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Charlotte Epstein

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Charlotte Epstein

The University of Sydney, NSW, Australia

Abstract

This article aims to show the theoretical added value of focussing on discourse to study identity in international relations (IR). I argue that the discourse approach offers a more theoretically parsimonious and empirically grounded way of studying identity than approaches developed in the wake of both constructivism and the broader ‘psychological turn’. My starting point is a critique of the discipline’s understanding of the ‘self’ uncritically borrowed from psychology. Jacques Lacan’s ‘speaking subject’ offers instead a non-essentialist basis for theorizing about identity that has been largely overlooked. To tailor these insights to concerns specific to the discipline I then flesh out the distinction between *subject-positions* and *subjectivities*. This crucial distinction is what enables the discourse approach to travel the different levels of analyses, from the individual to the state, in a way that steers clear of the field’s fallacy of composition, which has been perpetuated by the assumption that what applies to individuals applies to states as well. Discourse thus offers a way of studying state identities without presuming that the state has a self. I illustrate this empirically with regards to the international politics of whaling.

Keywords

constructivism, discourse, Jacques Lacan, levels of analysis, post-structuralism, psychoanalytic theory, psychology, subject-position, social theory, whaling

The ‘return’ of identity to the study of international politics prophesized in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War has come true (Lapid and Kratochwil, 1996). This comeback was coextensive with the rise of constructivism in international relations (IR). Insofar as it played a key role in breaking open the narrow, rationalist focus on power and interests,

Corresponding author:

Charlotte Epstein, The University of Sydney — Government and International Relations, Merewether Building H04 Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia.

Email: charlotte.epstein@sydney.edu.au

identity is here to stay. However, the accrued interest in identity has also yielded a fair amount of concern regarding its conceptual fuzziness and corresponding efforts to clarify the concept to make it more pertinent for political analysis at large (Abdelal et al., 2006; Brubaker and Cooper, 2000; Fearon, 1997; Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001; Hansen, 2006; Smith, 2004). These concerns notwithstanding, the interest has continued apace, entrenching a broad turn to psychology in IR (Goldgeier and Tetlock, 2001). What is noteworthy is that identity has proved fruitful both for constructivists (Finnemore, 1996; Flockhart, 2006; Katzenstein, 1996; Wendt, 1999) and their critics alike (Greenhill, 2008; Hansen, 2006; Mercer, 1995, 2005; Zehfuss, 2001). In this article I make the case for using discourse to study identity in international politics. I argue that the discourse approach offers a theoretically parsimonious and empirically grounded way of appraising identity that steers clear of some important pitfalls that have taken shape around the way in which the concept has become entrenched in the discipline. My aim, however, is not to engage in the 'how-to' of discourse analysis, which has been done extensively elsewhere (see Epstein, 2008a; Hansen, 2006; Milliken, 1999). It is rather to show the theoretical added value of its underlying concepts by showing how they can help in addressing IR's concern with appraising the phenomenon of identity at the different levels at which it plays out in international politics. The target of my critique is the notion of 'self' that IR has uncritically imported from psychology to study identity. I contrast it with Jacques Lacan's concept of the 'speaking subject', which casts a different light upon the dynamics of identity, one that fundamentally undermines the cohesiveness presumed in the psychological study of the 'self'. The 'subject' is also the founding concept of the discourse approach. Lacan's (1977) critique of 'ego psychology' thus serves both to highlight the central role of discourses in making identities and, centrally, to clear the grounds for highlighting the contribution of the discourse approach to the study of identity in international politics. What it offers, coarsely captured, is the possibility of studying the identity of states and other actors of international politics unencumbered by problematic assumptions about their 'selves'.¹

In the first part of the article, I begin by mapping out the ways in which the concept of identity has been mobilized within constructivism. Because of its central role in articulating the theoretical underpinnings of the concept for the field at large, the discussion of Alexander Wendt's *Social Theory of International Politics* takes centre stage in that section. I show that Wendt's understanding of identity is curtailed by his conflation of 'identity' and 'essences'. I also examine the ways in which a similar understanding of the self has implicitly informed the scholarship on norms and socialization. In the second part, I set up Jacques Lacan's social theory as a foil to this conception of identity. His concept of the 'discursive subject' brings pressure to bear on this essential self. It also draws out the important limitations that Wendt's understanding has placed upon his own aspirations to developing a social theory of international politics. I then return to IR in the third part and show how this notion of self has perpetuated what I call IR's fallacy of composition with regards to identity, namely, the notion that if it works for persons, it must work for states too. I show that, although he goes furthest in this regard, Wendt is not alone in committing it, insofar as his critics, even while rejecting his states-as-people thesis, have centrally maintained this notion of the cohesive self. In the last part of the article I hone the tools offered by the discourse approach for the study of international politics by developing a key distinction, between *subjectivity* and *subject-positions*. This

distinction is what opens up the possibility of continuing to analyse the role of identity at the international level without having to presume that the state, or any other actor of international politics, has a self. This is also what allows the analysis to travel along the different levels of analysis, from the individual to the state, thereby also steering clear of any state-centrism to which IR regularly falls prey.

The essential self, or where constructivism took the wrong turn

The turn to identity was brought on by the broader ‘reflectivist’ turn in IR (Keohane, 1988). While it has thus never been the exclusive preserve of that scholarship, constructivism deserves credit for placing that concept front and centre of the discipline’s concerns. Identity was foregrounded by their efforts to break open the power–interest dyad that had locked in the predominance of rationalist analyses of state behaviour, in their neorealist and neoliberal institutionalist guises, respectively. Key to demonstrating that state behaviour was not reducible to where they stood in the distribution of power in the international system, nor to the maximization of their interests, was emphasizing that these self-interested actors indeed had a self; that this self coloured their interactions with other states; and that these interactions between the selves of states in turn shaped some of the structures within which ulterior interactions take place (Wendt, 1999). My argument, however, is that, because of a particular conception of the self it has uncritically brought to the table, constructivism has dis-availed itself of the ability to wield to full effect the concept for which it had seemed initially so well suited.

The promise of constructivism with regards to identity: Foregrounding contingency and meaning

Notwithstanding a hugely diverse scholarship both theoretically and empirically, two important emphases of constructivism are constitutiveness and meaning. First, against the given-ness inherent in rationalist analyses, constructivism upholds that the world we live in is ‘of our making’ (Onuf, 1989). Even anarchy, the defining feature of the international system, is not a discrete structure to which states react but rather an institution crafted by states through their interactions (Wendt, 1992). Recognizing the deep imbrications amongst social facts as being precisely what distinguishes the social world from the natural world, constructivists have developed alternative modes of analysis where these imbrications are emphasized as part of the explanation itself rather than eschewed in the search for discrete causal factors and a sequence of independent and dependent variables (Wendt, 1999: 83–89). The constitutive logic deployed by constructivism thus renders visible those very processes by which the ‘givens’ of the international system were initially constituted. Constructivism, on this account, can be considered a thinking of constitutiveness or of ‘the making of’. Second, if the social world is indeed made by interacting actors, then it is important to consider the sets of meanings they bring to these interactions; that is, the ideas they hold (Blyth, 2002), the cultures to which they belong (Katzenstein, 1996; Weldes et al., 1999) and the patterns of rules and norms regulating these exchanges (Kratochwil, 1989; Onuf, 1989). Meaning is thus central to social agency.

