Hegel's House, or 'People are states too'

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Are states people too? *Yes*, they are. In this I agree with Alexander Wendt's contention that the state is an 'emergent phenomenon which cannot be reduced to individuals', although I disagree with the methodology (scientific realist abduction) that he uses to make his argument and the consequent implication that the state is a 'real' (as opposed, presumably, to a 'fictitious') thing.[1] Indeed, I would rather *invert* the claim that states are people too, and claim that *people are states too*, inasmuch as both are social actors – entities in the name of which actions are performed – exercising agency in delimited contexts. Instead of trying to ascertain what makes something a 'person', we should focus on processes of 'personation' in world politics, in order to enhance our understanding of how social actors in general are produced and sustained in the first place. Doing so allows for a much broader catalogue of actors in world politics, and affords the possibility of studying social action in a more consistently constructionist[2] manner.

I will begin in a somewhat oblique way. Hegel is perhaps best known in contemporary IR theory as the person responsible for the standard example of a constitutive relation: the master-slave relationship. In Wendt's summary of the example, 'masters and slaves are caused by the contingent interactions of human beings; they are constituted by the social structure known as slavery'. The master-slave relationship marks the distinction between constitution and causation: 'Masters do not "cause" slaves because without slaves they cannot *be* masters in the first place, but this does not mean the institution of slavery has no effects'.[3] Constitutive relations are logical relations, internal to the very definition of an entity; they are static as opposed to dynamic, forming the framework within which concrete historical action takes place. Although our sense of a constitutive relation emerges from our observations of actual things, the relations themselves occupy a different – perhaps *deeper* – plane of reality.

Hegel has another example that he uses to make this point. Although events are often (efficiently) caused by the actions of individuals motivated by passion, he

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[1] Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 215.

[2] By 'constructionism' I mean nothing more than the ontological claim that (social) reality is (socially) constructed, and that we should in consequence concern ourselves with 'social interactions or causal routes that led to, or were involved in, the coming into being or establishing of some present entity or fact'. Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 48.

[3] Wendt, *Social Theory*, p. 25.

argues, the *significance* of those actions to the course of world history does not depend on their causation, but rather on how those actions are (constitutively) arranged. Hegel compares this to the building of a house:

Building a house is, to begin with, an inner goal and purpose. . . . The elements are utilized according to their nature, and yet they cooperate toward a product by which they themselves are being limited.[4]

A similar distinction between constitution and causation is in evidence here: the house may be *caused* by the properties of the materials used to build it, but what *constitutes* a house is how those materials are positioned and balanced against one another. Its essence is given not by anything specific to any of the materials used to construct it, but by an abstract pattern or schema that at least implicitly governs their arrangement. This schema does not cause the house; it defines the house *as* a house in the first place.

The problem with this depiction, however, is that it assumes that the parts composing the house simply cohere with one another of their own accord. But as anyone who has ever been responsible for a house knows, this is simply not true: a house takes *continual maintenance*, from minor tasks like cleaning the windows to major tasks like replacing the roof. The snapshot from which a theorist might derive the constitutive properties of a house purposely abstracts from these processes of maintenance so that the analyst can focus on the purely conceptual and definitional aspects of the house as an entity. But this snapshot necessarily selects out *one* moment in a series of ongoing processes – processes of the maintenance of the house as well as processes of decay and wear which break the house down over time – and privileges it as the 'essence' of the house. And it ignores the extent to which that image of what a house should be is itself involved in the processes which maintain the house, as that image is referenced and used as a recipe or plan of action by the people involved in keeping the house going.

These objections also apply to the example of the master-slave relationship. *Masters* do not cause slaves, and vice versa, but *the master-slave relationship* is causally involved in the processes which maintain both 'masters' and 'slaves', as it is referenced by the people involved in maintaining the social institution. And taking one moment of the interaction between masters and slaves as the essence of the master-slave relationship downplays the concrete social processes that produce and sustain that relationship. Indeed, in both cases the analyst *reifies* a series of ongoing processes, treating something that is actually fluid and dynamic as if it were static and fixed: as if the object of the investigation were akin to a physical object, and therefore best represented with a noun.

