

Beware of organicism: the narrative self of the state

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Alexander Wendt holds that states are ‘purposive actors with a sense of Self’.¹ He draws on hermeneutic scholarship from Paul Ricoeur (1991) to Erik Ringmar to argue that this self is a narrative structure.² To Ringmar,

To understand how a person [including, for Ringmar, persons like the state] makes sense of the world is thus not primarily to understand the words he or she uses, but more fundamentally to understand the experiences and memories with which words are associated. [. . .] The experiences and memories that people share are *facts* about a society, and like other facts about it they are amenable to investigation.³

I would go along with this, with the rider that the Self’s structure is heterological rather than monological; there is an ongoing inter- and intrasubjective struggle about which of the many possible stories of Self should at any one time be activated. I suspect, however, that Wendt would probably agree with this, but his claim is taller: it is the philosophical realist claim that narratives of state Selves, and therefore states themselves, are *real*. When Wendt writes that ‘Against anti-essentialists to the “left”, like postmodernists, I argue that we can theorize about processes of social construction *at the level of the states system* only if such processes have exogenously given, relatively stable platforms’, he is surely muting his claim.⁴ The claim is that the platform, which turns out to be the territorial state itself, is *real*. Most narrativists would indeed disagree with this claim, and underline that states are *like* persons, that is, that Wendt is availing himself of an analogy, a comparison, a metaphor.⁵ Wendt is explicitly dismissive of such ‘as if’ stories. Where in the landscape of social theory does this place him?

I should like to approach the question of whether states are people too in terms of the social sciences themselves, and not in terms of the discipline of philosophy’s

¹ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 194.

² Paul Ricoeur, ‘Narrative Identity’, in David Wood (ed.), *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1991 [1988]), pp. 188–99; Erik Ringmar, *Identity, Interest and Action: A Cultural Explanation of Sweden’s Intervention in the Thirty Years War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996a).

³ Ringmar, *Identity*, pp. 70–71.

⁴ Wendt, *Theory*, p. 198.

⁵ See, for example, Erik Ringmar, ‘On the Ontological Status of the State’, *European Journal of International Affairs*, 2:4 (1996), pp. 439–66, on p. 460, n. 8; Iver B. Neumann, ‘Ringmar on Peace and War’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 32:3 (1997), pp. 309–30.

comments on the social sciences.⁶ Wendt heads off the chapter by drawing on Weberian, Pluralist and Marxist insights about the state, and wraps up by stating that ‘I first combined Weberian and Marxist insights by defining the state as an organizational actor possessing sovereignty and a territorial monopoly on organized violence, whose form is constituted in relation to the society it governs by a structure of political authority’.⁷ Weber, however, cannot be invoked to support the claim under discussion here, for he consistently held that ‘For sociological purposes there is no such thing as a collective personality which ‘acts’ [. . . the state is . . .] only a certain kind of development of actual or possible social actions of individual persons’.⁸ We have to look elsewhere.

When a writer on the social invokes two of the founding fathers of sociology, one should always look for the third. So where is Durkheim? My answer is that he is present in a degree that should allow us to call Wendt a Durkheimian: he reifies, he uses organic metaphors, he thinks in terms of normal and abnormal systems, and finally, he is an evolutionist.

Reification

Although there is no mention of Durkheim in the chapter under discussion here, Wendt has one indicised mention of Durkheim. It comes on pp. 161–2, in the run-up to the chapter on whether states are people too, when he draws on Durkheim’s idea of there existing a *conscience collective* to argue in favour of the fruitfulness of there existing something that he calls ‘collective representations’ of stuff social, something that transcends the various beliefs of individuals. He follows Durkheim in taking the explicit starting point that social facts should be considered to be *things*.⁹ Wendt, who styles himself a scientific realist, follows Durkheim in programmatically reifying social phenomena.¹⁰ But what kind of things does he hold social stuff like the state to be?

Organicism

To Durkheim, social phenomena understood as things have certain tasks. Following Herbert Spencer, he refers to these tasks as functions.¹¹ The overall metaphor that Durkheim uses for social units is the organic one. It is, furthermore, not a general

⁶ For such discussions see, for example, Stefano Guzzini and Anna Leander, ‘A Social Theory for International Relations: An Appraisal of Alexander Wendt’s Theoretical and Disciplinary Synthesis’, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 4:4 (2001), pp. 316–38; Hidemi Suganami, ‘On Wendt’s Philosophy: A Critique’, *Review of International Studies*, 28:1 (2002), pp. 23–37.