This dual ontology of constitutiveness and signification seemed to leave constructivism particularly well equipped to develop a social theory of international politics that centrally foregrounded the concept of identity. Indeed, underpinning the scholarship is the ‘ontological assumption ... that actors are shaped by the social milieu in which they live’ (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001: 394). It is, in other words, the recognition that identities cannot be appraised apart from the social structures that constitute them. The promise of constructivism with regards to the study of identity was that it seemed to carve out a middle ground between, on the one hand, rationalists’ blindness with regards to the ways in which the self is constituted by the social. For this, the emphasis on constitutiveness was key. On other hand, within the reflectivist scholarship it promised to ‘rescue the exploration of identity from the postmodernists’ (Checkel, 1998: 325) Indeed, its emphasis on meaning placed important safeguards against the over-determinism and the evacuation of agency that were seen to be conveyed in the latter approaches, because it underlined the ways in which that self also actively produces itself through voluntary acts of signification, or meaning creation.

Where, then, did constructivism take the wrong turn? One work in particular deserves close attention, Alexander Wendt’s *Social Theory of International Politics*. First, in view of the role it is widely recognized as having played in laying the theoretical foundations of the concept of identity for the field at large (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001: 399; Lynn Doty, 2000; Smith, 2000).² Second, as I will show in the third part of this article, the costs of Wendt’s formulation are borne out in the way in which its widespread adoption in the field has entrenched what I call IR’s ‘fallacy of composition’, that is, the assumption that what applies to the individual self must apply to states as well. I will show that the Wendtian project is ridden with a tension that surfaces at its clearest at the point where he marks his departure with the canon of IR theory. His treatment of identity stems from his efforts to handle this tension.

The essentializing moves of Alexander Wendt

Wendt needs to essentialize identities for what he wants to do. Explicitly positioned in relation to Kenneth Waltz’s liminal *Theory of International Politics* (1979), Wendt’s opus similarly sets out to conceive the structural effects of the international system upon states. Structures are central to his analysis, serving both to inscribe it within the disciplinary cannon and to carve out the site for his own contribution. Indeed, structures are where classic analyses have fallen short, on two accounts. First, IR’s narrow focus on tangible, material structures, such as the distribution of capabilities or interests, has blinkered the discipline to a wide range both of structural effects and actor behaviour. Ushering in a sociological perspective thus serves for Wendt (1999: 22–29) to inflect the understanding of structures in order to open the analysis to the less tangible, meaning-related structures contained in ideas, beliefs and culture equally at play in interactions. Second, in examining the structural effects of the international system upon states, rationalists have stopped at considering their behaviours alone. This is possible so long as one presumes the ontological separateness of the structure. It is no longer tenable once one begins to see the ways in which they mutually constitute each other. The effects of structures do not stop at the surface behaviour of the agents. They change the agents themselves, who, in interacting, in turn change the structures, in line with a structurationist analysis.

Herein lies the rub. Venturing into identity is crucial to his aim of furthering the systemic analysis. Indeed a key concern for Wendt is to show how the international system actually shapes the identities and interests of states (Wendt, 1999: 11). Yet it also threatens his systemic approach. In the very next step Wendt shuts down his own move, quick to specify that ‘explaining state identities and interests is not [his] main goal either’, since his is ‘a book about the international system’, not about ‘state identity formation’ (Wendt, 1999: 11). Hence in order to focus on the whole he needs to assume some parts, since ‘the units make their respective systems possible’ (Wendt, 1999: 194). From there, however, Wendt is caught between wanting to focus on the system, and wanting to open up its units in order to be able to say something new about the effects of that system. The contradiction lies in his attempt to reconcile a structural, systemic focus that requires positing given units and appraising them from the outside, while emphasizing effects that call into question this given-ness and require opening up these units — which in turn risks undermining his starting point. Put differently, he wants to look at a system that has certain pre-givens, but he wants to look at it in such a way as to draw out how these are made by that system, such that they can no longer be treated as ‘givens’. This was not a problem that Waltz (1979) had: treating his units as discrete entities squarely located beyond the remit of an analysis concerned only with the system itself, he could continue to travel with ease on either side of the domestic–international divide, readily drawing on intra-state phenomena (market mechanisms, domestic constitutions) to explain systemic features. The concept of identity thus takes Wendt much further than his neorealist predecessor in pinning down the state as a closed, unified entity and in entrenching the domestic–international divide.

The role of the human body in constructing Wendt’s ‘essential state’

What threatens Wendt’s endeavours is the same constitutive logic upon which his theoretical contribution rests, which is also the explanatory mode particularly suitable to the study of identity. Having extensively exposed the distinctness of the constructivist logic, Wendt then proceeds to draw a series of neat lines to contain it (1999: 77–92). Identity is one important site where this line drawing occurs, and his ‘essential state’ a key means for doing so.³ Developed at the beginning of the second part of his book, it is what enables him to extend a social theory to the international (Wendt, 1999: 198–215). But its other key function is to demonstrate the ontological primacy of the state vis-a-vis the state system, and thus to cordon it off from the search for constitutive effects. If the state can be considered as a given, then there is no need to consider how it was constituted. Essentializing state identities thus serves to contain the constitutive logic, and thereby salvage his systemic approach. In sum, it is precisely the logical requirements of building a systemic theory that Wendt shares with his neorealist predecessor that lead him to secure the state as the unitary actors upholding the system. From there, his project can be read as an effort to fasten the state as the unit of the system by means of his ‘essential state’.

Key to constructing the essential state is the analogy with the human body. ‘The state is pre-social relative to other states in the same way that the human body is pre-social’ (1999: 198). Moreover, for Wendt (1999: 221) the biological body contains identity’s principle of coherence. Upholding the materiality of the body as a bastion where to

relegate a pre-social, 'rump materialist' self is highly problematic, both conceptually and politically. Conceptually, it exemplifies an essentialist thinking grounded in a correspondence theory of the world where, just as the word is thought to contain the essence of the thing it describes, so the body would hold some true essence of some pre-social self. This assumption of a perfect fit between the 'true self' and the body is defeated by extensive clinical psychoanalytic work on the role of the body in the formation of the self, where the body, and the attempts to gain control over it, is revealed as a critical site for the struggle to make one's self (notably during teenagehood), not as that which is inherently given (Dolto, 1992; Lacan, 1977). Moreover, it assumes relations of internality between the self and the body that are called into question by Lacan's theory of the self, as we shall see in the following section.

