

Theory Talks

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THEORY TALK #35

BARRY BUZAN ON INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY,
SECURITIZATION, AND AN ENGLISH SCHOOL
MAP OF THE WORLD

Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion of debates in International Relations with an emphasis of the underlying theoretical issues. By frequently inviting cutting-edge specialists in the field to elucidate their work and to explain current developments both in IR theory and real-world politics, *Theory Talks* aims to offer both scholars and students a comprehensive view of the field and its most important protagonists.

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BARRY BUZAN ON INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY, SECURITIZATION, AND AN ENGLISH SCHOOL MAP OF THE WORLD



Few thinkers have shown to be as capable as Barry Buzan of continuously impacting the direction of debates in IR theory. From regional security complexes to the English School approach to IR as being about international society, and from hegemony to securitization: Buzan's name will appear on your reading list. It is therefore an honor for *Theory Talks* to present this comprehensive *Talk* with professor Buzan. In this *Talk*, Buzan – amongst others – discusses theory as thinking-tools, describes the contemporary regionalization of international society, and sketches an English School map of the world.

What is, according to you, the biggest challenge / principal debate in current IR? What is your position or answer to this challenge / in this debate?

I think the biggest challenge is a dual one, namely, to reconnect international relations with world history and sociology. First, why connect IR to world history? Unless you have some understanding of how thinking about IR sits with world history, you are in a sort of Westphalian box which you can't get out of. How has this grown? Most IR theory presupposes the particular conditions of Westphalia, that is, the world is divided in its entirety into sovereign and autonomous boxes named 'states'. How we understand current international relations through that statist lens is simply not supported by much of world history, neither when you go back in European history nor if you look at other places in the world. So by confronting IR with world history, we can re-think many of the limitations of the theoretical underpinnings that now structure our understanding of the world.

One can then ask the second question: why link IR to sociology? The answer to that question is a little more complex, but fundamentally rests on the premise (adopted, for instance, by the English School) of international society. If you adopt the notion that international *society* is the point of focus rather than international *politics* as limited to states, then a sociological outlook seems the most apt thinking tool, rather than the statist perspective of IR. If IR is about international society, that is, about social relations at the global level, then what's the difference between IR and a sort of global sociology? Yet sociologists—with one or two exceptions—have not occupied the territory of international society, nor have IR scholars generally attempted to build upon a sociological outlook to international relations.

Since I see these two challenges (connecting IR to history and to sociology) as central, my work has gravitated increasingly towards the English School (which builds on the work of, for instance, Hedley Bull) over the last fifteen years or so, because that seems to be a good place to construct such a meeting ground.

How did you arrive at where you currently are in IR?

I guess my early childhood is really where it started: I had this typical boyish interest in war and weapons, which as I grew a little older began to mutate into an interest in history. I was particularly influenced by reading H.G. Wells' 'Outline of History' (1920, full text [here](#)) at an early age. The synoptic vision of history, and the willingness to take on the entire story of history in one volume, made an impression that never left me. At university, Kal Holsti was a person whose teaching inspired me into becoming interested in International Relations, and Mark Zacher encouraged me to think of it as a possible career. Kenneth Waltz's '*Theory of International Politics*' (1979) inspired me a lot, and I found myself engaging with that for a long time.

What I think makes my journey distinct, is that as well as writing as a single author, I have co-authored with an unusually high number of people—by now, it must be a dozen or more, some becoming deep and longstanding partnerships, with such people as Ole Wæver, Richard Little, and more recently with Lene Hansen and Mathias Albert. That kind of deep collaborative work requires you to create a 'third mind' with the person you're writing with, and I have found that extremely stimulating. It has enabled me to do things I couldn't have done myself, yet it has also meant that one comes to terms with another person's thinking sufficiently to create a third person who is then another author, with a distinct style and way of thinking. So in a sense, I consider my co-authorship to be not my own but rather that of this third person. Since I have worked together with different people, I have stood at the cradle of several distinct 'third persons' authors, and in that way I could be criticized for incoherence. You have to find a core on which both authors agree and take that as a point of departure, setting aside the differences you might—and will—have. And that core will be different each time. Yet to be able to do that, think outside of your own limited thinking, was immensely challenging and stimulating.

