



RECONSIDERING IDENTITY IN WENDT'S "ANARCHY IS WHAT STATES MAKE OF IT": LIMITS AND EXTENSIONS

Mirah Satria Alamsyah*
Universitas Bangka Belitung

Abstract

This article revisits Alexander Wendt's constructivist framework on state identity and behaviour in an anarchic international system. Wendt emphasizes that anarchy is a social construct and that identities and interests shape state actions. However, his framework has limitations, particularly in explaining how identities form from the societal to the state level, and in the role of cognition and deliberation at the state level, which are essentially individual capacities. Drawing on Bruce Cronin's insights, Oran Young's social choice theory, Maja Zehfuss' distinction between social and corporate identities, and critiques by Copeland and Boulding on intention interpretation, this article highlights overlooked complexities. The analysis suggests that enriching Wendt's framework with complementary perspectives allows for a more robust understanding of identity as a key factor shaping intentions, interactions, and the meaning of anarchy, reinforcing constructivism's relevance in international relations studies.

Keywords: Constructivism, State Identity, Anarchy, International Relations, Social Construct

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji ulang kerangka konstruktivis Alexander Wendt mengenai identitas dan perilaku negara dalam sistem internasional yang anarkis. Wendt menekankan bahwa anarki merupakan konstruksi sosial, dan identitas serta kepentingan membentuk tindakan negara. Namun, kerangka ini masih terbatas, khususnya dalam menjelaskan proses terbentuknya identitas dari masyarakat ke negara, serta peran kognisi dan deliberasi negara yang kurang meyakinkan karena sejatinya dimiliki individu. Dengan merujuk pada pemikiran Bruce Cronin, konsep social choice Oran Young, pembedaan identitas sosial dan korporat oleh Maja

*Corresponding Author: Mirah Satria Alamsyah, Universitas Bangka Belitung, Indonesia

235

Zehfuss, serta kritik Copeland dan Boulding terhadap interpretasi intensi, artikel ini menyoroti kompleksitas yang kerap diabaikan Wendt. Analisis ini menunjukkan bahwa dengan memperkaya kerangka Wendt melalui perspektif tambahan memungkinkan pemahaman identitas sebagai faktor utama dalam membentuk intensi, interaksi, dan makna anarki secara lebih meyakinkan, sekaligus memperkuat relevansi konstruktivisme dalam studi hubungan internasional.

Kata Kunci: Konstruktivisme, Identitas Negara, Anarki, Hubungan Internasional, Konstruksi Sosial

Introduction

Discussion about anarchy already becomes a major debate for international relations scholars. Discussion about how state relations with other states in anarchical international politics structure between realist-liberalist, neo-realist-neo-liberalist, or form these schools of thought to constructivist towards the concept of anarchy been broadly discussed. Alexander Wendt takes a part on this discussion about anarchy through his writing titled '*Anarchy is what state make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics*' and '*Social Theory of International Politics*'. Based on these writings, Alexander Wendt challenges the logic of anarchy structure impacts state behaviour towards other states. He believes that state in anarchy structure will act 'god' or 'bad' towards other state depend on the meaning that states understand towards anarchy. Then, identity and interest become the main factor to understand state process of giving meaning towards anarchy.

This paper concurs with Wendt's perspective on anarchy. However, it takes a different stance regarding state identities. This paper argues that Wendt explanation on identity faces difficulties in explaining state intentions. Wendt also pays less attention to how identities are articulated from society to the state. The aim of this paper is to develop these arguments, beginning with a discussion of the debate on anarchy and Wendt's thinking about it.

Analytical Framework

This article uses Wendt's constructivist theory as a starting point but adds insights from several other scholars. Wendt argues that identity and interest shape how states act, yet he gives little attention to how identities are formed. Cronin explains this through three steps: categorization, identification, and social comparison. Zehfuss adds a distinction between social identities, which can be many, and corporate identity, which is singular and rooted in a state's internal structure. To connect identity with decision-making, Young's idea of social choice is used, showing how individual preferences become collective outcomes. Copeland and Boulding highlight further challenges, such as misinterpretation of behaviour and the unequal power of small decision-making groups. By combining these perspectives, the framework helps explain how identities are created, maintained, and turned into state actions in international relations.