Wendt's naive biologism is highly problematic for political analysis at large (see also Neumann, 2004). First, it simply ignores a now extensive body of work that has exposed how that same body has been historically mobilized in the constitution of the modern polity. In another vein of social theory Michel Foucault (1977, 1990, 2003) has shown extensively that the physical body is not that neutral, asocial and apolitical place that holds the inner core of the self: it is the site where modern political subject, and consequently modern society, was formed — and the locus of deployment of those specifically modern, bodily forms of power, discipline and biopower (see also Epstein, 2007, 2008b). Just as with that other classic trope of the body politic, where the physical body of the sovereign features as the recipient of state sovereignty, the physicality that Wendt conjures to pin down the essential state is, precisely, a rhetorical construct.

Second, Wendt's utilization of the human body runs up against an extensive body of feminist and post-colonial work that has extensively exposed how representations of 'human nature' grounded in reference to essentialized bodily attributes, such as race and gender, have been a key motor of domination and exclusion throughout history; specifically, the role played by these physical characteristics in being able to decree who could count as 'human' or not (Haraway, 1991; Plumwood, 1993; Said, 1978; Shiva, 1996). Although Wendt (1999: 1, 122) shows at times a wariness regarding the notion of human nature. The central role he assigns to the trope of the human body in building the concept that underpins his theoretical framework for the analysis of state identities leaves him exposed to this critique. To say that the body is the physical basis of the asocial self is merely to extend to modern social theory that same old essentialist line which casts the body as the recipient for a true human nature, prior to its encounter with culture. Wendt's trope flies in the face of extensive analysis of the relationship between the body and the self that exposes the profoundly constructed nature of even such seemingly essential biological properties as an individual's sex. From a post-structuralist feminist perspective, there is no pre-social self, no more than there is a gender-less self — which is of course not to deny that every body is born with a particular sex (Butler, 1993). But to acquire a self is precisely to acquire a gender, and that is a profoundly social phenomenon. Wanting to resuscitate the body as the locus for a pre-social self as Wendt does is akin to wanting to rehabilitate 'sex' against 'gender' and ignoring the constructed-ness of gender roles, which also contradicts his extensive recourse to role theory elsewhere in the book (Wendt, 1999: 227–229).

The cohesive self

In the Wendtian project the concept of identity proper is ushered in only once the units of the system have been tightly secured by means of this ‘essential state’ (Wendt, 1999: 224–233). Wendt (1999: 224) appraises the analysis of identity as the search for the set of core attributes that ‘make a thing what it is’, which is to say, the quest for its essence. Wendt’s essentializing of identities thus stems from a conflation of ‘identity’ and ‘essences’, in line with a classic superimposition of the category of ‘having’ over ‘being’ characteristic of essentialist thinking. What differentiates the concept of identity as applied to states from one that would work just as well for ‘beagles and bicycles’ (1999: 224) — two ‘things’ equally endowed with essences — is intentional action. Intentional actions, and the self-understandings linked to it, are appraised as ‘essential properties’ (1999: 225), things that the state possesses. To appraise what a state *is* (in order to specify what are the units of his system) is, for Wendt, to examine what the state *has* as its core properties. In this perspective, agency is not what the state does nor, importantly with regards to the difference with discourse theory, what it says; it is something it has. The typology subsequently deployed to map out these core properties further reifies state identities by drawing out a neatly stratified, static internal structure, on the model of Aristotelian hierarchies, a paradigm of essentialist thinking (Wendt, 1999: 225–230). Underpinning this typology is a concept of self possessing two cognitive attributes, memory and consciousness, borrowed from social psychology and symbolic interactionism (Wendt, 1999: 225).

Further reifying identities: The turn to norms

If the theory is what has impaired the understanding of identity in the constructivist scholarship, the question then arises as to whether a more applied constructivism has yielded a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of identity on the ground. The interest in one type of immaterial structure in particular, norms, paved the way for developing constructivism’s empirical reach (Checkel, 1998; Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001; Price and Reus-Smit, 1998). With the shift to norms, however, identity seems to have acquired a further ‘given-ness’. It is noteworthy that Peter Katzenstein’s introduction to his *Cultures of National Security* (1996: 5) and Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink’s ‘International norm dynamics and political change’ (1998: 891), two milestones in casting the constructivist focus on norms, both explicitly define norms in relation to ‘given’ identities. One side effect of refining constructivism’s empirical lens was thus to further lock in the ‘given-ness’ of identities. Moreover, although norms is the operative concept in this literature, identity remains important as the site that holds the ‘microfoundations’ of norm dynamics, and Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: 916, 904) call for more attention to psychology. Noteworthy as well is that the essentializing typology of identity developed by James Fearon (1997) is a founding reference for both Wendt (1999) and Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: 892, 902–904).

Implicit in the focus on norms is thus the same concept of ‘self’ borrowed from social psychology, with its twin components of self-scheme (the cognitive component)

and self-esteem (the evaluative component). Whereas Wendt concentrates on the former to analyse the workings of identity, the latter is seen as helpful to account for the ways in which norms impact upon actor behaviour. For example, Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: 903–904) emphasize the importance of ‘conformity and esteem’ in explaining how actors are socialized into a new norm. Last, despite the emphasis on the dynamic nature of actor behaviour, behavioural change is appraised as the passage from one stable state to another along the trajectory of internalization of a new norm. Socialization thus features as the process of adding a norm onto (or removing a norm from) a stable platform of identity. This stability is fundamentally called into question by Jacques Lacan’s analysis of identity.

The ‘subject’ rather than the ‘self’: Jacques Lacan’s social theory of identity

Constructivism has come under increasing critique from within the reflectivist turn for the way it has entrenched a fixed, essentialized understanding of identity in IR (Campbell, 1998; Hansen, 2006; Lynn Doty, 2000; Smith, 2000; Zehfuss, 2001). It is noteworthy that, meanwhile, the neatly bounded self that Wendt uncritically draws upon to lay the foundations of his social theory has been similarly subjected to critical examination within those disciplines primarily concerned with understanding the self. Specifically, the cohesive self that lies at the core of psychology, as well as the various theories of the social it has given rise to (such as Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory [SIT]; Stets and Burke, 2000) has been fundamentally called into question by the Lacanian school, both conceptually and by clinical practice. In the words of Lacanian analyst Phillippe van Haute (2002: xxvii) ‘academic psychology ... assumes the unity of the subject whose various properties and functions it studies without even pausing for a moment to consider the validity of these assumptions’. The point here is not to adjudicate on debates pertaining to another discipline but simply to highlight the existence of alternative ontologies of identity that have been largely ignored by constructivism. The theories of Jacques Lacan in particular must be reckoned with insofar as they fundamentally undermine the basis of constructivist theorizing. Here I will first begin with the Lacanian critique of the notion of self before deploying his own analysis of identity, which requires shifting from ‘the self’ to ‘the subject’.