⁷ Wendt, *Theory*, p. 243.

⁸ Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: Free Press, 1964), p. 102.

⁹ Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method, and Selected Texts on Sociology and Its Method* (London: Macmillan, 1982 [1985]).

¹⁰ Wendt, *Theory*, pp. 196–7 et passim.

¹¹ Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Sociology* (New York: D. Appleton, 1891).

organic metaphor, but that of the human body. In a major series of lectures that was collated as a book by one of his students and published posthumously, Durkheim uses the differentiation of state functions as an example:

The function of the rules of the individual moral code is in fact to fix in the individual consciousness the seat of all morals – their foundations, in the widest sense [. . .] Let us imagine what would happen to the functions of heart, lungs, stomach and so on, if they were free like this of all discipline... Just such a spectacle is presented by nations where there are no regulative organs of economic life. [. . .] we can therefore say that the State is a special organ whose responsibility it is to work out certain representations which hold good for the collectivity. These representations are distinguished from the other collective representations by their higher degree of consciousness and reflection. [. . .] As we read on in history, we see the functions of the State multiplying as they increase in importance. This development of the functions is made materially perceptible by the parallel development of the organ itself. What a far cry from the instrument of government in a society such as our own to what it was in Rome or in a Red Indian tribe. [. . .] The social brain, like the human brain, has grown in the course of evolution.¹²

This example runs throughout Durkheim's book, and the book's claim to being one of Durkheim's major works is further boosted by the high probability of this being the synopsis for an even grander book on moral universalism that Durkheim was planning as a follow-up to his best known work on the elementary forms of religious life.¹³ I mention this to underline the centrality of the use of the organic metaphor for the treatment of the state, and of the use of the state for the treatment of the social. Again, Wendt specifically follows this line of thinking. It is not only that one subheading reads 'States are people too', and that he refers to what he is doing as anthropomorphising the state.¹⁴ It is more specific than that. He insists on talking about the discussion of territory and population as giving 'our model of the state a "body"' and of the discussion of 'national interest' as giving 'our model of the state "life"'.¹⁵ Indeed, the inverted commas must be lapses, for he insists that he is not discussing the state *as if* it had a body and a life – the entire Durkheimian point is that they *actually* have these 'things'. The metaphorical distance implied by the use of inverted commas is explicitly done away with, and it should therefore be a correlate that Wendt should have done away with the inverted commas as well. Be that as it may, the point here is that Wendt is programmatically Durkheimian in being an organic thinker.

Normality

Like any overall metaphor in social thought, this one comes with a number of specific, in-built effects on the analysis. In order to function well, an organism must

¹² Emile Durkheim, *Professional Ethics and Civil Morals*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 3, 30, 50, 53.

¹³ Daniel Bell, 'Durkheim', in Alan Bullock and R.B. Woodings (eds.), *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thinkers* (London: Fontana, 1983), pp. 197–8, on p. 198.

¹⁴ Wendt, *Theory*, p. 215.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

act normally, and to Durkheim, a social fact understood as a thing should therefore be 'normal'. He argues that 'a social fact is normal, in relation to a given social type at a given phase of its development, when it is present in the average society of that species at the corresponding phase of its evolution'.¹⁶ To Durkheim, then, some forms are elementary to social life, inasmuch as they make human sociability possible at all. In terms of the history of science, this seems to be a sociologisation of Kant's basic assumption of there being certain categories (cause, effect, time, space) that must be there to make human *thought* possible at all.¹⁷ True, Durkheim favours a cover-all category rather than these four, giving as his reason that Kant's four categories are not universal cognitive givens, but the major point is that there exists such a thing as elementary categories and that such categories are formatted according to the social itself – that is, that they are socially constructed rather than material.¹⁸ Therefore, he argues, for societies the functional is the constitutive, and the functional therefore takes precedence over the causal. Again, Wendt seems to be in programmatic accord, when he argues that it is the cultural rather than the material which is constitutive of the social. True, Durkheim talks about the social and Wendt about the cultural, but they seem to be talking about very much the same thing – the common point is that social stuff is made by humans.