The trouble with this reification is that we only know that someone is a 'master' or a 'slave' – or that something is a 'house' – by observing the processes that maintain it and then making a conceptual leap to its supposed essence. This is epistemologically parallel to the move made when we abstract from the usage of a word in speech to its 'essential meaning', on the suspicion that the repeated use of a word in some particular context indicates something about the intrinsic character of the word itself. But this move seems unwarranted, inasmuch as a statement like 'red

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[4] G. W. F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. Leo Rauch (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1988), p. 30.

exists' only *appears* to be 'a metaphysical statement about red', when it only says 'something about the use of the word "red"' in a definite context.[5] The same can be said about a statement like 'this is a house' or 'this slave belongs to that master'; these statements are not so much reflections of an objectively (externally) existing reality as they are expressions of a certain way of comporting ourselves in and towards a reality of which we remain an integral part. As such, the statements are also integrally wrapped up with the production and reproduction of the entities to which they only apparently refer: this is a house only because we act as if it were and consequently *make it so*. The reification involved in focusing on static constitutive relations blinds us to these processes.

A scientific realist might reply that the test for whether some particular reification was justified would be the explanatory gains involved in doing so; treating a social actor as if it had a stable constitutive essence would be acceptable if the resulting explanations were better. If they are, then we can reasonably conclude that the identified essence of the actor is *really* that actor's essence; otherwise, the success of the theory would be simply miraculous.[6] But Roy Bhaskar, the social theorist of reference for many scientific realists in IR, is quite clear that the grounds for accepting that statements about the essences of actors refer to real things *cannot* be the empirical success of the social sciences, since 'there is no such body of knowledge' to transcendentally explain.[7]

Instead, the specification of essential actors stems from the position that 'if the concept of human agency is to be sustained, it must be the case that *we* are responsible' for our actions.[8] In a similar vein, Colin Wight argues that we require a basic notion of essential agency in order to do meaningful social science.[9] Wendt extends this argument to 'the state': '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'.[10] Maintaining essential agents prevents the analyst from assimilating action directly to structural imperatives, and introduces the possibility of individual mediation between options, albeit structurally provided ones. So isolating constitutive essences – even 'thin' ones – in the social sciences is in the last instance about avoiding 'constitutivism' and preserving agency.[11]

But this argument rests on a very particular view of social action and the epistemological character of social theory that is not shared by constructionists. Scientific realists, in accordance with their professed naturalism, inhabit a *dualistic* world characterised by a split between the mind (the domain of knowledge) and the body

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[5] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), §58.

[6] Note that making this move would eliminate the as-if character of the assumption, which is precisely what most scientific and critical realists recommend. *Contra* the arguments of most critical and scientific realists, however, I see no way to reliably make this move when dealing with conceptual assumptions that are themselves implicated in the (re)production of the phenomenon under investigation.

[7] Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism*, 3rd edn. (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 99.

[8] Ibid., p. 92.

[9] Colin Wight, 'They Shoot Dead Horses Don't They? Locating Agency in the Agent-Structure Problematique', *European Journal of International Relations*, 5:1 (1999), pp. 131–3.

[10] Wendt, *Social Theory*, p. 198.

[11] Emanuel Adler, 'Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 3:3 (1997), pp. 332–3.

(the domain of actual physical or social things); hence the point of social research for scientific realists is to capture as much of that externally existing reality as possible by creating successively better and better approximations of it in our theories.[12] But a focus on the social processes which create and sustain entities, instead of on the purportedly 'essential' character of those entities, inhabits a very different world: a *monistic* world, in which knowledge and reality are not two separate things, but ontologically continuous. Max Weber's 1904 essay on 'objectivity' remains the most thorough exploration of what such a stance entails: instead of seeking to produce 'a "presuppositionless" copy of "objective" facts,' social research operates with ideal types, which are