Methods

This study applies a qualitative method based on theoretical and textual analysis. The main sources are Alexander Wendt's writings, which are examined closely to understand his arguments on anarchy, identity and state behaviour. These texts are then compared with critiques from scholars such as Cronin, Zehfuss, Young, Copeland, and Boulding. The method involves identifying key concepts, tracing their logical connections, and highlighting gaps or inconsistencies in Wendt's framework. By relying on conceptual comparison and critical reading, this approach allows the study to evaluate Wendt's contribution and propose refinements without relying on empirical case studies.

Discussion

Anarchy

Anarchy is a core concept to understand international relations. It is majorly understood as the absence of authority above the state (Donnelly 2015; Fearon 2018; Lake 1996; Parent and Erikson 2009). However, it also could have associated with the occurrence of violence (Cudworth and Hobden 2010, 392). Anarchy in this writing is the first definition. Since nation-states system becomes recognized as a legal basis to limits political entity sovereignty and authority, there is no other political entity outside nation-states that could impose a rule to society inside the state except that state government itself. States could have power over other states or could have influence over other states regulation making. However, only state government that has a legitimate authority to apply the rule. Like Bruce Cronin said, sovereignty place wall between one's society and all other (Cronin 1999, 7). This is the basic reason why international politics is anarchy. The opposite of anarchy is hierarchy as explained by Joseph M Parent, He said that 'anarchy is a condition that stretches over a given territory in which none is entitled to command, none is required to obey. Conversely, the hierarchy is a situation in which some are entitled to command and others are required to obey' (Parent and Erikson 2009, 132). This writing will focus on the anarchy.

In this anarchy circumstances, scholars of international relations have many arguments towards how state relations with other states. It started from Thomas Hobbes, Hobbes argue that in the anarchy structure, states will see other as an enemy. Due to states is a Leviathan for other states and there is no guarantee for state security except their own self, then war against all will possibly become the choice. In Hobbes perspective, anarchy has destructive causes on states behaviour (Moloney 2011). The same argument presented by Frederick L. Schuman, he explains that 'if anarchy involves the absence of

government, the pursuit by each of his own ends, and the use of violence in the service of such ends, then the practice of international politics can indeed be described accurately as international anarchy' (Donnelly 2015, 399).

In the other hand, Kenneth Waltz assumes that anarchy structure made state self-help. States will provide itself goods in the purpose of survival and protecting itself against other. Cooperation becomes limited, due to state suspicion about possible gain that possibly more favourable to other than itself; states also become worries to dependence with other states (Waltz 1979, 105–7). Because of this thinking, scholars labeled Waltz as neo-realist.

From the root of the liberal school of thought, Axelrod and Keohane in their writing *Cooperation under Anarchy*, explain the aspect that affects the strategic choice to cooperation or discord. These factors for them are mutuality of interest, the shadow of the future, and the number of actors. These factors become consideration of state willingness to cooperate with other states. These writings also explain the importance of international regime to institutionalize reciprocity. Since in their writings, reciprocity is important to gain in order to make cooperation works (Axelrod and Keohane 1985, 249–53). Their assumption comes from the idea that human nature is good, so does the nature of the state. But it is undeniable that states suspicious of other states are exists. That is why reciprocity needed in cooperation.

Alexander Wendt looks different understanding towards anarchy than other scholars before. He understood, anarchy as such is an empty vessel and has no intrinsic logic; anarchies only acquire logics as a function of the structure of what we put inside them (Wendt 1999, 249). This implies that anarchy only a structure without causal logic, not directly lead to war or even cooperation. States give meaning how it wants to act toward this structure. Then, he said that anarchy is what state make of it.

Further explanation toward Alexander Wendt thinking of anarchy and what he means by 'anarchy is what state make of it' will become a focus in this writing.