At the theoretical level, that unified self is, in a Lacanian perspective, nothing more than an imaginary construct that the individual needs to believe in to compensate for a constitutive lack that lies at the core of her (or his) identity. What underlies the concept of identity is in fact a dynamic process of *identification* by which the individual makes up for this lack and, in so doing, makes her self. Hence while this notion of self serves a key function in the dynamics of identity-making, it is also a fiction that cannot be posited as the ‘real’ site for the appraisal of identity. It points to a lack, not to a seat that can hold any essential identity. However clinical practice is where the dangers contained in this essentialized concept of the self are really brought to the fore. Lacan (1977) denounces the host of practices founded in what he terms ‘ego psychology’ (such as cognitive or group therapies or those that come under the banner of ‘self-help’ approaches), whose

entire therapeutic orientation is geared towards buttressing the patient's ego. The ego simply cannot be consolidated insofar as it is an illusion. These forms of therapies are not only theoretically flawed but they are deontologically irresponsible as they perpetuate a false promise and actually impair the possibility of self-understanding. The aim of analytic practice is instead to come to terms with the illusions of the ego. The appropriate starting point for the study of subjectivity is not the presumed harmony between the self and the social environment but rather an inherent 'maladaptation' of a self that can never be fully socialized (van Haute, 2002). In other words, what is uncritically taken by the constructivist literature to be the key mechanism of norm diffusion, socialization, is thus problematic from the start from a Lacanian perspective.

The split subject

The more fundamental problem, however, lies with the notion of cohesive self, insofar as the self is in fact fundamentally *split*. His analysis first requires shifting to a different concept altogether, namely, the subject. What the subject better foregrounds is the centrality of desire and language, the twin constituents of identity for Lacan. These also point to the fundamental duality underlying his ontology. Desire pertains to the raw, immediate (as in un-mediated) dimension of being, the basic ontological level of being-in-the-world or phenomenological *dasein*. This is also where the body is initially located prior to its being inscribed with meaning. Language, on the other hand, points to the mediated realm of intersubjectively shared meanings and values, that is, the social world, or, in Lacanian terminology, the symbolic order. For Lacan, language, rather than any other social fact, is the defining feature of social life. Hence importantly his is a discursive theory of the social (Stavrakakis, 1999). The individual, for her part, belongs to these two ultimately incommensurate orders. She is both simultaneously a subject of desire and a discursive subject.

The individual is, first, a *subject of desire*. Desire, for Lacan, is that which is irreducible, specific to the individual, the ultimately idiosyncratic. It is hyper-individualized. Importantly, it is also the locus of human agency. It is the only component of identity that could, at a stretch, be considered 'pre-social'; not, however, in any meaningful sense, since desire alone is not enough to make up a self. For the individual is also, second, a *discursive subject*. The ability to speak, to make meaning or 'symbolize', is the key feature of identity. It is also what constitutes the individual as a social being in a primordial, not in a secondary sense. The 'pre-social' self that Wendt wants to hang on to (his Ego) is simply word-less, since words are social facts. It could only refer to the infant, etymologically the speechless being (*in-fans*). Speaking, saying 'I', is what inscribes the individual into the symbolic order, which is also properly the plane where identity takes shape. The human subject uncomfortably straddles these two realms, the immediate, preverbal realm of desire on the one hand, and the intersubjective, mediated realm of language where desire finds expression and the self is made on the other. In fact, the mediation of desire, the passage from one realm to the other, is what makes individual identity possible in the first place. It is also what causes its loss, and thus the fundamental lack characteristic of identity. I now turn to these two dimensions of identity successively, namely, its conditions of possibility and its constitutive lack.

The centrality of lack to the constitution of the subject

In Lacan's analysis, the social world, or symbolic order, is centrally constitutive of identity. What makes identity possible in the first place is the individual's inscription into the symbolic order, the process by which she becomes a discursive subject, an instance who says 'I'. The centrality of the symbolic function to the making of individual identities is illustrated by the role of the proper name (Lacan, 1977: 74). The acquisition of a proper name marks the moment when the individual is born into the symbolic order. Centrally, this passage from the biological to the social order is operated by a signifier. This is the constitutive moment for identity, the one that makes possible all ulterior identities, all future narrations of the self. The symbolic order is thus where the individual makes her self by speaking, by making meaning.

This emphasis on symbolization as the central process of identity-making is what makes Lacanian theories particularly germane to the post-structuralist scholarship emphasizing the role of discourse in international politics (Campbell, 1998; Der Derian and Shapiro, 1989; Epstein, 2008a; Hansen, 2006; Lynn Doty, 1996; Weber, 1996; Weldes et al., 1999). For symbolization is a discursive phenomenon. Within a similar non-essentialist lineage, scholarship amply illustrates the Lacanian point that the making of the self is a narrative act. Lacan's foregrounding of the symbolic function and the role of the signifier (or meaning) in the dynamics of identities thus further shores up that scholarship's approach to identity. For it simply precludes the possibility of envisaging identity in terms of an essentialized or pre-social self.

In the Lacanian perspective, moreover, this process of inscription of the individual into the symbolic order that makes possible identity in the first place is not merely the acquisition of a positive, distinctly human, neurological capacity of speech à la Noam Chomsky (1981). On the contrary, what Lacan draws out is that it is premised on a fundamental *loss*. Alienation within the symbolic order is a basic condition of the formation of subjectivity and agency. For that order is initially alien to the individual, to the subject of desire: the symbolic order is the order of the Other. The words that the infant has to acquire belong, literally, to a foreign world, an order that pre-exists it and where these words already hold given meanings. To express itself, thus to develop both its agency and its subjectivity, it has to step into this alien order.

Several implications stem from this discovery. First, words can never completely convey exactly what the subject wants to say. This is the fundamental tragedy whereby humans are condemned to wander the world split between their desire on the one hand, and, on the other, the need to first become integrated into the symbolic order in order to be able to express that desire, but which actually leads them astray from it. What the subject wants to say can only be mediated by words that belong to everyone, words that hold generic meanings and are thus fundamentally ill-fitted for that unique and immediate impulse that led the subject to want to speak in the first place. This is the meaning of Lacan's (1977) famous quip that 'the thing must be lost in order to be expressed', or again that 'speech is the murder of the thing'. In other words 'the thing' in its original, raw, individualized form must be relinquished so as to be mediated by language, that is to say fitted into an existing signifier.

This loss or fundamental alienation is precisely the lack that lies at the heart of identity. It is also what defeats the possibility of a closed, cohesive self. As Yannis Stavrakakis (1999: 29) puts it:

the subject is doomed to symbolize in order to constitute her- or himself as such, but this symbolization cannot capture the totality and singularity of the real body, the close-circuit of the drives. Symbolization, that is to say the pursuit of identity itself, introduces a lack and makes identity ultimately impossible.

