to be worked out in book form. However, the biggest challenge I face in writing this book – which I originally had planned to start in 2003, before I got the quantum bug – is now to quantize the whole argument. I have some even rougher ideas about how to make this "Volume II" of Quantum Mind and Social Science, but I'll save those for another occasion. Suffice it to say that it's going to be a while before this book is done, but hopefully not ten years this time around...