What would a student need to become a specialist in IR or understand the world in a global way?

I don't think there is a single answer to that: IR is a huge field and there are many different ways into it, requiring different skills from mathematics to linguistics. Yet what all students would need is an analytical capability of a high level, and a well-focused topic—possessing that, they are bound to teach us something of interest.

I would not, for instance, require adherence to a strict set of theories or ideas. I see ideas or positions in the 'debates' rather as ever-evolving tools in a toolbox. A choice of theory should depend on what one wants to think about rather than having the question depending on the *a priori* chosen theory. One does not attack a flat tire with a chainsaw, simply because one takes a liking to chainsaws. I don't attach my identity to any school, which I would feel obliged to defend; I take a particularly utilitarian epistemological or ontological view on theory. I can find realism both interesting and utterly flawed; at the same time, I can find some postmodern work interesting as well as profoundly flawed. They have different kinds of utilities, depending on what kind of question you want to ask and answer. I do not have a problem with people adopting different epistemologies in the same analysis; as long as they keep them clear, I don't see why they cannot complement each other. As I am not deeply knowledgeable of philosophy of knowledge, it might be that I am sitting on a dangerously unstable ontological chair, but so far, so good.

So to come back to what would make a good IR scholar, I would be able to name only what would *not* make a good student: taking theory as blindfolds or letting method cloud the process of formulating interesting questions, for instance, would not be advisable.

A lot of what is widely published and read in our field is theoretical or meta-theoretical. Why are international relations (IR) and international security studies (ISS) so reflective?

I think it has something to do with the fact that IR is such a broad field. In one way, IR is not like other disciplines in the social sciences; most disciplines in the social sciences are sector-based. So they are reflective of a rather functionally based differentiation approach to understanding the world, something reflected sociologically in how we are organized: law departments are separated from anthropology departments, from sociology which is separated from politics, economics, etc. IR isn't legitimated in that way: it is defined either by a level of analysis or by encompassing everything, depending on how you frame it. It seems to me that there's a huge contestation about what IR actually *is*: some people think of it as international politics, that is, as a sub-branch of politics. Others think of it as political economy, and therefore covering two disciplinary or sectoral grounds. Still others, such as English School and constructivist people, are more sociological in their disciplinary orientation.

So what is this 'thing' called IR? I don't think of it as a discipline, I think of it as a cross-disciplinary field. The most inclusive conceptualization of IR is really about everything: about how humankind organizes itself. That would explain why there is such a multiplicity of theorizing, because most of the functionally differentiated disciplines can concentrate a body of theory which becomes their core. IR can't do that, unless it is simply understood as only covering international politics, which would just be the macro-side of the discipline of politics. That seems vastly too narrow, at least too narrow to sustain my interest.

If we would have to make a map of the world in international political terms, what would it look like? To make this question somewhat more answerable, would it be divided in north and south, core and periphery, would it be a world of states? Is it one integrated security complex or a world of regional security logics? Is there a hegemon?

I will give you an answer consistent with an English School framing. My map would focus on the interplay between the interstate society and transnational and interhuman society in terms of identity. Since I am getting increasingly postcolonial in my take on IR, my map would probably reflect an interest in the way in which the core-periphery social and power structure, with the West as a weakening core, seems to be evolving into a more regionalized map. International society, on this map, would be more decentered, with a variety of distinctive regional societies emerging in different colors. These regional societies would not be competing with each other as a Cold War map might show you, in terms of regional blocs trying to take over the whole system. They would rather be more defensive than universalist in their aspirations.