Evolutionism

To Durkheim, 'the rules which determine the duties that men owe to their fellows, solely as other men, form the highest point in ethics'.¹⁹ He takes this as his starting point for telling a story about the evolution of the world towards an envisioned cosmopolitan high-point where it will become possible, he argues, to 'imagine humanity in its entirety organized as a society'.²⁰ This society should be led by a state, which evolves organically out of the social, but which is distinct from it, like

a brain which controls the function of inter-relationship; but the visceral functions, the functions of the vegetative life or what corresponds to them, are subject to no regulative action. Let us imagine what would happen to the functions of heart, lungs, stomach and so on, if they were free like this of all discipline. . . . Just such a spectacle is presented by nations where there are no regulative organs of economic life.²¹

This discussion of world history is of course historically specific: Durkheim is attacking Great Britain, and by way of collateral damage, the United States, for paying too much heed to (nation-based) free trade and too little heed to (state-based) republicanism. Durkheim allocates the central role in bringing about

¹⁶ Quoted in Martin Hollis, *The Philosophy of Social Science. An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 100.

¹⁷ See Bryan S. Turner, 'Preface to the Second Edition', in Emile Durkheim (ed.) *Professional Ethics and Civil Morals*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. xiii–xlii, at xxvi.

¹⁸ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1976 [1912]).

¹⁹ Durkheim, *Ethics*, p. 3.

²⁰ Durkheim, *Ethics*, p. 74.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

evolutionary change and hence world history to what he calls the despotism of the state:

Every society is despotic, at least if nothing from without supervenes to restrain its despotism. Still, I would not say that there is anything artificial in this despotism; it is natural because it is necessary, and also because, in certain conditions, societies cannot endure without it. [. . .] From the moment the individual has been raised in this way by the collectivity, he will naturally desire what it desires and accept without difficulty the state of subjection to which he finds himself reduced.²²

To Durkheim as to Spinoza, human autonomy consists in insight into the incontrovertible character of this process.²³ And to Durkheim, it is exactly the state which plays the key role of inculcating the citizens with this insight. In order to do so, the state must incorporate itself as a small cadre, organised independently of society: ‘the State is nothing if it is not an organ distinct from the rest of society. If the State is everywhere, it is nowhere. The State comes into existence by a process of concentration that detaches a certain group of individuals from the collective mass.’²⁴ ‘State actors are differentiated from their societies, but internally related to them: no society, no state’. When the state is young, it has few ties to society: ‘it is above all the agent of external relations, the agent for the acquisition of territory and the organ of diplomacy’.²⁵ But the more it grows, the more democratic it becomes. The state becomes more and more conscious of itself, since that part of public consciousness which is clear, namely the *state’s* consciousness, becomes more and more pervasive.²⁶ Durkheim insists that ‘the state’ has indeed been empirically characterised by such an evolutionary course.²⁷ But, he adds, this is not the case with any state; some states, what he refers to as ‘certain democracies’, waste their time on idle ‘quasi-debates’ instead of working single-mindedly to strengthen the true state.²⁸ The model for the cosmopolitan future, then, is clearly his own state, France.

All that need not concern us here, since our focus is Wendt’s work, and we are only interested in Durkheim in the degree that he throws light on the historical and intellectual underpinnings of Wendt’s work. To what extent is Wendt’s own tack evolutionary? Since Wendt does not explicitly discuss the question of evolution, the parallel between the two thinkers is not as obvious here as it is in the cases of reification, organicism and normality. Still, there is a clear parallel. In tackling the question of differentiation between states *on the way* to the cosmopolitan future, Durkheim argues that:

As long as there are States, so there will be national pride, and nothing can be more warranted. But societies can have their pride, not in being the greatest or the wealthiest, but in being the most just, the best organized and in possessing the best moral constitution.²⁹

²² Ibid., p. 61.

²³ Ibid., p. 91.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 82; cf. Wendt, *Theory*, p. 209.

²⁵ Durkheim, *Ethics*, p. 85.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 87.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 86.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 94.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 75.

