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Alex Wendt & Raymond Duvall "Sovereignty and the UFO"

Thursday, January 19, 2006

12:00 p.m.

Mershon Center for International Security Studies

Room 120

Alexander Wendt is the Ralph D. Mershon Professor of International Security Studies at the Mershon Center, and Raymond Duvall is Professor of Political Science and Associate Director of the Interdisciplinary Center for the Study of Global Change/MacArthur Interdisciplinary Program on Global Change, Sustainability, and Justice at the University of Minnesota. They gave a talk entitled "Sovereignty and the UFO" at the Mershon Center, addressing the puzzle of why it is that modern states do not take Unidentified Flying Objects seriously.

Wendt and Duvall offer what they call an "epistemology of UFO ignorance" to explain why modern states systematically resist the notion that extraterrestrial life forms might both exist and travel to earth. They emphasized their militant agnosticism about whether UFOs really are extra-terrestrial, saying that they are interested only in how and why the ignorance is maintained.

They said that the authoritative public sphere discourages taking UFOs seriously, and that this is ignorance masquerading as knowledge. There has actually been little scientific research on the subject, meaning that we do not know whether or not UFOs exist. Lack of evidence for UFOs' existence does not mean that they do not exist, Wendt and Duvall argued, and skepticism regarding UFOs – that extra-terrestrials would be unable to reach earth, that UFOs would land on the White House lawn, that we would know if UFOs had been on earth – is not sufficient. Instead, the burden of proof ought to lie with disproving their existence.

Wendt and Duvall explained why they would expect UFOs to be taken seriously. First, if UFOs were found to prove the existence of extra-terrestrial life, this would be the most important event in world history. Second, aliens pervade popular culture, making it clear that people are interested in the phenomenon of UFOs. Third, states have historically been very willing to label things security threats, because the presence of more security threats increases states' power in order to deal with them. Last, natural scientific curiosity would seem to make research about UFOs interesting and desirable.

Despite all of this, very little is known about UFOs, and the modern state shows no signs of encouraging otherwise.

Wendt and Duvall argued that the authoritative epistemology of UFO ignorance is necessary to maintain modern governance, because intelligent extra terrestrial life that can make itself known on earth is a threat to humancentered science and rule. They said that UFOs constitute a metaphysical threat to human power, making ignoring them the only alternative acceptable to modern states. They divided their argument into three parts.

First, they situated modern rule as "governmentality." Governmentality is what Foucault describes as non-coercive rule, or power that functions not by violence or physical oppression but through control of knowledge. Both science and the state rest upon an anthropocentric metaphysics, whereby human conduct is all that matters. A regime of governmentality may also have a sovereign or coercive face, however, which deals with the physical threats that arise (but rarely).

Second, they discussed how that sovereign face functions. They said that there are sometimes physical threats to governmentality, and that, in these exceptional circumstances, the state must resort to coercive behavior.

Third, they said that the UFO poses not just a physical threat, to which a modern state could respond with its sovereign behavior, but also a metaphysical threat. Even if a UFO and its occupants had benign intentions, its unique otherness (in being non-human) would require a world government, united against the other, and this new universal sovereignty would replace the modern state as we know it.

Wendt and Duvall repeated that phenomena requiring exceptions to normal governmentality fall into two categories: physical (e.g. conquest) and existential or ontological threats (e.g. the existence of a non-human world that would extinguish the viability of individual nationally sovereign states). They said that the state cannot decide how to deal with UFOs as an exception, because even acknowledging their possible existence would call into question the state's role as the sole securitizer, and this leaves only one option: the existence of UFOs must be denied.

They also noted that the study of UFOs, even if it were not actively discouraged politically, may be a difficult task. The UFO poses what they called a "threat of unknowability" to science, on several grounds. First, UFOs are random and seemingly unsystematic. Second, UFOs appear to violate the laws of physics, making them "impossible" per the laws of science that would be used to study them. Third, the UFO raises the possibility of a non-human subjectivity, making an understanding of UFOs potentially unassayable.

Wendt and Duvall said that modern states' ignorance of UFOs need not be conscious, as conspiracy theories would suggest. States might unconsciously repress UFOs as taboo, so as not to reveal their existential insecurities. Wendt and Duvall identified four mechanisms by which states, whether consciously or unconsciously, authoritatively repress UFOs.

First, epistemic authorities may simply announce that we know UFOs not to exist. Second, they may announce that UFOs do not and cannot constitute a security threat (on the grounds mentioned earlier, e.g. UFOs would not be able to reach earth, etc). These claims might be supported by secrecy, such as the non-reporting of cases or redactions from official reports.

Third, they may denounce UFO research as inherently pseudo-science. They may do this by systematically denying federal funding to any grant proposal about such research, or by otherwise exerting pressure on scientists to self-censor to avoid ridicule. Last, epistemic authorities may practice pseudoscience, themselves. For example, the U.S. Air Force commissioned a report on UFOs in the late 1960s, and the panel undertaking the research was stacked with skeptics whose bias rendered their findings unscientific. Even while suffering from serious methodological flaws that biased findings against the existence of UFOs, the study had a 30% failure rate at explaining them. This failure rate hardly warranted the study's summary, which declared that UFOs do not exist.

Ultimately, Wendt and Duvall characterized UFOs as a political problem first, rather than a scientific or sociological one. In order to address UFOs, the taboos against such research must be lifted. They said that once there is real scientific research underway, it should be possible for science and the state to diverge on the question of UFOs' existence.

Alexander Wendt (Ph.D., Minnesota, 1989) is Ralph D. Mershon Professor of International Security Studies at the Mershon Center. His research and teaching interests focus on international relations theory, global governance, political theory, and the philosophy of social science. His current research focuses on the inevitability of a world state, and on the idea of a quantum social science. He is the author of *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), and articles in *International Organization*, *American Political Science Review*, *Review of International Studies*, *European Journal of International Relations*, *International Security*, and *Politics and Society*. Before coming to Ohio State, he taught at the University of Chicago, Dartmouth College, and Yale University.

Raymond Duvall is Professor of Political Science at the University of Minnesota. He received his Ph.D. from Northwestern University in 1975. He is currently Morse-Alumni Distinguished Teaching Professor of Political Science and Associate Director of the Interdisciplinary Center for the Study of Global Change/MacArthur Interdisciplinary Program on Global Change, Sustainability, and Justice at the University of Minnesota. He regularly teaches courses on international relations theory, global governance, productions and performances of international hierarchy, and critical international political economy. While on leave from the University of Minnesota, he has held visiting appointments at Bogazici University (Istanbul, Turkey), Karl Franzens University (Graz, Austria), and the Graduate Institute for International Studies (Geneva, Switzerland).

He was also on the staff of the World Bank for one year, under the terms of an International Affairs Fellowship from the Council on Foreign Relations.

His recent publications include the collaborative edited book,

Cultures of Insecurity: States, Communities and the Production of Danger (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), with Jutta Weldes, Mark Laffey and Hugh Gusterson, and a co-authored article with Jutta Weldes on future directions for research on relations among liberalism, democracy, and peace, in a volume edited by Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey. He has a forthcoming book on the state and the constitution of authority in economic globalization, and a forthcoming co-edited book, with Michael Barnett, on power and global governance. His earlier research focused on theories of the capitalist state, dependency theory, and civil conflict, including revolutionary struggles, and was published in the *American Political Science Review*, *International Organization*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *Comparative Political Studies*, several other scholarly journals, and a number of edited books.