"Anarchy is What State Make of It"

Anarchy is what state make of it, Alexander Wendt phrase to express his stands towards anarchy. However, to understand what this phrase truly signifies, it is first necessary to examine the foundations of Alexander Wendt's thinking on anarchy. Rather than defining the human as natural kinds like realist or liberalist school of thought. Alexander Wendt defines human as social kinds. Social kinds mean for him that there is no nature of human, the human is made of shared ideas (Wendt 1999, 49). Consequently, Wendt denies the assumption that human has 'given' nature in them. The nature that claimed by realist or liberalist school of thought scholars that human nature is 'bad' or 'good' does not relevant for Alexander Wendt. Due to human has no given nature, how humans interact with other human is dependent on the shared ideas that socially constructed in the interaction process between them. Which ideas that successfully accepted by human cognition made the human being. He added that identity and interest determine human relations with other. These two variables, interest and identity are indeed constructed in social life (Wendt 1992, 1995, 1999).

Building on this reasoning, state interact with other state is not determined by given nature, but by identity and interest that made from social interaction. In the case of anarchy, the state chooses to behave 'war against all' or even to 'cooperate' is due to their identity and interest lead state to doing so. It indeed different with neo-realist thinker Such as Kenneth Waltz. Waltz assumes that state is self-help, and in the anarchical world political structure state will provide themselves only. Alexander Wendt stands on the different side. He challenges Waltz stance

by saying, 'If we find our-self in self-help world, this is due to process, not structure' (Wendt 1992, 394). By saying this, Wendt means that there are no causality relations between self-help and anarchy. He emphasizes more by saying 'structure has no existence or causal powers apart from the process. Self-help and power politics are institutions, not essential features of anarchy. Anarchy is what states make of it' (Wendt 1992, 395). Thus, anarchy does not inherently lead to self-help, as state behaviour is shaped by social processes that construct identities and interests, meaning that anarchy is ultimately what states make of it.

Thus, identity and interest play important role in Alexander Wendt thinking towards anarchy. Self-help for him is an institution that structured from identity and interest. Self-help exists due to state identify negatively towards other states in anarchy system. If states identify other states positively, there is a possibility that state would like to cooperate with other states. Then, where interest play role in this scheme? Wendt said that identity is the basis of interest. He gives example about the United States and Soviet Union cold war; he said that 'without the cold war's mutual attributions of threat and hostility to define their identities, these states seem unsure of what their interest should be' (Wendt 1992, 399). From this explanation, state identification of others determines their interest, these two concepts -identity and interest- later determining action towards other states.

The identification of others does not identify only other state but also states itself. Wendt said that cognition towards other mutually constitutes the self (Wendt 1992, 399). For example, when states realize other as an enemy, state possibly will make identification for itself as an enemy too towards others. By doing so, States internalizing they own new identities and interest towards others. In this process, the function of state cognitive and deliberative works, then change the ideas of the

state towards others, not only states behaviour. This is the process of shared ideas, and what states got from this process is intersubjective knowledge. It is called intersubjective knowledge to the extent that the ideas that acquired in this process are not only come from the states itself but also from its relations with other states. Thus, Anarchy is what states make of it because behaviour is shaped not by the state of nature, but by identities and interests formed through interaction.

Furthermore, Wendt explains that anarchy in international level could be categorized into three structures based on the role that state play, Enemy (Hobbesian), Rival (Lockean), and friend (Kantian). Hobessian and Lockean come from state identify other negatively, meanwhile Kantian come from positive identification towards others (Wendt 1999, 247). The name is only metaphor by Wendt. He argues that the structure of anarchy will vary depending on state relations with other. The change of anarchy structure is possible; due to the structure of anarchy is the idea.

After explaining Alexander Wendt argument about anarchy and what he means by 'anarchy is what state make of it', this writing will continue to contend Wendt assumption about identity. There are some aspects that unclear from Wendt Explanations. The latter arguments are not in the position to refuses Alexander Wendt thinking about identity in anarchy system, but more to present a questionable point of it.