Now, a major theme of Wendt's book is the follow-up on his article 'Anarchy is What States Make of It'. Wendt postulates two kinds of anarchical systems, a Hobbesian and a Lockean, and pays particular heed to the question of evolution of the former into the latter, as when he writes that:

All other things being equal, the international system contains a bias toward 'Realist' thinking. The question, however, is not whether there are pressures on the states to be self-interested – there are – but whether states are capable ever of transcending those pressures and expanding the boundaries of the Self to include Others. This they might do initially for self-interested reasons, but if over time the identification becomes internalized, such that a group of states learns to think of itself as a 'We', then its members will no longer be self-interested relative to each other with respect to the issues that define the group. The question, in short, is whether the members of states can ever learn additional 'social' (what I am calling 'collective') identities above and beyond the state, creating 'concentric circles' of group identification.³⁰

There is definitely an evolutionism here, and hence yet another parallel to Durkheim, although it is admittedly somewhat more implicit than the other parallels identified, which all seem to be explicit and programmatic. So if Wendt is a Durkheimian, where does that place him in IR debates, what kind of Durkheimian is he, and why should we care?

So what?

It is easy to see why Wendt, as a critical realist, has turned to Durkheim. He starts with the postulate that there exists a deep structure that anchors the real, and proceeds to study the social as a set of consequences or effects of something real. He interprets Durkheim's exhortation to study social phenomena as *things* as an exhortation to study representations. Provided that we see these representations as somehow 'growing out of' a material reality, then this means that we may study human constructs and still treat them as real. The things to be studied remain tied to underlying realities, and this has a whole swathe of repercussions, a central one being that the correspondence theory of truth may be kept. As a Durkheimian, Wendt may pose as a constructivist within contemporary IR and still escape attacks of being an idealist, for

The Durkheimian picture is not a wholly idealist one in which the world is dispensable; it is a picture wherein knowledge and classification rest upon the natural and the social in symbiosis, wherein what merits recognition as the truth is at one and the same time an empirical and a moral issue.³¹

One of the many services that Wendt has done IR is to link the discipline more firmly to social theory overall. In this respect, I welcome his Durkheimianism. There are, however, problems with being a Durkheimian, and particularly with being the kind of Durkheimian that Wendt is. Take Durkheim's somewhat smug statement

³⁰ Wendt, *Theory*, pp. 241–2.

³¹ Barry Barnes, *The Elements of Social Theory* (London: University College London Press, 1995), p. 97.

reproduced above, to the effect that 'Every society is despotic, at least if nothing from without supervenes to restrain its despotism. Still, I would not say that there is anything artificial in this despotism: it is natural because it is necessary, and also because, in certain conditions, societies cannot endure without it'.³² Seen from the other side of the twentieth century, the trust in the state as a civilisational force is hard to uphold, because the price that individuals and groups had to pay for state excesses turned out to be infinitely higher than Durkheim envisioned in his day. This should have consequences for our choice of research design. By foregrounding the state and bracketing everything else, we read out a lot of the action, including a lot of the transformational action, evolutionary or otherwise, that Wendt himself singles out for specific attention. These omissions have analytical and moral costs.

But then again, Wendt's evolutionism is not as optimistically progressivist as Durkheim. Neither is his reification as dogged. There is that part of the chapter, 'Why anthropomorphizing the state is still problematic', where he argues that states are less unitary, more transparent and less dependent on interaction as their sole mode of interaction than are people.³³ It is easy to follow Wendt when he seems to suggest that there is fast-moving change with large potential effects on the density of state interfaces and hence on the state itself here. Particularly the last point is worth detailed attention. As social structures, corporate actors such as the state have interfaces which also harbour such possibilities as division, growth, merger, interlocking and specialisation: 'To varying degrees these strategies do not presuppose a given body and as such are not "interaction" in the usual sense. [. . . However,] If this is all that nominalists mean to call our attention to then there is not much to disagree with, since whether or not anthropomorphizing the state is appropriate will then be an empirical question.'³⁴

I should, however, like to take issue with this way of couching the question. It is not the case that a question is either of universal relevance and hence theoretical, or socially specific and hence empirical. To argue whether a state *is* a person or not may not be that helpful. Both states and persons are fuzzy sets. In certain respects, states are like persons, and in others they are not. In certain respects the state is like a machine, too, or like a language, and in certain respects not. This question should not (and probably cannot) be settled on its merits. It should be settled pragmatically. If one believes, as I do, that thinking depends on the language in which it is couched, and that language cannot help but be metaphorical, then the key question is not whether a certain phenomenon is metaphorical or not, but *which* metaphors constitute it, with what effects and at what alternative cost (in terms of the relative merits of using other and competing metaphors).