> formed through a one-sided *accentuation* of *one* or *more* points of view and through bringing together a great many diffuse and discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent *concrete individual* events, which are arranged according to these emphatically one-sided points of view in order to construct a unified *analytical construct* [*Gedanken*]. In its conceptual purity, this analytical construct [*Gedankenbild*] is found nowhere in empirical reality; it is a utopia.[13]

Ideal types are pragmatically useful rather than 'true' or 'false'.[14] Inasmuch as the first criterion of an ideal type is this pragmatic and analytical character, we can begin by tossing out claims to have accurately apprehended the objective character of social reality, focusing instead on what particular theoretical specifications actually *do* in practice.[15] The scientific realist claim to know the constitutive essence of some social actor directs our attention to how this essence interacts with the social environment in which it is situated.[16] But in so doing it becomes quite unable to account for this essential character *itself*; we are thus left with a world in which social interactions are surrounded (conceptually, at any rate) by the essential, *non-social* 'cores' of actors which restrict – even if only minimally – processes of social construction and reproduction.

Against this, I would oppose a 'rhetorical-responsive' or *relational* account[17] of social action that begins not with the abduced constitutive essences of actors but with the 'rhetorical commonplaces' that 'afford' social action.[18] In so doing, these

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[12] Fred Chernoff, 'Scientific Realism as a Meta-Theory of International Politics', *International Studies Quarterly*, 46:2 (2002), pp. 193–5.

[13] Max Weber, 'Die "Objektivität" Sozialwissenschaftlicher und Sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis', in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, ed. Elizabeth Flitner (Potsdam: Internet-Ausgabe, <http://www.uni-potsdam.de/u/paed/Flitner/Flitner/Weber/index.html>), p. 191.

[14] Weber, 'Objektivität', p. 193.

[15] Hence we no longer need to retain a distinction between 'real' and 'fictitious' entities, or between 'as-if' statements and statements about how things 'really are'. These distinctions only make sense if one begins from a position that we can gain knowledge of the social world that is *not* in some way ideal-typical; this is neither my starting point nor Weber's. The argument here is not that nothing is real, but rather that the concept of the real (vs. the fictitious) is misleading if taken literally and incorporated into an analytical framework.

[16] David Sylvan and Stephan Majeski, 'A Methodology for the Study of Historical Counterfactuals', *International Studies Quarterly*, 42:1 (1998), pp. 85–89.

[17] Accounts are *not* theories in the strong sense, and hence make no essential claims about the character of reality – John Shotter, *Conversational Realities* (London: Sage, 1993), pp. 113–15. My posing of this alternative thus avoids Wendt's charge (Wendt, *Social Theory*, p. 67) that all social research is implicitly 'realist' to the extent that it uses empirical evidence ('we are all realists in practice,' he declares). But not all claims about 'reality' are *scientific realist* claims.

[18] John Shotter, *Cultural Politics of Everyday Life* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), pp. 65–9; Friedrich Kratochwil, *Rules, Norms, and Decisions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 40–2.

commonplaces *simultaneously* give rise to concrete social actors, justifying and legitimating particular actions to be performed in their names. Rhetorical commonplaces, which form the 'living tradition' in which a given social actor is situated, are not 'fully predetermined, already decided distinctions,' but rather more ambiguous '*resources*' which can be 'expressed or formulated in different ways in different, concrete circumstances.'[19] Struggles over precisely *which* concrete deployment of *which* commonplaces are practically enacted are always also struggles about the *identity* of some particular actor, and hence part of the active process of *bounding* that actor – producing and reproducing it out of the transactional flow of everyday life.[20] So actors, from this perspective, are more like contested zones of ongoing debate than like physical objects. Instead of possessing a constitutive *essence*, actors – whether states or individuals – should be regarded as the product of ongoing constitutive *practices*.