Alexander Wendt's Account of Identity and the Debates Around It

The previous subchapter outlined Wendt's concept of anarchy and his claim that "anarchy is what states make of it." In Wendt's view, international relations unfold within an anarchic structure, yet state behaviour is shaped not by the state of nature but by identities and interests constructed through interaction.

This discussion sets the stage for the central debate of this paper: while Wendt offers a compelling and persuasive account of anarchy as a social construct, his treatment of identity leaves significant gaps in explanation.

Wendt argues that identity refers to or who or what actor is, it constituted by both internal and external's structure. Internal structure refers to human ability constructing ideas, and external structure refers to outside social relations that posit more ideas and help to redefine ideas. Due to states will redefine the ideas along with interactions, it impacted the identity. Identity change makes uncertain understanding towards other state intention.

Furthermore, he argued that a state's intentions can be inferred by observing its social acts, which are categorized into three types: signalling, interpreting, and responding. When these social acts operate in interactions between states, they produce intersubjective meanings. Guided by their identities and interests, states take these intersubjective meanings into account when deciding how to act toward other states (Wendt 1992, 405).

However, the problem of Wendt argument on this is in the process of signalling and interpreting. Wendt realizes that ideas of other intention are unobservable (Copeland 2006, 12). This implies that a state's signalling may not accurately reflect its true intentions. Even if a state's actions align with its actual intentions, another state may misinterpret them. Dale C. Copeland emphasizes this point, stating that "behaviour does not speak for itself; it must be interpreted, and many interpretations are possible"(Copeland 2006, 12)." He further notes that human beings are not born with the ability to read the minds of others and possess only limited means to foresee future actions.

Kenneth Boulding also highlights the difficulty of discerning intentions. He argues that "the people who

determine the policies and actions of nations do not respond to the objective facts of the situation, whatever they may mean, but to their image of the situation (Boulding 1959, 120). This suggests that a state may misperceive the reality of the world, interpreting it through its own lens. Consequently, identity alone is insufficient to explain state intentions. While identity may account for interests—since, for Wendt, identity forms the basis of interest—it does not fully explain intentions. To address this gap, Wendt needs to provide further clarification regarding how intentions are derived and understood in international relations.

Furthermore, Wendt also argues that states can possess multiple identities. This presents a challenge at the international level, as it becomes difficult to determine which identity drives a state's actions. For instance, the United States has often been identified as the "police of the world" due to its involvement in various conflicts after the Cold War (e.g., Afghanistan, Libya, Syria) to promote and protect democracy. However, in Afghanistan, the US withdrew its troops, and there are plans to do the same in Syria. From Wendt's perspective, such actions may indicate a redefinition of US identity through socialization, leading to changes in behaviour.

Yet, it is also possible to interpret these actions as the result of another identity becoming more salient. For example, the US may act primarily as a provider for its domestic public needs. This does not necessarily mean that its identity as the "police of the world" has diminished, but rather that another recognized identity temporarily takes precedence. Claiming that the US identity has fundamentally changed, however, may be too ambitious. As Maja Zehfuss notes, "identity and interests that have been created are not easy to transform because the social system becomes an objective social fact to the actors," highlighting the persistence of established identities (Zehfuss 2006, 96).