There is no such thing as a fully formed, cogent self to which the term ‘identity’ refers. It is that never-ending and self-defeating quest to project the self into the symbolic order, which is the order of the Other.⁴ This means that the self–other relationship is centrally constitutive of identity. In other words, the self does not simply encounter the other once it is fully formed, in the way that Wendt’s Ego encounters Alter. Rather, the relationship with the other is the very site where its original identity takes shape.

‘Identification’ rather than identity

The making of the self is a perpetual attempt to make up for an original lack. In view of this impossibility that is in fact masked by the term ‘identity’ the better concept is *identification* (Butler, 1997; Stavrakakis, 1999). This conceptual shift serves not merely to underline the dynamic nature of identity, which is unproblematic for social psychology, but to highlight that it works as a perpetual yet impossible process of compensation.⁵ Moreover, ‘identification’ also better foregrounds relations of constitutiveness, the founding logic of constructivism. Yet the understanding of that term in IR provides a good illustration of the missed opportunity to wield it to its full effect in appraising the dynamics of identity. While Wendt (1999: 327), who takes his cues here mainly from Identity Theory, recognizes identification as a dynamic process, it is merely a ‘cognitive process in which the self–other distinction becomes blurred and *at the limit* transcended altogether’ (Wendt, 1999: 229; emphasis added). The self–other relationship stands as fixed and already constituted prior to the onset of the process, as something that is then to be undone by that process, rather than that which is centrally constituted by it. Hence in Wendt’s analysis (1999: 229) identification is reduced to being ‘the extension of the boundaries of the Self to include the Other’ rather than its constitutive process. In sum, it is seen as a process of losing the self, rather than one without which there could be no self to begin with. Coming at it from the vantage point of SIT, Jonathan Mercer (2005: 96), similarly underplays the concept, which is taken to mean simply ‘wanting to belong’ to a pre-constituted group with a pre-constituted identity. There too the concept is hollowed out.

A non-essentialist social theory of identity that accounts for the role of agency

How, then, is Lacan’s understanding of identity non-essentialist? The key distinction here is between ‘structuralism’ and ‘essentialism’. Lacan’s thought is structuralist, insofar as he develops an understanding of the human psyche as a dynamic, symbolic structure.⁶ It is not, however, grounded in some quest for the true human essence or nature. In the words of Yannis Stavrakakis (1999: 36) ‘the object of Lacanian psychoanalysis is not the individual, it is not man [sic]. It is what he is lacking.’ Consequently, Lacan also avoids the ‘essentialist reductionism of the social to the individual level’ (Stavrakakis, 1999: 3). In other words, Lacan steers clear of the methodological individualism that

characterizes most attempts at developing social theories that are premised on the possibility of a cohesive, pre-social self, including that of Alexander Wendt (see also Wight, 2004). Notwithstanding Wendt's (1999: 227) claim that his recourse to role identities, in particular, allows him to 'take the dependency on culture and thus Others one step further', his insistence on a core self underlying the different social roles thus taken (professor, student) places important limits on being able to capture the centrality of self–other relations to the making of identities. Lacan's analysis, by contrast, goes the full length towards showing how the dependence on the Other, that is, on the social or symbolic order, is central to the making of the self.

To return to the core question of this article, how to study identity in international politics, Lacan's ontology undermines the constructivist approach insofar as it uproots the notion of a pre-social self on which that approach is premised. In that sense, then, it validates post-structuralist analyses that foreground identity just as centrally without harbouring essentialist assumptions. However, rehabilitating post-structuralist approaches alone is insufficient if it is only to ignore constructivism's valid criticism regarding the question of agency. What remains valid in particular is Wendt's injunction to develop a structurationist social theory of international politics, that is, one that can *also* account for the ways in which the actors shape the structures that in turn shape them. Thus an important advantage of the Lacanian perspective is that his analysis of subjectivity does not evacuate agency, because of the central role he grants to desire, that other pillar of individual identities, alongside language. In this sense it adds an important corrective to the Foucauldian understanding of the ways in which the subject is created through subjection to power (see also Butler, 1997).

The level-of-analysis problem and the role of the cohesive self in perpetuating IR's fallacy of composition

From a Lacanian perspective, this pre-constituted self thus provides a highly problematic starting point for the study of identity. Instead the analysis of identity requires an approach that does not start by presuming a pre-social self, which is what the discourse approach proposes. Before turning to it, however, I consider the role this problematic conception of the 'self' plays in IR theory. This in turn serves to show how the discourse approach speaks to one of its central problems in IR: how to develop modes of analysis geared towards capturing what happens at the international level.

The role of the states-as-persons thesis in straddling the levels of analyses

What makes the concept of self so compelling is that it appears to resolve one of the long-standing problems of IR theory, namely, how to appraise state agency.⁷ Wendt's (1999) key move in this regard was to take the personification of the state out of the realm of disciplinary conventions and to proclaim it an ontological fact. For Wendt, states *are* people in a real, not an 'as if', sense or by way of analogy (see also Schiff, 2008). For this, the essentialized self is key. My argument here is that, in the debate around the nature of state agency, both Wendt and his critics who have explicitly rejected his states-as-persons thesis

have continued to perpetuate a classic fallacy of composition that lies at the heart of IR theory, namely, the assumption that if it works for the parts, namely, for the individual, then it must work for the whole, or states, too.⁸ Hence not only is the concept of the self problematic on its own terms, but it has led us one step away from tackling the levels-of-analysis problem in IR. This is precisely what discourse theory will enable us to do.

One key advantage of the Wendtian move, granted even by his critics (see Flockhart, 2006), is that it simply does away with the level-of-analysis problem altogether. If states really are persons, then we can apply everything we know about people to understand how they behave. The study of individual identity is not only theoretically justified but it is warranted. This cohesive self borrowed from social psychology is what allows Wendt to bridge the different levels of analysis and travel between the self of the individual and that of the state, by way of a third term, 'group self', which is simply an aggregate of individual selves. Thus for Wendt (1999: 225) 'the state is simply a "group Self" capable of group level cognition'. Yet that the individual possesses a self does not logically entail that the state possesses one too. It is in this leap, from the individual to the state, that IR's fallacy of composition surfaces most clearly.

Moving beyond Wendt but maintaining the psychological self as the basis for theorizing the state

Wendt's bold ontological claim is far from having attracted unanimous support (see notably, Flockhart, 2006; Jackson, 2004; Neumann, 2004; Schiff, 2008; Wight, 2004). One line of critique of the states-as-persons thesis has taken shape around the resort to psychological theories, specifically, around the respective merits of Identity Theory (Wendt) and SIT (Flockhart, 2006; Greenhill, 2008; Mercer, 2005) for understanding state behaviour.⁹ Importantly for my argument, that the state has a self, and that this self is pre-social, remains unquestioned in this further entrenching of the psychological turn. Instead questions have revolved around how this pre-social self (Wendt's 'Ego') behaves once it encounters the other (Alter): whether, at that point (and not before), it takes on roles prescribed by pre-existing cultures (whether Hobbessian, Lockean or Kantian) or whether instead other, less culturally specific, dynamics rooted in more universally human characteristics better explain state interactions. SIT in particular emphasizes the individual's basic need to belong, and it highlights the dynamics of in-/out-group categorizations as a key determinant of behaviour (Billig, 2004). SIT seems to have attracted increasing interest from IR scholars, interestingly, for both critiquing (Greenhill, 2008; Mercer, 1995) and rescuing constructivism (Flockhart, 2006).

