

## Interview - Barry Buzan

Written by E-International Relations

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Professor Barry Buzan is best known as a leading scholar on the English School of International Relations, and for developing the theory of securitization with Ole Waever and the Copenhagen School. Emeritus Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics and honorary professor at the University of Copenhagen and Jilin University, he was previously Project Director at the Copenhagen Peace Research Institute (COPRI) from 1988 to 2002, Chairman of the British International Studies Association from 1988 to 1990, and founding Secretary of the International Studies Coordinating Committee from 1994 to 1998. He was also editor of the *European Journal of International Relations* from 2004 to 2008, and was elected a fellow of the British Academy in 1998.

Professor Buzan answers your questions about the English School and the securitization of global finance, and discusses his view of the next era of world history.

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### **e-IR: Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in contemporary IR?**

Well, I have to answer that in my own biased way. Where do I see them? I see them in the English School, which is why I'm working in that tradition more than anything else at the moment. It seems to me that the English School has its eye on the right kinds of things, partly because it makes you take history into account in a way that most other IR theories don't: history doesn't exist for realism, it's just a constant, and liberals look forward because they can't look back, there isn't much to look back for, and looking back is embarrassing because then you see a whole bunch of progressive predictions that didn't work, and that's a problem. I like the English School's engagement with history, and its ability therefore to give you that kind of perspective in IR. It is also a kind of sociological approach. It seems to me to be the right place to be and the right sort of questions to be asking. There is a link to constructivism, because constructivists are also talking about society, but I find the English School approach to society is better structured than the Constructivist one. At least from my point of view, it seems to be the better way to go, to ask questions about what international society looks like, how it's structured, where it's going, how it evolves, etc. etc. So in terms of understanding social structures, as opposed to just the material structure, again, it's the best and the most interesting place to be.

I wouldn't say that all others should be thrown overboard and everybody should go to the English School! So I'm taking the question personally- what do I think is the most interesting place? Well, my work over the past few decades has ended me up here, finding this the most interesting. I've worked in most other traditions- not really the Marxist one, certainly not post-structuralism- but I've worked in realism and I've worked a little bit in liberalism, and this seems to me to be the most interesting place to be.

### **e-IR: So as a follow-up to that, do you see the English School and constructivism as fundamentally different, or is there some overlap?**

Both. They're fundamentally different in the sense that they come from different places. Constructivism is in a sense an epistemological position and it comes out of philosophy of knowledge. The English School is a rather practical, pragmatic tradition that comes out of political theory, history, and international law, so its roots are completely

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different. But both of them are talking about society, in some sense, and in that way they're the same thing. Any kind of society has by definition to be socially constructed, there isn't any other way of thinking about it. So from that point of view, the English School is constructivist, but there's a lot more in its approach than just constructivism, and I think the whole approach to structure through primary institutions is a lot more interesting than say, Alex Wendt's three types of society.

### **e-IR: How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?**

Well, I guess I'll try and answer that in a slightly autobiographical way. I got in to this subject through a boyish interest in war and weapons, and I still have that interest. I can be a nerdy 'bombs and bullets' man with the best of them, and books on British battleships still occupy my shelves. So that's been an enduring interest, and that's what got me interested in history, and history is what got me interested in International Relations. When I was in school, I was 'punished' by being sent to the library rather than sitting in the Social Studies class. There I read H.G. Wells' *Outline of History*, which made quite a big impact on me, because I thought, "wow, all that in one volume!" That was pretty impressive.

When I drifted into university, as middle class people did at that time, I had no idea why I was at university. It was just a conveyor belt that one was on, and I had no particular focused interest. My interest if in anything was in science, but I was sufficiently useless at mathematics that I couldn't go any further with that. But I was lucky enough in my second year to encounter Kal Holsti, who was teaching an International Relations course, and he had just about finished the textbook that became quite a famous IR textbook, so this course was beautifully honed and polished. It quite blew me away, and that got me launched on formalizing my boyish interests into Strategic Studies, dressing that up generally with a realist approach to things. So I was part of the IR generation of my time that was very influenced by [Kenneth] Waltz: that kind of really stupendous simplification was very appealing to me, I'm a kind of top-down guy, I like the high-altitude view of things. I was vulnerable to a big simplification approach like that, and I worked with that for a long time.