The map would also have to accommodate the mutual interplay of more universalist types of identities with the continuing strength of parochial identities, and I would be interested in seeing how this latter map would be superimposable on the former one.

On a transnational level, my map would accentuate the way in which the Washington Consensus seems to have imploded in a way very similar to the implosion of Communism. We have seen a Cold War map, of two ideological regions in distinct colors, turn into a map of different shades

of the same color—the Washington Consensus map—which is now being supplanted fairly rapidly by yet another, more regional, map. I am convinced that the implosion of Communism has the same reasons as the implosion of the Washington Consensus: the attempt to construct a global economy of a very intense sort, especially through financial liberalization, was a bit premature: the management ability to sustain such a level of economic integration is not yet there. With the collapse of both ideologies—Communism and the Washington Consensus—we need a period of experiments in political economy, for which regions seem the appropriate size. They would not be isolationist regions of radically contrasting colors, but still, enthusiasm for efforts on a global scale seem to have receded.

In 1991, you made such a map (*New patterns of global security in the 21st century*), and argued that the 21st century started with the end of the Cold War. How do you think about that now?

At this moment, I think these kinds of boundaries, between the 20th and the 21st century, are not all that interesting. To explain why we have to shift focus a little back in time, to a world with a radically different ‘map’. The 19th century is the great forgotten century in IR, yet it is a century of great turbulence, of great transformations. that the 19th century reflects the need to bring IR and sociology together using history: in most sociological perspectives, the 19th century *is* the great transformation, as Karl Polanyi would have it. As his exemplary account shows, the 19th century transforms not just the internal character of the leading states, but also the whole character of international society. Basically, IR doesn’t say anything at all about the 19th century, except that it was the peak of European power. I am more inclined to think that what happened in that century was indeed *the* great transformation, and that we’re still witnessing and grappling with its effects now.

You have done much work on regions in recent years. Why should we start focusing on regions and less on hegemonic power?

The system seems to have developed in the direction of regionalization. With the US recovering from financial malaise, the system seems to be in for a period of decentering, for regionalization. Within the English School there is a literature that notes the tensions between the legitimating principle of sovereign equality for international society on the one hand and the actual practices of hegemony in much of international politics on the other, that is, the practice of hegemony without any legitimation. The way the world is unfolding, with a greater global distribution of power and more voice to non-western cultures, makes the idea that hegemony is ever going to be legitimizable (that is, not just in practice, but as agreed upon by the multiplicity of states) on a global level a passing one.

That doesn’t mean that such hegemonic tendencies might not be very much in play at the regional level. The neighbors of both China and India worry about such hegemonic dynamics unfolding on a regional level.

So the whole core-periphery idea on a global level, with one power setting and enforcing an agenda, seems on its way out. As the West declines, this whole question declines with it relatively to rising powers elsewhere. But it is not only the rise of other powers as such, but rather also the collapse of the Washington Consensus as a global programme. So all in all, the relation between sovereignty as a legitimizing principle and decentralizing tendencies in a more decentralized and

regionalized international society, without so much focus on the question of US global leadership, will be the point of focus.

And this is especially interesting since each region has different regional dynamics and powers. If one looks at the Middle East, which I am now studying as a regional international society, one sees that it has a distinct set of primary institutions and a specific postcolonial state-structure. It is thus a very different kind of place as an international society from, say, the West. We are now learning that this category, the West, was a sort of construction taken to be global but which in fact is more reduced to a specific geographical and cultural space than we thought. While you find of course similarities between East Asia and the West if you look for them, you'll also find significant differences, either of institutions or in practices. In East Asia, for instance, there is a much stronger tradition of non-intervention and sovereignty, and a much greater concern for regime security than you'd find in the West.

You have earlier argued that the post-cold war world would move towards regional security complexes, in part because of declining superpower interest in local matters; and the evening out of military capacity that would mean that only the strongest superpower could (and most often would not) project military might to far away places. In the light of the prolonged wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, how do you see the regionalization thesis now?