For Trine Flockart (2006: 89–91), SIT can provide constructivism with a different basis for developing a theory of agency that steers clear of the states-as-persons thesis while filling an important gap in the socialization literature, which has tended to focus on norms rather than the actors adopting them. She shows that a state's adherence to a new norm is best understood as the act of joining a group that shares a set of norms and values, for example the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). What SIT draws out are the benefits that accrue to the actor from belonging to a group, namely increased self-esteem and a clear cognitive map for categorizing other states as 'in-' or 'out-group' members and, from there, for orientating states' self–other relationships.

Whilst coming at it from a stance explicitly critical of constructivism, for Jonathan Mercer (2005: 1995) the use of psychology remains key to correcting the systematic evacuation of the role of emotion and other ‘non-rational’ phenomena in rational choice and behaviourist analyses, which has significantly impaired the understanding of international politics. SIT serves to draw out the emotional component of some of the key drivers of international politics, such as trust, reputation and even choice (Mercer, 2005: 90–95; see also Mercer, 1995). Brian Greenhill (2008) for his part uses SIT amongst a broader array of psychological theories to analyse the phenomenon of self–other recognition and, from there, to take issue with the late Wendtian assumption that mutual recognition can provide an adequate basis for the formation of a collective identity amongst states.

The main problem with this psychological turn is the very utilitarian, almost mechanistic, approach to non-rational phenomena it proposes, which tends to evacuate the role of meaning. In other words, it further shores up the pre-social dimension of the concept of self that is at issue here. Indeed norms (Flockhart, 2006), emotions (Mercer, 2005) and recognition (Greenhill, 2008) are hardly appraised as symbolic phenomena. In fact, in the dynamics of in- versus out-group categorization emphasized by SIT, language counts for very little. Significantly, in the design of the original experiments upon which this approach was founded (Tajfel, 1978), whether two group members communicate at all, let alone share the same language, is non-pertinent. It is enough that two individuals should know (say because they have been told so in their respective languages for the purposes of the experiment) that they belong to the same group for them to favour one another over a third individual. The primary determinant of individual behaviour thus emphasized is a pre-verbal, primordial desire to belong, which seems closer to pack animal behaviour than to anything distinctly human. What the group stands for, what specific set of meanings and values binds it together, is unimportant. What matters primarily is that the group is valued positively, since positive valuation is what returns accrued self-esteem to the individual. In IR Jonathan Mercer’s (2005) account of the relationship between identity, emotion and behaviour reads more like a series of buttons mechanically pushed in a sequence of the sort: positive identification produces emotion (such as trust), which in turn generates specific patterns of in-/out-group discrimination.

Similarly, Trine Flockhart (2006: 96) approaches the socializee’s ‘desire to belong’ in terms of the psychological (and ultimately social) benefits and the feel-good factor that accrues from increased self-esteem. At the far opposite of Lacan, the concept of desire here is reduced to a Benthamite type of pleasure- or utility-maximization where meaning is nowhere to be seen. More telling still is the need to downplay the role of the Other in justifying her initial resort to SIT. For Flockhart (2006: 94), in a post-Cold War context, ‘identities cannot be constructed purely in relation to the “Other”’. Perhaps so; but not if what ‘the other’ refers to is the generic, dynamic scheme undergirding the very concept of identity. At issue here is the confusion between the reference to a specific other, for which Lacan coined the concept of *le petit autre*, and the reference to *l’Autre*, or Other, which is that symbolic instance that is essential to the making of *all* selves. As such it is not clear what meaning Flockhart’s (2006: 94) capitalization of the ‘Other’ actually holds.

The individual self as a proxy for the state's self

Another way in which the concept of self has been centrally involved in circumventing the level-of-analysis problem in IR has been to treat the self of the individual as a proxy for the self of the state. The literature on norms in particular has highlighted the role of individuals in orchestrating norm shifts, in both the positions of socializer (norm entrepreneurs) and socializee. It has shown for example how some state leaders are more susceptible than others to concerns about reputation and legitimacy and thus more amenable to being convinced of the need to adopt a new norm, of human rights or democratization, for example (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Risse, 2001). It is these specific psychological qualities pertaining to their selves (for example, those of Gorbachev; Risse, 2001) that ultimately enable the norm shift to occur. Once again the individual self ultimately remains the basis for explaining the change in state behaviour.

To summarize the points made so far, whether the state is literally considered as a person by ontological overreach, whether so only by analogy, or whether the person stands as a proxy for the state, the 'self' of that person has been consistently taken as the reference point for studying state identities. Both in Wendt's states-as-persons thesis, and in the broader psychological turn within constructivism and beyond, the debate has consistently revolved around the need to evaluate which of the essentialist assumptions about human nature are the most useful for explaining state behaviour. It has never questioned the validity of starting from these assumptions in the first place. That is, what is left unexamined is this assumption is that what works for individuals will work for states too. This is IR's central fallacy of composition, by which it has persistently eschewed rather than resolved the level-of-analysis problem. Indeed, in the absence of a clear demonstration of a logical identity (of the type $A=A$) between states and individuals, the assumption that individual interactions will explain what states do rests on little more than a leap of faith, or indeed an analogy.

Using discourse to study identity in international politics

The discourse approach, while equally centred on identity, makes this leap of faith unnecessary because it does not begin by presuming a self, whether that of an individual or state. Its starting point is both more empirically grounded and unencumbered by the host of assumptions that need to be made about the internal structure of these identities and what constitutes their essential properties. The question raised by the discourse approach is, quite simply, *who speaks?*¹⁰ That the state has a self may remain forever impossible to demonstrate. However, one trait states can be seen to share with individuals, even on a very basic level of empirical observation, is that they talk.¹¹ This 'talking' is central both to what they do and who they are — to the dynamics of identity. States, like individuals, position themselves in relation to other states by adopting certain discourses and not others. Moreover, these discourses function as important principles of coherence for statehood. One remarkable feature of international politics is the relative consistency of state positionings in international fora. Notwithstanding the long succession of individuals in a country's diplomatic seat, its line tends to remain relatively consistent; that is, until it explicitly decides to change positions, which in turn translates into a change in discourses.