But basically what changed me was encounters with various people along the way, many of whom I co-authored with. My encounter for example with Ole Waever starting in the late 1980's- he also had some realist roots, but he was basically a post-structuralist, the kind of perspective that I knew relatively little about. He was sufficiently brilliant, and still is, that his perspective made sense to me, and enabled me to see things in ways that I hadn't thought of before. So, in a sense he got me into a species of Constructivism with securitization theory, which seemed to me a very interesting way of looking at security issues. I had been looking at security issues mainly in realist-materialist ways, as people did, but Ole's perspective was quite different, and quite powerful, I thought. So that pulled me more into Constructivist-type approaches, and opened my mind, etc. And then various others I've encountered along the way and written with have taught me a lot. Richard Little taught me a lot about more historical and anthropological approaches, Mathias Albert has taught me a lot of sociology that I didn't know before, and George Lawson at the moment is teaching me a certain amount of historical sociology. So it's really encounters with individuals and writing with individuals that has brought me to where I am now.

### **e-IR: What spurred you to partner with co-authors working in a variety of different areas?**

There's no single answer to that... very circumstantial kinds of things. The partnership with Ole Waever came about because a book that I had written in the early 1980's, *People, States and Fear*, unbeknownst to me had become quite influential in Scandinavian circles. I didn't realize that until I was invited over there in the late 1980's then, and we got on, and one thing led to another, and I got invited to be the kind of absentee-landlord Program Director at the Copenhagen Peace Research Institute as then was, where he was. So sometimes it's people who've approached me. Richard Little I've known forever. Mathias Albert I've also know for a long time, and it was his suggestion that we work together, because he saw some similarities in some things that I was doing and some things he was doing. Sometimes it's me approaching others and suggesting that we work together. So it's all kinds of different reasons, there's no particular, single answer to that.

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### **e-IR: What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of IR?**

Follow your interests. Don't be deterred from doing that. I mean, if you want to get into this line of business, it doesn't pay well, and the job is not as free in the sense of giving you control over your time as it used to be, so the big remaining justification for it is that it enables you to do what you want to do. Basically, you have to find a way of turning what you're interested in into something that will interest others and may be part of a larger conversation. But don't be steered away from what you're interested in, because otherwise the whole thing is a bit pointless. You have to love this in order to do it, so stick with whatever inspires you.

### **e-IR: What is the greatest strength of the English school in looking at 21st century international relations? What, if any, is its greatest weakness in your view?**

The greatest strength of it, I think, is that it enables you to look at how and why the social structures are evolving in the way that they are. So, I mentioned the primary institutions thing before. I find that way of tracking the shape and the structure of international society particularly useful at the moment. It enables you to ask all kinds of good questions, both *about* questions like China, and *to* the Chinese. If you have the opportunity to speak there, it's a very good language to speak to them in, because it's historical and a lot of Chinese IR comes from a historical background, so it's a good point of access in that sense.

I'm particularly of the view, which is not entirely the English School view, that at the moment we're in either the beginning of a new kind of era, or the end of something that started a couple of centuries ago, and that one needs this historical perspective to get that, either through the English School or something like historical sociology. To put this extremely compactly: what is happening is that the revolutions of modernity which took off in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in a few parts of the world, that created a fantastically unequal international system-structure, where there were a few very powerful states and lots of weak, and therefore dominated, states was a very unusual structure. And, IR doesn't pay much attention to it. The English School doesn't pay much attention to it either, and I suppose I would count that as its biggest weakness, along with the rest of IR, that it simply ignores this. Benchmark dates in IR go from 1648 to 1919 as if nothing of much consequence happened in between, but what happened in between was modernity.