I am still working on regional security complexes, and I am starting to ask myself questions on whether there is any kind of linkage between strategic interaction defined by security complex theory and the making of regional international societies. In principle, there may be scope for that; whether in practice it holds too, I'm not sure—that's an empirical question.

In terms of the two cases that you mention, I'm fascinated by the extent to which Afghanistan has remained an insulator for the regional security complexes between which it is nested. Despite invasions and wars and relatively huge upheavals, its actual position hasn't changed that much since Ole Waever and I wrote *Regions and Powers* (2003, read the introduction and part of the 1st chapter [here](#) in pdf).

From the kind of lofty birds-eye perspective that regional security complex theory gives you, Iraq in some sense is a relatively minor event. The Middle East is so subdivided anyway, and even though Iraq was one of the regional powers and now taken out for a bit with the great increase of American overlay, it doesn't make any enormous difference. One can understand the interplay between regional dynamics and American penetration, yet in the case of Iraq, it doesn't seem to have mattered all that much in reshaping regional dynamics, except perhaps that it has worked to the advantage of Iran. But for the rest, it hasn't redressed the regional security complex of the Middle East very profoundly, nor would one expect so, unless Iraq actually breaks up. If it manages to hold itself together and get back to functioning as a state, then I don't think things are going to be all that much different: it will remain a region in which conflict is hugely over-determined—so in that sense, I think the Americans have wasted their time and money: they lost a great deal of whatever influence they might have had before going in there.

Some time ago, you argued that international relations theory is theory *by* and *for* the West, and 'rests on an assumption that Western history *is* world history'. For whom and for what purpose is the idea of 'international society'?

Linking that to the 19th century, the story of which has been told from a remarkably Western perspective (even by such great writers as Karl Polanyi), I think the vantage point of the notion of international society is that it challenges such region-biased views by requiring a re-telling of old and hegemonic stories that condition so much of our discipline. The supposedly ‘timeless and universal’ perspective of IR is based on a Euro-centric understanding of the past, the present and future, and it does not take into account nearly enough the cultural syncretic processes by which the west itself was and still is made. While the idea of international society is not *for* someone in particular, it tends to be made by the great powers of the day. In a sense, ‘international society’ can be understood mainly as the international projection or extrapolation of what the great powers agree to construct as the international order in which they want to operate—like most else in IR, it is a great power centered theory, but it has wider potentialities.

As Hedley Bull constructs it, the concept evolves around international *order*, and everybody has an interest in a certain kind of order as opposed to chaos or anarchy. You might or might not like any particular order, and at any given point you can find people who are opposed to or supportive of the reigning order. Right now, we live in a liberal order, so it suits people and societies of that disposition while it is hostile to people and countries who are not of that disposition—which is also one reason why we see this regionalizing tendency.

Yet within this normatively ‘agnostic’ analysis, one can argue that it seems to be the first order that has constructed values such as ‘all humans are equal’, an assumption we have only operated with for the last 60 years. It’s a very big principle that delegitimizes racism, slavery, genocide, and empire. So there have been some transformations under this order which seem not only to reflect the interests of the great powers, but also of people.

Neorealists assume that a US China bipolarity is basically antagonistic: economically both players are competitive, and from a social-cultural view, the ‘G2’ does not seem to share a lot. What would an IR theory need to accommodate, say, Asian perspectives on world politics?

It’s an interesting place to start thinking but I don’t believe neorealist polarity theory offers much more than mental gymnastics. If you, like myself, adopt a Wendtian (*Theory Talk #3*) constructivist outlook, anarchy is what states make of it.

Interestingly, some things are already coming out using Chinese history, such as *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (2005, read excerpt [here](#)) by Victoria Hui, which wheels in Chinese history from the warring states period to ask some hard questions about balance of power assumptions as being the normal operative logic of anarchy. Situations where the sophisticated history of a non-Western international system is brought back into play form a good platform of thinking about neorealism’s assumptions and IR theory in general, and its excessive dependence on western history. And this kind of challenging is not something for me to do; I just act as a provocateur, encouraging those who have the skills to do that.