For example, Australia's (or the US's) position on whaling has remained unchanged since 1978, despite major political swings and a long line of whaling commissioners. And when Australia did change stances in 1978, it did so by relinquishing one discourse and adopting another (see Epstein [2008a] for an extensive development). Thus this principle of coherence is implicitly reflected both in the practice of diplomacy and the everyday language used to describe international politics (see also Neumann, 2007). It is what enables such statements as: 'Australia said this' or 'France said that'. Moreover, speaking over time is also what creates binding positions for states. When the US says, 'the US supports the anti-whaling moratorium', that is an explicit statement that all people representing the US will do so, until one such representative succeeds in going through an elaborate, explicitly discursive procedure to change that position. It is thus 'the US' rather than anyone in particular, that is speaking and being committed to the anti-whaling stance.¹²

What the discourse approach does not do, however, is presume that states are the *only* actors to have a say in shaping international politics. In this sense it addresses a key motivation for the turn to norms in constructivism that is bound up with the level-of-analysis problem. There it become apparent that IR's excessive state-centrism had obscured the role of non-state actors (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Klotz, 2002; Risse, 2006), international organizations (Finnemore, 1996) or domestic actors (Checkel, 1999, 2005). The discourse approach does not decide a priori at what level the analysis must be cast; rather, this is determined after the empirical observation of a particular issue-area in international politics. The initial question *who speaks* opens up the analysis to observing who are the relevant actors in that area. The discourse perspective begins by identifying the discourses within which interactions take place in a particular issue-area of international politics. The international politics of whaling, for example, are structured by particular whale discourses, that is, particular constructions of 'the whale' and how we should behave in relation to them. Security issues are framed by particular understandings of national security and of the nation that needs to be secured (Campbell, 1998; Hansen, 2006; Weaver, 1995; Weldes et al., 1999). Those discourses may be primarily spoken by states, as is mainly the case with many security issues. But their primary speakers (or indeed authors) may instead be non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as was the case with whaling, where states subsequently took on the anti-whaling discourse initially framed by these NGOs after relinquishing their own nationalistic whaling discourse (Epstein, 2008a). Or they may be firms, as with globalization discourses (Hay and Rosamond, 2002).

The discourse approach allows such flexibility in the analysis because it does not decide beforehand who constitutes the agents of change. With the focus cast upon the discourses, the analysis can then travel across the different levels of analysis in order to identify who are the relevant speakers-actors. In sum, because it offers a way of traveling across the different levels of analysis, from the individual to the state, without presuming who constitutes the key actors of international politics nor what their 'selves' should look like, the discourse approach offers an empirically grounded way of encompassing the different levels of analysis at play in international relations.

Subject-positions versus subjectivities

The discourse approach operates on a set of key premises regarding the relationship between language, agency and identity. These are, first, that language is effective and that to speak is also to act. Second, social actors are first and foremost speaking actors. That is, speaking is both a key modality of their agency and of the way in which they position themselves in the world. Third, actor behaviour is regulated by pre-existing discourses that structure the field of possible actions. Centrally, this is not to say that actors are shaped entirely by social structures, which would be falling prey to an excessive social determinism with which the discourse approach has been mistakenly conflated. The key distinction here is between 'subjectivities' and 'subject-positions'. It was developed precisely in reaction, on the one hand, to the evacuation of agency that characterized the Marxian appraisal of the subject as produced exclusively by material/social structures, and, on the other, to correct Foucault's own tendency to downplay the dynamics of resistance — and thus agency — within the concept he so centrally contributed to developing (Butler, 1997; Howarth, 1995; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). That distinction has remained largely unused in IR.

Only subject-positions are produced by discourses. Social actors, that is, political *subjectivities*, cannot be reduced to being discursive phenomena. In other words, a *subject-position* refers to a *position within a discourse*. It is a place-holder, a linguistic category (Butler, 1997: 10), the I/we of a discourse. By contrast, 'subjectivity' is a much more extensive, and consequently unwieldy, category, where all the hyper-individualized characteristics of identity are relegated — including those that are not so readily transferable to the analysis of collective political units, let alone states; notably everything that has to do with desire and bodily affects. Once this distinction has been drawn, it becomes possible to cast the focus upon subject-positions, and to actually suspend questions pertaining to subjectivity. It becomes possible, in other words, to approach 'every subject-position [as] a discursive position' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 111), and to approach it as a discursive position *only*. For example, in examining Australia's anti-whaling discourses, in order to analyse how it constituted its identity as an anti-whaling state, what is considered is a subject-position, rather than how Australia 'feels' about whales (Epstein, 2008a). The concept of subject-position thus circumvents many of the difficulties involved in translating the concept of identity to the international level. Centrally, this distinction opens up the possibility of continuing to study identity while bracketing issues of subjectivity. In other words, subject-positions constitute identities *minus* subjectivities.

To be clear, this move is not intended to deny the intimate links between discourse and subjectivity. The earlier foray into Lacanian thought served precisely to underline the centrality of discourse to both the making and subsequent analysis of the subject. But by the same token it also drew out what is required to wield the discourse approach effectively in IR. Indeed Lacan's analysis emphasizes the sheer complexity of the dynamics of a highly individual phenomenon (identity), and consequently the difficulties in taking this level as the starting point for analysing all other levels at which identity is politically at play.¹³ As the discipline that positions itself at the highest level of analysis (the supranational), IR cannot maintain its focus at the level where some of the finer debates around

subjectivity take place (see for example, Butler, 1997). The issue here is one of disciplinary specificity, or, in other words, equipping IR for what it wants to do; and the solution proposed is one of suspension or bracketing.

To restate this important point differently, at the individual level, subjectivities and subject-positions remain coextensive. The distinction between subject-positions and subjectivities becomes operative once the analysis shifts beyond the individual level. This distinction thus offers a theoretically cogent way of studying identity while bracketing some of its more unwieldy dimensions that may, moreover, not be pertinent at the levels at which IR casts its focus. It renders the discourse approach operative for IR, because it makes it possible to study *state* identities, without having to presume that states have feelings, or indeed enter into questions of how much exactly are they like people, or what kind of selves do they possess.

What the discourse approach analyses, then, is the ways in which actors — crucially, whether individuals or states — define themselves by stepping into a particular subject-position carved out by a discourse. In taking on the ‘I/we’ of that discourse, actors’ identities are produced in a very specific way. In doing so, they are establishing themselves as the subjects of particular discourses, such as the anti-whaling discourse, and thereby marking themselves as ‘anti-whalers’. How, then, do discursive subject-positions differ from Wendt’s (1999: 227–229) role identities, where the actor is similarly seen as stepping into institutionalized roles (such as professor and student)? The crucial difference is that the concept of subject-position does not harbour any assumption about any primordial self supporting these roles. Importantly, this is not to say that the self does not exist — that the professor or student have no selves — but simply that the concept is not relevant to the analysis of the discursive construction of identity, especially when taken to the interstate level.