Wendt does acknowledge that identities can change through interactions, which is generally uncontested. However, he does not sufficiently address the implications of states having multiple identities: how these identities influence interests, which identity becomes internalized and recognized, and under what conditions a particular identity dominates state behaviour. To further refine Wendt's argument, Zehfuss distinguishes between social identities and corporate identity. He observes that "actors have several social identities but only one corporate identity." Corporate identity refers to the intrinsic qualities that constitute an actor's individuality. Applied to states, this suggests that domestic politics and internal structures form the intrinsic qualities that define a state's identity. These intrinsic qualities mean that a state possesses pre-existing ideas about itself even before interacting with other states. Social identities, according to Zehfuss, are relatively stable because they are shaped and maintained through ongoing social processes, whereas corporate identity is inherently unstable, as every interaction with other actors can modify a state's pre-existing self-conception (Zehfuss 2006, 98). Indonesia's *bebas-aktif* foreign policy illustrates this argument. As a corporate identity, *bebas-aktif* existed prior to external interaction and was rooted in Indonesia's domestic political history and constitutional foundations. Yet, through ongoing engagement with other actors, Indonesia developed multiple social identities. Interaction within ASEAN positioned Indonesia as a regional leader, engagement with the UN Security Council contributed to its role as a regional security actor, and involvement with emerging platforms such as BRICS increasingly shaped Indonesia as a promoter of multipolarity. Together, these identities demonstrate how interaction layers and reshapes a pre-existing corporate identity rather than replacing it.

This distinction supports Wendt's argument that states can have multiple identities—but only in the realm of social

identities. Corporate identity, being rooted in intrinsic, pre-interaction qualities, cannot multiply; it forms the core self of the state before engagement with the international system. In this sense, Zehfuss provides a nuanced explanation of why certain identities may dominate state behaviour in different contexts and how the multiplicity of identities can coexist without contradicting the persistence of a core state identity.

Alexander Wendt provides a foundational framework for understanding state identity, cognition, and behaviour in an anarchic international system. However, his analysis is limited when it comes to explaining how identity form. Bruce Cronin highlights that to fully understand (social) identity, three processes must be considered: categorization, in which individuals mentally organize the world into meaningful units; identification, where actors define themselves and are recognized as members of particular social categories; and social comparison, which allows actors to differentiate their conceptual in-group from relevant out-groups. Cronin's framework highlights the internal and relational processes of identity formation, which feeling the gap Wendt left (Cronin 1999, 18).

Furthermore, even though Wendt does not explain the process of identity formation as explicitly as Cronin does, he nonetheless provides an account of the features that make such a process possible. For Wendt, the key features are cognition and deliberation—the mental functions that help states define their identities, shape their interests, and guide behaviour (Wendt 1999, 125–30). Yet this raises a critical question: do states themselves possess cognitive and deliberative abilities, or are these functions better attributed to the human actors within states? Applying Wendt's concepts to states requires explaining how individual deliberations and cognitive processes are translated into collective decisions recognized as state-level cognition. Oran Young's concept of social choice provides a

useful framework here, defining it as “the processes through which collective or group decisions are reached in situations where the component actors possess non-identical preference orderings over sets of differentiated alternatives (Young 1978, 245).” In this sense, actors within domestic politics use their cognitive and deliberative abilities to reach collective decisions that constitute the state’s social choice.

Nonetheless, this approach has limitations. Social choice does not always reflect the preferences of all actors equally. Kenneth Boulding emphasizes that a small group of decision-makers often wields far more power than the broader public, whose preferences may influence outcomes indirectly but do not determine them directly. This highlights a tension in applying Wendt’s idea of state cognition: while cognitive and deliberative functions exist at the individual level, their aggregation into meaningful state-level decisions is neither straightforward nor fully representative of all actors (Boulding 1959, 121).

Thus, Wendt largely overlooks the problem of identity articulation at the state level. As David A. Copeland notes, Wendt portrays the state as a self-organizing entity that, “being held in the collective memories of many individuals, is dependent for existence on no particular actor” (Copeland 2006). By treating states as self-organizing, Wendt assumes that identities naturally emerge at the state level, bypassing the question of how individual identities and social processes are transmitted and institutionalized within the state.

Taken together, these critiques suggest that while Wendt’s framework is highly influential and contributes significantly to our understanding of identity and interdependence in international relations, it simplifies the processes by which identities are formed and translated into state behaviour. Concepts such as social choice, the aggregation of human cognition, and internal identity formation highlight

the complexity underlying state actions that Wendt's framework only partially addresses.