It is interesting to note that the English School in IR, with its assumptions of international society, is surprisingly popular in China and reasonably influential in the emergent discipline of IR that is coming about there, so it will play into whatever the much-mooted ‘Chinese school’ of IR eventually becomes. While there is no shortage of people in China and Asia more widely who are doing the formal, positivistic, US-realist-style IR, the Chinese seem to be more open to a theory that has a more historical dimension to IR than to the more abstract kind of theorizing. They are also somewhat reluctant to find themselves slaves to American theory, so there’s a

certain amount of theoretical nationalism there. It might not be a good thing—yet another great power devising theory to match its interests—but in many ways, it might also turn out to stimulate debate. Yet with a few exceptions you don't find much of this stance in other Asian countries: South Korea and Japan, for instance, have many of their scholars trained in the US and they still largely follow that way of doing things.

So I would not agree with a necessary antagonistic bipolarity between the US and China, nor would I say that one Asian 'School' is possible, given the wide range of diverse interests, not least vis-à-vis each other.

A question on securitization. A threat—such as terrorism—needs an audience to accept the securitizing move as such. What happens if, as for instance the 'terror thermometer' of the US, a threat gets discursively sustained yet the threat- or securitization-level normalizes and people get used to it? Is that desecuritization? In other words: what's the current status of the terrorism-securitization?

I think the current status of the terrorism securitization is indeed somewhat declining. I think I got it right in 2006 when I wrote *Will the Global War on Terror be the new Cold War?* (International Affairs, 2006, read pdf version [here](#)): the war on terror is not going to be a new Cold War in terms of a global dominant macro-securitization which the US can use to structure alliances and frame itself in a good position in global security concerns. Even in the US, nowadays, the term 'war on terror' hardly appears at all: in that sense, it is becoming desecuritized, partly because many people are simply not coming on board with a continuous high securitization of the war on terror. Rather, as Mary Kaldor has argued in *Theory Talk #30*, people would rather treat this as a criminal matter involving policing. Yet, it is not taken off the register entirely, there's obviously still a problem there.

A bigger problem your question points to is a theoretical problem: what is normal politics? Indeed, within securitization theory, normal politics has been taken as a kind of static status quo, from which one departs with a securitization and returns to with desecuritization, yet as critics have rightly pointed out, 'normal politics' is dynamic rather than static. Granted this observation, it becomes important to probe the interrelations between securitization and normal politics. Ole Waever would I think say that emergency measures—so critical to the definition of a securitization—can be bureaucratized and routinized in some senses without losing their qualities as emergency measures. But one has to ask, for instance: what is normal politics in a paranoid dictatorship? Or in the Soviet Union, where even Ray Bans and blue jeans could be security issues! These examples show that it is possible to conceive of normal politics as involving a reasonably high degree of securitization—and then you're in a difficult situation.

However, I think the basic concept of securitization is still clear, and the basic differentiation between normal politics and securitization with emergency measures is sound, even if there is a lot more to be said than just this.

You recently published a volume with Lene Hansen entitled '*The Evolution of International Security Studies*' (2009). I have some questions about that. First of all, realists might argue that the field is not in evolution at all but rather falling apart into ever-more critical and less policy-relevant shreds.

