Alexander Wendt

Alexander Wendt is the Ralph D. Mershon Professor of International Security at the Mershon Center. His research interests include international relations theory, global governance, political and social theory, and the philosophy of social science.

Wendt is one of the most cited international relations scholars today. Based on a survey by the College of William and Mary of 2,000 international relations faculty, Foreign Policy named him the third-most influential scholar in the field over the past 20 years.

Wendt is so important because he was one of the first scholars to bring social constructivist theory to international relations. His book Social Theory of International Politics argues that international politics is determined not primarily by material concerns such as wealth and power, but by states' perceptions of each other as rivals, enemies, and friends. Social Theory of International Politics was named Best Book of the Decade by the International Studies Association in 2006 and has been translated into six languages.

This year, Wendt launched a new academic journal, International Theory: A Journal of International Politics, Law and Philosophy, which he co-edits with Duncan Snidal from University of Chicago. The journal, supported by the Mershon Center and published by Cambridge University Press, promotes theoretical scholarship about the positive, legal, and normative aspects of world politics. Its first issue came out in February.

Wendt will also publish New Systems Theories of World Politics (Palgrave, 2009), edited with Mathias Albert and Lars-Erik Cederman. Based on a 2005 conference that Wendt organized at the Mershon Center, the book uses a number of systems theoretical approaches to analyze the structure and dynamics of the international system.

Wendt’s contribution to the volume, “Flatland: Quantum Mind and the International System,” compares the international system to a hologram. Unlike photographs, holograms store all their information in every part of the image. Thus, if a hologram is cut into pieces, each piece will still contain a smaller but intact version of the original image. Wendt argues the same is true of the international system. Each person represents one point in the international system, and as such has all the information needed to recreate the system as a whole in his or her own mind.

This paper is the basis for Wendt's current project, Quantum Mind and
Social Science. In this book, Wendt explores implications of recent claims that human consciousness is a quantum mechanical phenomenon - in other words, it behaves as both a wave and a particle. If these claims are true, he argues, then social science must shift its foundation to quantum mechanics because consciousness is key to the social construction of reality.

Wendt's recent work includes "Sovereignty and the UFO," co-authored with Raymond Duvall, and published in Political Theory. The article explores why states have placed a taboo on considering whether or not UFOs exist. Wendt and Duvall take no position on what UFOs are - extra-terrestrials, natural phenomena, or something manmade - but argue that governments refuse to study them because they challenge state sovereignty.

State authority rests on the ability to establish and enforce norms, engage in systematic surveillance, and develop specialized knowledge for the production of disciplined subjects. If a state found that a UFO was extra-terrestrial, this would represent a power it could not normalize. Therefore, Wendt and Duvall argue, states prefer not to ask the question.