Let me briefly address two objections to this position. First, relational constructionism is neither an 'idealist' account of social life nor a privileging of process over social structure. As a monistic approach, it does not recognise or admit the difference, preferring to operate in the actual world of practical social activity instead of trying to separate this world into material and ideational (or structural and processual) elements. Far from ignoring the supposedly real social structures that underpin rhetorical deployments,[21] relational constructionism *reconceptualises* social structure as patterns of social interaction and the *relative* stabilities within them.[22] This position should not be unfamiliar to IR constructivists: Wendt himself has argued that '*structure exists, has effects, and evolves only because of agents and their practices*'.[23] Structures are present, although reconceptualised, in both IR constructivism and relational constructionism; relational constructionism takes this insight one step further, suggesting that *actors too* should be conceptualised as consisting of practices.

This brings up the second objection: annexing actors *completely* to social process denies agency, in that actors become cultural (or structural) dupes – blind carriers of objectively existing social and cultural forces, unable to exercise any independent causal influence over the course of events.[24] But the solution to this problem proposed by many IR constructivists – an assertion of actor autonomy coupled to a discussion of actor motivations – *fails to solve the problem*, inasmuch as an assertion of agency and an analysis of agency are two different things. And ironically, giving

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[19] Shotter, *Cultural Politics*, pp. 170–1.

[20] Erik Ringmar, *Identity, Interests, and Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon, 'Relations Before States: Substance, Process, and the Study of World Politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 5:3 (1999), pp. 313–17.

[21] In his 'Afterword' to Shotter's book *Conversational Realities*, Bhaskar advances this criticism of Shotter's relational constructionist position. But Bhaskar also misreads Shotter as engaging in a hermeneutic exercise (p. 185), which is not his position at all – although in a sense Bhaskar *has to* misunderstand Shotter's project in this fashion, given Bhaskar's (political) position on how science can contribute to human emancipation.

[22] Shotter, *Conversational Realities*, pp. 73–4; Talcott Parsons, 'The Present Position and Prospects of Systematic Theory in Sociology', in *Essays in Sociological Theory* (New York: Free Press, 1954), p. 216.

[23] Wendt, *Social Theory*, p. 185, emphasis in original.

[24] Adler, 'Seizing the Middle Ground', pp. 333–4.

actors an essence – a non-social core to which they can presumably retreat and from which they can subsequently act in ways that are *not* constituted by their social environment – opens the door to an even more subtle denial of agency, as actors become automatons acting on the *internal* pressure of social norms and conventions which they have 'internalised'. Acting according to the dictates of an internalised norm does not seem to me to capture 'agency' at all, unless we take the categorical stance that agency is some sort of metaphysical quantity lodged firmly between the ears (and we should not fail to note that most analysts making this argument also restrict 'agency' to biologically individual human beings).

Against this, relational constructionism locates agency in what we might call the double failure of social structures to cohere on their own.[25] First, particular constellations of processes are never inevitable, but represent *ongoing accomplishments of practice*.[26] The 'fit' of particular legitimating practices with one another has less to do with intrinsic properties of the practices themselves, and more to do with active processes of tying practices together to form relatively coherent wholes.[27] Second, cultural resources for action are always *ambiguous*, and do not simply present themselves as clearly defined templates for action.[28] Instead, cultural resources provide opportunities, but actualising those opportunities demands practical, political and discursive work to 'lock down' the meaning of the resource and derive implications from it.[29] Agency is thus preserved through a more explicit embrace of *historical contingency*, in that an actor's actions are never reducible to either its purportedly intrinsic properties, or to the purportedly extrinsic 'objective' social structures in which it is embedded, but are rather located firmly within what we might call the *practical politics of boundary-maintenance*, or (to use John Shotter's felicitious phrase) the 'cultural politics of everyday life'.

In conclusion I should return to houses, slaves, and masters – and states. These words, treated as *nouns* in approaches inspired by scientific realism, are also *verbs*, and can refer to active processes; this verb form catches up the 'maintenance' aspects of the entities in question much better than the noun form does. In this sense, a house, a social relationship, and a state are not 'things' at all, but *patterns of activity* organised around certain regulative ideals. *But so are 'individuals'*, which are socially empowered to speak and act on their own behalf – never absolutely, but always in particular circumstances, with particular social entailments, able to do particular things and not others. (The changing boundaries of the agency afforded to women, for example, illustrates the point, as do discussions about 'animal rights'.)

