(sovereignty, dynastic relations, trade, goals, etc) that can cause power politics and self-help not to flow from anarchy.[xii]. With this analysis, Wendt has changed the focus from anarchy as a must and defining feature of the system, to anarchy as a social construct that can change.

Constructivism offers no real guidance on what to study – except to put the focus on interests and identities of actors because those are socially formed and when changed, can make the system change. But there is no indication of which one changes, or how changes affect the system. Without being able to make some causal argument other than: change can cause change (tautological) then constructivism is not a theory, but a set of initial conditions.

In the Constructivist account, the variables of interest to scholars—eg military power, trade relations, international institutions, or domestic preferences—are not important because they are objective facts about the world, but rather because they have certain social meanings (Wendt 2000). This meaning is constructed from a complex and specific mix of history, ideas, norms, and beliefs which scholars must understand if they are to explain State behaviour. For example, Constructivists argue that the nuclear arsenals of the United Kingdom and China, though comparably destructive, have very different meanings to the United States that translate into very different patterns of interaction (Wendt 1995). To take another example, Iain Johnston argues that China has traditionally acted according to Realist assumptions in international relations, but based not on the objective structure of the international system but rather on a social, historical strategic culture.

A focus on the social context in which international relations occur leads Constructivists to emphasize issues of identity and belief (for this reason Constructivist theories are sometimes called ideational). The perception of friends and enemies, in-groups and out-groups, fairness and justice all become key determinants of a State’s behaviour. While some Constructivists would accept that States are self-interested, rational actors, they would stress that varying identities and beliefs belie the simplistic notions of rationality under which States pursue simply survival, power, or wealth.

Constructivism is also attentive to the role of social norms in international politics. Following March and Olsen, Constructivists distinguish between a ‘logic of consequences’—where actions are rationally chosen to maximize the interests of a State—and ‘logic of appropriateness’, where rationality is heavily mediated by social norms. For example, Constructivists would argue that the norm of State sovereignty has profoundly influenced international relations, creating a predisposition for non-interference that precedes any cost-benefit analysis States may undertake.

These arguments fit under the Institutionalist rubric of explaining international co-operation, but based on constructed attitudes rather than the rational pursuit of objective interests.

Many constructivists analyse international relations by looking at the goals, threats, fears, cultures, identities, and other elements of "social reality" on the international stage as the social constructs of the actors. In a key edited volume, The Culture of National Security (1996), constructivist scholars (Elizabeth Kier, Jeffrey Legro, Peter Katzenstein, and many others) challenge many traditional realist assumptions about how the international system operates, especially with regard to military security issues. Another approach is offered by "Defending the West" (2005), in which James Gow studies contemporary issues of peace and security through empirical studies of the Western powers.

This field is perhaps most closely associated with Alexander Wendt, as he has applied the ideas of social constructionism to the field of international relations. Wendt’s article "Anarchy is