Hidemi Sunagami further critiques Wendt by noting that his explanations are largely hypothetical: "He only explains what would happen if states encountered one another in a quasi-state of nature—and he does not have in mind any particular historical period or case to explain" (Sunagami 2006, 58). Indeed, much of Wendt's work relies on logical reasoning and rhetorical argumentation rather than reference to specific events. Nonetheless, this does not diminish the value of his contributions. Wendt's thinking enriches the study of international relations by encouraging readers to critically reconsider established definitions and assumptions. His argument—that identity is defined and redefined through social processes—supports the notion that anarchy is not a fixed condition, but rather what states make of it, subject to ongoing processes of definition and redefinition.

Conclusion

Alexander Wendt's framework has been pivotal in international relations. It demonstrates that anarchy acquires meaning through state identities and interests. Yet, his analysis leaves important gaps, particularly in explaining how identities are formed, articulated, and aggregated from individuals to the state. His treatment of cognition and deliberation as state functions also remains unconvincing without clearer mechanisms of translation from human actors to collective decisions. Insights from Cronin on identity formation, Young on social choice, Zehfuss on corporate versus social identities, and Copeland and Boulding on the interpretation of intentions expose these limitations. While Wendt's work simplifies the complex processes behind identity and state behaviour, it remains foundational for international relations, inviting further

refinement to better capture the dynamics of identity, intention, and interaction in an anarchic world.

References

- Axelrod, Robert, and Robert O. Keohane. 1985. "Achieving Cooperation under Anarchy: Strategies and Institutions." *World Politics* 38(1): 226–54. doi:10.2307/2010357.
- Boulding, K.E. 1959. "National Images and International Systems." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 3(2): 120–31. doi:10.1177/002200275900300204.
- Copeland, Dale C. 2006. "The Constructivist Challenge to Structural Realism." In *Constructivism and International Relations: Alexander Wendt and His Critics*, The new international relations, eds. Stefano Guzzini and Anna Leander. London New York: Routledge.
- Cronin, Bruce. 1999. *Community under Anarchy: Transnational Identity and the Evolution of Cooperation*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Cudworth, Erika, and Stephen Hobden. 2010. "Anarchy and Anarchism: Towards a Theory of Complex International Systems." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 39(2): 399–416. doi:10.1177/0305829810384677.
- Donnelly, Jack. 2015. "The Discourse of Anarchy in IR." *International Theory* 7(3): 393–425. doi:10.1017/S1752971915000111.
- Fearon, James D. 2018. "Cooperation, Conflict, and the Costs of Anarchy." *International Organization* 72(3): 523–59. doi:10.1017/S0020818318000115.
- Lake, David A. 1996. "Anarchy, Hierarchy, and the Variety of International Relations." *International Organization* 50(1): 1–33. doi:10.1017/S002081830000165X.
- Parent, Joseph M, and Emily Erikson. 2009. "Anarchy, Hierarchy and Order." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 22(1): 129–45. doi:10.1080/09557570802683912.

- Sunagami, Hidemi. 2006. "Wendt, IR, and Philosophy: A Critique." In *Constructivism and International Relations: Alexander Wendt and His Critics*, The new international relations, eds. Stefano Guzzini and Anna Leander. London New York: Routledge.
- Waltz, Kenneth N. 1979. *Theory of International Politics*. 1st ed. Boston, Mass: McGraw-Hill.
- Wendt, Alexander. 1992. "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics." *International Organization* 46(2): 391–425. doi:10.1017/S0020818300027764.
- Wendt, Alexander. 1995. "Constructing International Politics." *International Security* 20(1): 71. doi:10.2307/2539217.
- Wendt, Alexander. 1999. *Social Theory of International Politics*. 1st ed. Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511612183.
- Young, Oran R. 1978. "Anarchy and Social Choice: Reflections on the International Polity." *World Politics* 30(2): 241–63. doi:10.2307/2009960.
- Zehfuss, Maja. 2006. "Constructivism and Identity: A Dangerous Liaison." In *Constructivism and International Relations: Alexander Wendt and His Critics*, The new international relations, eds. Stefano Guzzini and Anna Leander. London New York: Routledge.