When we study social actors, we should be attuned to the concrete processes which accomplish the bounding of those actors; in particular, we should pay attention to what Hobbes called 'personation': the social process by which someone is empowered to speak on behalf of (or 'in the name of') an entity, *thereby making*

[25] Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, 'Defending the West: Occidentalism and the Formation of NATO', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 11:3 (2003), pp. 237–8.
[26] Roxanne Lynn Doty, 'Aporia: A Critical Exploration of the Agent-Structure Problematique in International Relations Theory', *European Journal of International Relations*, 3:3 (1997), pp. 376–9.
[27] Mark Laffey and Jutta Weldes, 'Beyond Belief: Ideas and Symbolic Technologies in the Study of International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 3:2 (1997), pp. 202–3.
[28] William H. Sewell, 'A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation', *American Journal of Sociology*, 98:1 (1992), pp. 17–19.
[29] Iver Neumann, *Uses of the Other* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 33–5.

that entity an actor – whether we are talking about human beings singularly or collectively, 'a Church, an Hospital, a Bridge', or 'the true God'.[30] These processes, involving social conventions which are themselves continually being produced and reproduced by social practices, should be our focus. But where Hobbes calls for an all-powerful Leviathan to impose some consistency on our social and linguistic usages, we – armed with contemporary theories of language instead of Hobbes' early Enlightenment nominalism – should be more sensitive to how local processes of negotiation and contestation produce relative stabilities in social action.

As an example, consider Benedict Anderson's celebrated account of the origins of nationalism. A number of common experiences, largely involving the 'glass ceiling' imposed on the careers of creole colonial administrators, were expressed in the novel vernacular languages systematised and codified by printers and publishers.[31] Individual frustrations and instances of distinction were 'yoked'[32] together into a coherent narrative that made sense of these disparate experiences: we creoles are different from those peninsulares, 'they' are not like 'us'. All of a sudden we have a novel social actor, a 'nation', in the name of which action can be legitimately performed: since 'we' are all in this together, in some sense, it now makes sense to consider how 'our' needs and interests and desires can best be met. The nation has no essence outside of how the social activity constituting it is arranged, even though there may be debates within that national community about what the resources implicated in the nation's identity actually *mean* in practical terms. But these debates have only political and contingent answers – local stabilisations – rather than final solutions imposed either by a Leviathan or by superior knowledge of the 'real' essence of some nation.[33]

A stance like this presents one further, surprising result: states and individual human beings do *not* exhaust the variety of actors being personated in contemporary world politics. In particular, one sees references to 'humanity', 'the market', 'the globe', and 'civilisation', which can also be meaningfully studied as social actors. Doing so presents some practical difficulties,[34] but these can be overcome provided that one approaches the problem with ontological and epistemological commitments – and the resulting methodological position – appropriate to the task. Scientific realist abduction is not necessary to acknowledge and analyse the important role that the state plays *as an actor* in contemporary world politics, and may actually hinder analysis inasmuch as scientific realists rush to quickly to identify a constitutive essence where it may be more useful to presume that none exists. States are people too, and people are states too – but neither are *essentially* so.

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[30] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, eds. Richard Flathman and David Johnston (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997 [1651]), pp. 89–91. See also Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics: Hobbes and Civil Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), especially ch. 5.

[31] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, revised edn. (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 55–8.

[32] On 'yoking', see Andrew Abbott, 'Things of Boundaries', *Social Research*, 62 (1995), pp. 871–2.

[33] A consistent constructionist account does need to go beyond Anderson in one crucial aspect, emphasising that the process of articulating a national identity never ceases, and that the same dynamics present at the birth of the notion of nationalism or of any particular national actor continue throughout the period of its existence. This fact was graphically illustrated by the trajectory of national notions in Eastern Europe after the Cold War. See Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[34] I have tried to address some of these in Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, 'The West is the Best: Occidentalism and Postwar German Reconstruction', in Daniel M. Green (ed.), *Constructivism and Comparative Politics* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe Press, 2002), pp. 230–64.