Every set of metaphors is an enabling and constraining prerequisite for thinking. It will therefore itself be an influence on where thinking goes. Two aspects of organic metaphors are particularly alluring for thinking about International Relations. First, they are ontologically dualistic: Either stuff must belong to organisms and be internal, or it must be external. This way of thinking privileges not relations but entities. And when relations are to be studied, organic metaphors point to one

³² Durkheim, *Ethics*, p. 61.

³³ Wendt, *Theory*, pp. 221–4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

particular level of relations, namely that of relations between organisms. This level becomes wholly distinct from, as well as privileged in relation to, relations internal to organisms on the one hand (which make up a pathology), and the functioning of the entire system of organisms on the other (which make up an ecology). Secondly, organic metaphors suggest that every organism has a *telos*, which is survival and adaptation, and that every system has a mode, which is evolution. Although it is not logically necessary for evolution to be conceived of as teleological, a suggestion is made that this mode points towards the *telos* of always-evolving differentiation.

Wendt could rid himself of Durkheim's organic metaphor and keep the gains that accrue from being a Durkheimian by putting the metaphor of a language in its place. If the social is a language, then social phenomena may still be treated as 'things' in a Durkheimian sense, but they would be *different* things. Such a move within IR would repeat what happened in other social sciences such as sociology and anthropology some fifty years ago. In the 1940s and 1950s, functionalism was the key theory in the social sciences, to the extent that Giddens talks about it as an orthodox consensus in the social sciences.³⁵ In some of the social sciences, its concept of structure was then modified or even supplanted by structuralism. There was a shift from conceiving structure in terms of organic metaphors towards conceiving it in terms of linguistic metaphors. Substituting linguistic metaphors for organic ones has two great advantages which are particularly relevant here. First, since language is made up of multilevel relations between elements, the privileged focus of inquiry becomes relations, with no logically necessary privilege being given to any one particular level. Secondly, since languages may be said to be 'alive' in a very different sense than are organisms, the *problématique* surrounding their 'life' and hence their possible 'survival' and 'adaptation' is different from the one surrounding organisms. Specifically, the linguistic metaphor does not extend an equally obvious invitation to teleological thinking as does the organic one.

By turning back to the organic metaphor, Wendt chooses to cut himself off from these avenues of scientific inquiry. As a consequence of his organic thinking that 'states are people too', he singles out the functioning of the states system as the central issue. Furthermore, he privileges relations between states understood as organisms, and the evolution of the system as a whole in the direction of a next 'stage', namely that of a world state. This move blocks two vistas of scientific inquiry which opened up as a consequence of the structuralist movement in the social sciences, namely a focus on what the state appears to be (if it is not already fixed as an organism), and how states relate to and are changed by a plethora of other kinds of agents (if one stops privileging relations between states as organisms and broadens the inquiry to include social relations in general).

Parting shot

Since I do not believe structuralism to be inherently superior to either functionalism or any other theoretical perspective, I do not want to argue that Wendt's turn to

³⁵ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge: Polity, 1984).

functionalism is a retrograde turn. I would argue that, to a social scientist, the value of a theoretical perspective lies in its use. The job of the social scientist is to draw up analyses of how and why worlds appear to us the way they do. The working of the states system remains important. Yet if one suspects that there are systemic changes afoot, and that the most relevant changes are to be located not only in the set of inter-state relations, but also in intra-state relations, in relations between states and non-state agents, states and supranational agents, and so on, then going back to organic thinking about the state occludes lines of inquiry that seem vital if one wants to understand these changes. Arguing that states are people too seems to constrain rather than to enable our inquiry into what is happening to states and their place in global politics here and now. To my mind, understanding this is exactly the key point of our theoretical and empirical work as social scientists working within the discipline of IR. Consequently, Wendt's organic thinking should be denied not (only) on philosophical, but on pragmatic grounds. That Alex Wendt is a Durkheimian is fine by me, but he should follow in the footsteps of the many Durkheimians, beginning with Durkheim's own collaborator and son-in-law Marcel Mauss, who have updated Durkheim by shedding his organic metaphors.