For world historians, or historical sociologists, or international lawyers, economists, they all know that something hugely important happened in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Pretty much everything changed- the nature of the state changed, all the current actors that we have in the international system were invented then- intergovernmental organizations, multinational corporations, international non-government organizations- all have their roots there. All the big ideas that we fight over such as liberalism, socialism, nationalism, racism are all 19<sup>th</sup> century ideas. There was a huge multiple revolution in human affairs, and it happened extremely unevenly, and now, where we are now, the first stage of that- in other words, the very uneven stage- is coming to an end. But we've been in that stage for nearly 200 years, so it feels normal. It feels normal that there should be super powers, and that a handful of countries should be dominant. But that is not normal, it is a function of those peculiar events of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

So we're just coming out of that. Fareed Zakaria has this nice phrase, "the rise of the rest," that, it seems to me, captures that very nicely. Revolutions of modernity are now spreading out, the power gap between a small core and a big periphery is beginning quite rapidly to disappear, and we're moving into a new phase in which modernity is much more widespread. That's going to look very different from the IR we've had ever since IR as a discipline came into being 100 years ago. So, it seems to me that is what we need to be grasping. The English School is pretty good at getting a handle on that, although it too hasn't sufficiently got to grips with the importance of modernity in thinking about International Relations. But I think it's probably a better place to start from thinking about that kind of thing than most of the other mainstream approaches.

### **e-IR: Looking forward to this new phase that you see developing, in a speculative way, what will it look like? Will it be an acceleration of the trends that we're beginning to see happening, or something different?**

I'll throw out a few thoughts: *no super powers*. 3 super powers, 2 super powers, 1 super powers, *none*- that's where

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we're going. So a world of great powers and regional powers, therefore probably a more de-centered world than the one we've been used to. In other words, more regionalized, for better or for worse. A world also with a much narrower bandwidth of ideological differences than we've been used to. I mean, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, all of the big wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were fought basically about capitalism or not, which is a pretty big question. That's over. So everybody's a capitalist now, and the question is, what kind of capitalism- authoritarian capitalism, social democratic capitalism, liberal capitalism. There are varieties of capitalism out there, but basically, the political economy of world politics is all in a narrower bandwidth than it's been for a very long time. So that should be, I think, a good thing, in the sense that there's less to fight about than there used to be, and that a lot of quite big questions have in some ways been answered. Not that there are no significant political differences, but compared to those of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they are much *less*.

So the possibilities for a reasonably functioning international society, it seems to me, are quite good: there's quite a large substrate of shared institutions, we all agree about nationalism and sovereign equality and more or less about the market, and all kinds of other things that we didn't used to agree about. There's a substrate of shared institutions that is a very valuable resource moving forward. We still carry forward the general constraint on war, put there by weapons of mass destruction on the one hand, and by the global economy on the other, so great power war is probably not going to be a very big issue, in other words, we're not going to be looking at any kind of replay of the 1930s scenario, because racism is gone, imperialism is gone, people care about the world economy, anti-hegemonism is a very wide-spread value. We are living in a different ideational world than the one of the 1930s.

But we have never been in this particular kind of world before. We have been in a world in which power was very evenly distributed: if you go back beyond the 19<sup>th</sup> century, you were in a world where there were a number of big centers of power, reasonably equal in some respects: China, Japan, India, the European powers, the Roman empire, etc. etc.- that then broke down, and the world was fantastically quickly and powerfully integrated into a single political economy. So we go forward with that single political economy, but back in a sense to a more even distribution of power. That's a combination that we've never had before. Either in the pre-19<sup>th</sup> century world, where there was a pretty even distribution of power but it was pretty loosely connected. It's a new game, and we have to learn how to play it. So forget polarity theory! Because it doesn't really apply to this kind of circumstance.

**e-IR: In reference to your article “The Global Transformation” (Buzan and Lawson 2012): examining the impact of 19th century, you say IR is focused on outcomes rather than social developments that led to conflicts. Has IR learned to examine social developments in a critical and helpful way or is it still outcome focused?**

I don't think most of IR has learned this yet. George [Lawson] and I are heading down the home stretch on the book of that article, which will make this argument at great length and depth, about how it is that IR needs to engage with modernity, and in fact, why it hasn't, and what the consequences of doing so would be. I think there are many such consequences, but one of them that would be a good benchmark for when IR has arrived here is when it can start talking to the other disciplines that have already recognized this fact. I mean, there's hardly any conversation at all between IR and sociology, for example. Now that's partly IR's fault, and partly sociology's fault. But it depends a little bit on how you see IR. I'm a kind of IR imperialist, old fashioned though that may seem to be, because there's an odd thing about IR. We think of it as a discipline, but if you ask yourself the question of what defines a discipline in the social sciences, mostly the definitions are functional, and it's to do with certain kinds of behavior, if you will- legal behavior, or economic behavior, or political behavior, or social behavior.