Here again, the pay-offs of this approach are empirical. Indeed, Wendt’s relatively fixed self does not hold out against the sudden identity shifts witnessed in the politics of whaling, where a series of whaling countries (such as the UK, Australia, Holland, New Zealand), who once saw whaling as key to their national security interests, dramatically recast themselves in the span of a few years as loud anti-whaling countries. Wendt’s position would raise intractable questions as to which, of the pro- or anti-whaling discourse, is closer to the true ‘self’ of these states (to their history, culture and so on). As I have demonstrated elsewhere (Epstein, 2008a), they both are. The point here is that question is avoided altogether in the discourse approach. Considering social actors exclusively as speaking actors allows the enquiry to travel the full length of the level-of-analysis spectrum, from the individual to the state. In this way the distinction between ‘subjectivity’ and ‘subject-positions’ centrally addresses the level-of-analysis problem in IR.

Conclusion

I have argued in this article that discourse provides an empirically grounded and theoretically parsimonious approach for studying of identity in international politics. It is empirically grounded, in that casting the focus upon what the actors say, and what they achieve in doing so, leaves the analysis open to appraising the specifics of the case and avoids

having to decide a priori who constitutes the relevant actors in that issue-area. It is theoretically parsimonious in that it offers a way of analysing the play of identities that does not harbour any of the indemonstrable assumptions about these actors 'selves' that have haunted IR theory. In order to draw out what discourse has to offer, I began by exploring IR's psychological turn, focussing on the role of identity in the constructivist project and specifically in the framework set up by Alexander Wendt (1999). I examined the specific moves by which Wendt essentializes identity, notably his construct of 'the essential state'. Grounded in the notion of a cohesive self derived from psychology, it is constructed by politically problematic references to the body as the recipient of a true human nature. Beyond Wendt, however, this cohesive self resurfaces in some of the more applied constructivist analyses. I contrasted it with Lacan's concept of the 'subject'. Lacan's understanding of identity draws out the limitations of Wendt's attempt to develop a social theory, because of his need to recourse to a pre-social realm wherein to locate an essentialized self. Not only is this unnecessary to explaining agency, but it ultimately short-circuits the understanding of, and possibility of wielding to its full effect, not only the concept of identity, but constructivism's own founding logic, constitutiveness. Nonetheless, I suggested that one key reason that this essentialized self has remained largely unquestioned both by Wendt and his critics within the broader psychological turn is that it provides a compelling way of theorizing the agency of the state. I also showed how, by the same token, it continues to perpetuate IR's fallacy of composition, by which what is thought to work for the parts (individuals) is assumed to work for the whole (states) as well. The discourse approach avoids this simply because it does not start from any assumptions about what works for the individual, which are relegated to the realm of subjectivity, and thereby placed beyond the remit of a more empirical focus on subject-positions. Instead the discourses approach simply observes how actors, whether individuals, groups or states, establish who they are by stepping into particular discursive subject-positions.

Notes

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1. While writing from a discourse perspective locates this argument within the 'post-structuralist' scholarship in IR, the term (rather than the scholarship) is problematic, both for the generic reasons Michel Foucault (1983) underlined and for reasons specific to the argument developed here. 'Post-essentialist' would be more accurate here.
2. For a broader discussion of the importance of Wendt's book see notably the special issues of *Review of International Studies*, vols 26 (2000) and 30 (2004).
3. The other is the distinction between material/immaterial structures.
4. This impossibility is, paradoxically, the condition of possibility for individuals coming together to act in the polity. Stavrakakis (1999), for one, defines the political as precisely that

level where the subject seeks to 'make up' for the lack. The work of Lacanian-minded political analysts has thus centred upon the impossibility of bringing closure to identity as a key driver of politics (Butler et al., 2000; Edkins, 1999; Howarth, 2000; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Stavrakakis, 1999).

5. Nor are the two concepts of 'identity' and 'identification' simply two options within a range of tools available to analysts to study identity-related phenomena, as Brubacker and Cooper (2000) put it. The argument I am making here is much stronger, namely, that the former holds little analytical purchase without consideration of the latter.
6. Somewhat ironically, and indeed a testimony to the limitations of labels, Lacanian thought, which is heavily structuralist both in its form and influences (Claude Lévi-Strauss' structural anthropology and Hegelian philosophy), has been ushered into IR by post-structuralist scholarship (Edkins, 1999). Hence my preference for the term 'post-essentialist'.
7. For a recent expression of this debate see the forum 'Is the State a Person' in *Review of International Studies* (2004) 30.
8. A fallacy of composition is a logical flaw whereby what is held true for the parts is assumed, without being demonstrated, to be true for the whole. For a discussion of the fallacy of composition in economic thought, see Hirschman (1997: 119).
9. For a discussion of the difference between the two from the point of view of social psychology, see Stets and Burke (2000).
10. Nor is this the *only* question that can be asked of the area under analysis. Rather, it is simply the question raised by the discourse perspective, which is my concern here. Importantly, this question, and the discourse approach, can and should be complemented by other perspectives that may sometimes provide a more direct analysis of the material conditions of their being able to speak that discourse in the first place. For example, a classical political economy analysis of whaling is helpful for understanding the context in which nationalistic whaling discourses took root in the West in the first part of the 20th century (see Epstein, 2008a). Thus importantly, what is at stake in the discourse approach is the relationship between *text* and *context*. It is not about focussing on text alone.
11. Thus ironically, there is a certain similarity in the stances of the discourse perspective and that of behaviourism in psychology, which has fallen largely out of favour because of these cognitive approaches centred upon the self (see, for example, Mercer [2005]). I argue that there is some validity to the recognition that the 'mind' may remain beyond the remit of the knowable, and that the analysis should therefore focus upon what comes out of it, so to speak — only this should be discourses, rather than the speechless behaviour behaviourists tended to focus upon.
12. I am grateful to Craig Parsons for drawing this out. Indeed, the whaling issue itself presents cases where some US whaling commissioners actually disagreed with the official US stance — and waited to no longer be the US whaling commissioner to give voice to their own discourse.
13. This is not to deny that there may be such a thing as a 'collective desire' nor to assert at all costs that desire is exclusively an individual phenomenon. It is merely to recognize the sheer difficulty once again of apprehending the phenomenon at the collective level with the tools at our disposal, and, in view of this difficulty, to offer a way around it in order to be able to continue to study identity in international politics.

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Biographical note

Charlotte Epstein is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Government and International Relations at the University of Sydney. Before coming to Australia she was a Georges Lurcy Visiting Scholar at the Department of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley. She holds a PhD in International Relations as well as an MPhil from Cambridge University. In addition, she read Philosophy and Literature in France, where she did an MA and a BA in Philosophy (Université de Paris-Sorbonne I) as well as a BA in Literature (Université de Paris-Sorbonne III). She is the author of *The Power of Words in International Relations: Birth of an Anti-whaling Discourse* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, runner-up to the 2009 International Studies Association Sprout Award). In addition to articles on post-structuralist perspectives in international relations, she has published articles in the areas of critical security studies (in the journal *International Political Sociology*) and global environmental politics (in *Global Environmental Politics* and the *Cambridge Journal of International Affairs* amongst others).