That is one interpretation, yet what Lene Hansen and I experienced as we surveyed all this literature, is the extent to which a single conversation exists concerning the major issues within international security studies (ISS). In that sense, the contestation should be interpreted as theoretical flowering and diversification rather than as disintegration: a deepening division of labor rather than a crumbling field. People are talking about similar sorts of issues: if you look at the literature on terrorism, for instance, you can find people from almost any perspective you would care to name: risk theory people, realists, feminists, postcolonialists, and liberals, for instance, all have their say on this international security issue. All these different perspectives bring in useful insights that you don't get from just a single perspective. Yet to interpret ISS as a single conversation, we had to take a step back and just read everything out there with a question in the back of our minds. If you're in the middle of such a discussion on any issue, often others participating in such a debate seem universes removed from yourself. I grew up with the discussion being set by strategic studies on the one hand and peace research on the other, and they seemed incommensurable at the time: people on both sides in the debate, talking about the same thing, wouldn't want to be in the same room with each other—yet in retrospect they were clearly deeply engaged in a single discussion. One purpose of the book is to make that synoptic, 'division of labour' view clearer to the various contending approaches within ISS.

Second of all, why do we need this division between IPE/ISS as (sub)disciplines within IR? Doesn't it blind us to the interconnectedness of economic governance and security governance?

I indeed agree that there is no reason why we would *need* it, but a more interesting question is then why we do *have* it. And that is a sociological question, about the way IR as a field unfolded at particular times and under the impact of particular events. The way academic disciplines emerged is not some logical devised plan; rather, it is all about turf wars: who wins gets to establish their school of thought in an institute and/or a journal. If you look at the sociology of the IR discipline in the 70s you can certainly see why this divide between IPE and ISS occurred in the US. You can either lament or cheer that this divide settled in, like I lament most divides that hinder an understanding of IR, because people on either side of any such divide simply don't talk to each other. They start speaking different languages, publish in different journals, and important and big questions can indeed easily drop into such gaps between disciplines.

Last question. Realists have charged you personally with being responsible for taking their black box—security—and opening it with your book *People, States and Fear* (1983). Walt in 1991 tried to close what he saw as a Pandora's box; ever since, many new security black boxes have developed in ISS, yet security is forever established as an 'essentially contested concept'. Is the evolution of the concept of security as contested within ISS a temporary period with all its 'turns' a temporary phase, or is it a foundational question making possible ISS?

Firstly, I am happy to plead guilty if I am accused of opening this box of security; look at the way the literature has evolved since! I am obviously not the only one thinking it was a good idea to do so; rather, it was long overdue. What is interesting, is that the black box of security has been opened and explored much further in Europe (where the concept is now established as 'essentially contested') than it has been in the US, where by and large there is little interest in the concept of security as such—it is taken as given. In a sense, this has unfortunately contributed to the widening of the Atlantic divide. One could even say that there is an American style of security studies and a distinctly European one.

Secondly, I think that once opened, the box remains indeed perpetually open. It is a foundational issue, and who's to know what else will come along? If Alexander Wendt ever gets his quantum social theory together, we might have great insights from that for security; sociobiology, or complex systems modeling (now for example applied to weather systems) might provide analytical boosts: it points for me towards such fascinating yet still science fiction ideas as Isaac Asimov's 'psychohistory' in the *Foundation Trilogy* many decades ago: the ability to see international relations as a complex system and to say something about the larger patterns and movements.

IR has always been magpie-ish in that it takes insights and concepts from other disciplines and it will continue to do so if other ideas look like they apply to problems addressed in the field. Isn't that in the end what makes it so interesting?

Barry Buzan is the Montague Burton Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics and is honorary professor at the Universities of Copenhagen and Jilin. He has written extensively on issues of international security, international society and world history, and is the author of such works as *People, States and Fear* (1983), *Regions and Powers* (2003, with Ole Waever), and more recently *The Evolution of International Security Studies* (2009, with Lene Hansen).

Related links

- [Faculty Profile at LSE](#)
- Read the first chapter of *The Evolution of International Security Studies* (2009, with Lene Hansen) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read the first chapter of *Regions and Powers* (2003, with Ole Waever) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read the paper *Functional Differentiation and sectors: between Sociology and International Relations* (2007, with Mathias Albert) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Buzan's *Rethinking Security after the Cold War* (Cooperation and Conflict, 1997) [here](#) (pdf)