But then you come to International Relations. It's not that: it doesn't define a function, it defines a scale. So, in a sense, IR is not a discipline in the same way that the other things are disciplines. What it does, if it does anything, is to occupy and unify the macro-end of all of the others, so it's about world history, the world economy, international law, international society, and world politics. But it combines all of those things into a scale-based approach. Not everybody agrees with that, quite a few people will still see International Relations as being a subset of Political Science, International Politics. I think that's unspeakably boring. So for me, if IR can't occupy this imperial role, overarching the big end of all of the other social science disciplines and history, then it's not all that interesting. For me, what makes IR interesting is trying to do that.

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**e-IR: With the recent financial crisis and the eurozone crisis, will finance, trade and banks become increasingly securitized issues? What kinds of impacts would securitization have on the global financial system and potential regulations to avoid future crises?**

It's a good question. I'm not very well placed to answer it because I don't have a lot of expertise there. It does seem to me that- and here I'm going to slightly avoid answering the question but put it into a slightly different perspective. The onset of the financial crisis - 2008, let's call that the benchmark date - it seems to me is quite likely, in retrospect, to be an important benchmark date in thinking about the unfolding of International Relations. In this evolution out of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, I'm thinking of 3 phases, if you will, all to do with globalization because the revolutions of modernity created the modern form of globalization, with all of its unparalleled intensities. So the first phase is Western colonialism, core-periphery with direct dominance of the core over much of the periphery. That runs up until 1945. Then you get what I would call a Western-global international society: still core-periphery, but decolonization has set in, some of the gaps are beginning to narrow, there isn't this kind of wholesale power and status differentiation that there was before, although the West is still the dominant core over a more or less subordinated periphery. That I think is going to be seen in retrospect as running up until 2008.

Beyond 2008, therefore, I'm thinking of this de-centered globalism order, where super powers are fading away, the West is not disappearing, it remains powerful and will continue to do so, but it is ceasing to be dominant. So the core is getting bigger and bigger, with China and India and others coming in, and the periphery is getting smaller and smaller, and therefore we're returning to this world of great powers. And I think the financial crisis is going to be a pretty big benchmark for that. The way I saw that was perhaps a little quirky, but it's still the way I think about it: when Communism collapsed at the end of the 1980s, I thought wow, what a privilege to have lived through the implosion of a really big idea, because I'd grown up with that idea, it was part of the background of everything I did in this discipline for 20 or 30 years, and suddenly within a few years- boom, it's just not there any more. And all kinds of things changed. So there's a wonderful demonstration of the ideational structure, if you like, of the world. And I had very much the same feeling in 2008 when neo-liberalism imploded, because it seemed to me that idea is as unrecoverable as the practical idea of Communism as a form of government would be. It just doesn't work, or it's too unstable to work as a system of global governance. So I see that as the implosion of a big idea- *twice!* Wow, a doubly privileged lifetime!

It seems to me therefore that the answer to this question to the extent that I can give it an answer is going to take place in terms of what I referred to before as varieties of capitalism. And that kind of neo-liberal, basically it's financial liberalization, is patently dangerous. I am not the first person to think this. You can go back and read Karl Polanyi and get the same kind of analysis- but it's also tremendously seductive, because if you go down that line, a lot of people make a lot of money for quite a long time before it all blows up. So it is, in some ways, quite attractive. The problem is, it's a kind of con game- nothing wrong with that- the game of economics, to put it in a very simple form is how much credit can you leverage from a given amount of capital. If the answer is none, then you have only got the capital that you have got, and you grow very slowly and consume very little. If you can leverage 100% credit off your capital, you've got £200 instead of £100, you can invest more, you can spend more, and you might create a virtuous circle of growth, where that's real money, if it's accepted as such, if you can make double that, £300 off your 100, consume more, invest more, grow more, it's all virtuous, and as long as it works, it works. But at some point, it's a bubble and it collapses. There's a lot of pain, shrinkage associated with that. So it is a dangerous species of capitalism. Some may want to continue it. The Americans may want to continue with it. Others will say no, and prefer a more German or Scandinavian style of capitalism, which is more regulated, perhaps less exciting, perhaps it doesn't grow quite as fast, but it doesn't have these huge ups and downs. Others will prefer authoritarian capitalism- Russian style, Chinese style, Singapore style- that seems to work for some places better than others, it has a different balance of costs and benefits.

It seems to me for where we are post-2008, is that we're all capitalists now, but we're all different kinds of capitalists. We'd need a period of peaceful competition, with a certain amount of collaboration, to see whose kind of capitalism works best. Maybe that will lead to a convergence, maybe it will stabilize as varieties of capitalism with which different kinds of society feel more comfortable, and therefore that the varieties of capitalism is durable. I'd vote for that, in the sense if you just look at the general difference between continental Europe and the U.S., with Britain

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somewhere in the middle, that's been very durable. The Europeans on the whole prefer a social-democratic kind of capitalism, the Americans prefer a more liberal kind of capitalism, a more *gung ho*, all stops out version. But as the Americans are no longer ruling the roost, they cannot impose their system on the rest of us, so I'm thinking we're in a varieties of capitalism kind of mode, and let's see how they all work.

**e-IR: Mearsheimer and Walt (January 2013) recently argued that IR scholars have become more preoccupied with hypothesis testing than theory generation, to the detriment of the IR field. What's your view? And do you think the theory/practice divide is growing or abating?**

Ah, we're back to the English School again! I think of that as mainly an American problem. But that does make it an IR problem because the Americans are very big, and most of IR is American in one form or the other, and much of the rest of it is British. So it is expanding quickly, but its core in some sense is still American, in terms of who's in command and control of the gatekeeping, the journals, etc. Mearsheimer and Walt are worried- and I'm going to name drop, I've talked to both of them about this- and what spooks them is that they cannot see the present American system producing anyone like themselves. In other words, any big thinkers. I talked to Steve Walt about this a year or so ago, and he had a very interesting observation, because he was saying basically, 20 years ago if he met a post-graduate student from anywhere and talked to them for a bit, he could pretty much tell where they were trained, because there were distinct differences between whether you were trained in Chicago, or at Stanford, Harvard or UCLA or wherever, everything had a more individual stamp to it. Now, he can't do that anymore, they're all the same, because they've all been drilled into this particular methodological training. They're all doing large-N studies of one sort or another, and they all do it competently, because they are well-trained, and they are all addressing small and middling range questions, and they are all pretty boring. And so I think the insight that's come over them is that, for some reason, which is a bit of a mystery to me, the U.S. is vulnerable to intellectual monocultures. So it tends to go with big fashions, which then become dominant and durable, more so than Europe. Perhaps because Europe is divided up more by language and cultural traditions than the U.S. is- so I'm not claiming any European virtue here.

So this is the American problem. They kind of got themselves into this, 'let's treat International Relations as science and let's commit ourselves to a positivist methodology.' That was the big argument when I was an undergrad, between traditionalists and behavioralists. The behavioralists basically won, in the sense that they took over all the training programs. The consequences of this are now becoming apparent, and it seems to me this is a crisis for American IR. They're either going to have to carry on with this in the hope that it actually produces something more interesting than it looks like it's going to produce, or have some kind of internal rebellion, because at the moment they're a little bit in the position that American dissidents tend to leave, so there are of course American constructivists and American post-structuralists, but they all feel a bit beleaguered within this dominant positivist tradition, so a lot of them find life more comfortable elsewhere, like in Europe.

I don't think it's a crisis for IR so much, and it's certainly not a crisis in the English School, which has always set its face against that. Perhaps the English School could be criticized for setting its face too strongly against that, and Americans have always criticized the English School for being a bit vague in its concepts, and not having a definite methodology. Those are fair points. But, the English School doesn't have this problem about hypothesis testing and formal methods. The Americans have been extraordinarily successful in colonizing IR, in effect. Their universities have been extremely effective and efficient in training IR scholars all over the place. American trained IR scholars are dominant in much of Asia- Japan, South Korea, China up to a point has been very influenced by the American positivist tradition. But they are all now rebelling against that, and that is one reason I find the English School a surprisingly good sell in places like China because it's the first port of call when you think, 'I no longer want to be an intellectual colony of the United States, and there's this thing called the English School which suggests I don't have to be' so they start looking there and then start thinking 'should we have a Chinese school, or a Japanese school, should we bring our own history and our own intellectual traditions into play?' That is all to the good, as far as I am concerned.

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