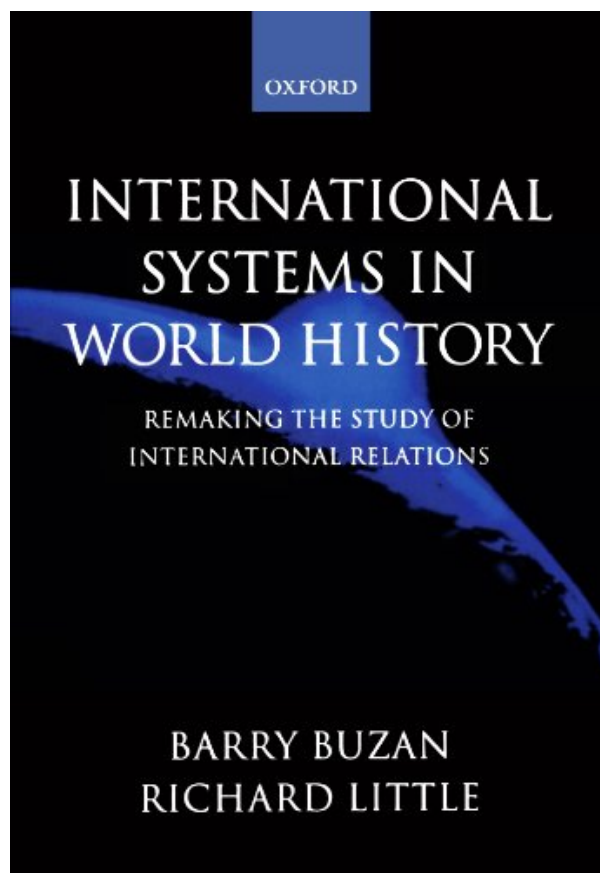


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HISTORY: REMAKING THE STUDY OF
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS BY BARRY
BUZAN, RICHARD LITTLE**



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Review

'This is an outstandingly good book, which succeeds on many different levels. The book is exceptionally well structured and well written. There is so much in this book for so many types of scholars of International Relations. I am certain that this book will be seen over time not only as one of the most intellectually impressive mergers of theory and history in the field, but also as a massive advance on US-style neo-realism. I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book, not least because I became fascinated with the argument, and found myself nodding in admiration as the authors pulled off the feat of bringing all the elements together into a powerful and intellectually impressive discussion of the types of international system found in world history. This is one of the most important books published in the last decade and for intellectual sophistication it leave neo-realism US-style standing, but also drowning.' *International Affairs* 76:4 (2000) 833-4.

About the Author

Barry Buzan is Research Professor of International Studies at the University of Westminster and Project Director of the European Security Group at the Copenhagen Peace Research Institute. Prior to this he was Professor of International Relations at the University of Warwick. He has been visiting professor at the International University of Japan and has also been an Olof Palme visiting professor and adviser on foreign affairs to the Swedish government. He is the author of numerous books on International Relations and from 1988-90 was the Chairman of the British International Studies Association.

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This book tells the story of mankind's evolution from a scattering of hunter-gatherer bands to today's integrated global international political economy. Seeking to emulate and challenge the cross-disciplinary influence of the world systems model, the book recasts the study of international relations into a macro-historical perspective, shows how its core concepts work across time, and sets out a new theoretical agenda and a new intellectual role for the discipline.

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Most helpful customer reviews

12 of 12 people found the following review helpful.

IR contribution to the understanding of world history

By César González Rouco

As the two authors recognize, this work is an International Relations ["IR"] textbook, and written as such; but they hope "to attract interest and comment from historical sociologists, archeologists, world historians and anyone trying to understand humankind as a whole" [precisely, with the purpose of understanding as much as possible of our world,...The authors, after researching what world history has to offer to IR theory, also examine what IR theory has to offer world history: "The most obvious answer to that questions is the idea of international system itself. As we hope we have demonstrated, this idea, and its associated concepts of dominant units, scale, interaction capacity, process, and structure, provide an extraordinarily useful theoretical framework for studying world history. These concepts can produce a "thick" conception of international system that has the potential to provide a rich and distinctive account of world history that captures main features that are missed or obscured by existing approaches. The concept in our toolkit are well suited to the broad-brush approach that world history requires and offers as much as, if not more than, any of the available alternatives".

I have rated it four stars. Considering its content, I think it should be five; considering its readability, two (sometimes falling to one, sometimes raising to three).

P.S. I think that reproducing a Synopsis of this book (that may be found in the web page corresponding to the same book offered by Amazon.co.uk) is worth it: "This text tells the 60,000 year story of how humankind evolved from a scattering of hunter-gatherer bands to highly integrated global international political economy. It traces the evolution of ever-wider economic, societal and military-political international systems, and the interplay between these systems and the tribes, city states, empires, and modern states into which humans have organised themselves. Buzan and Little marry a wide range of mainstream International Relations theories to a world historical perspective. They mount a stinging attack on International Relations as a discipline, arguing that its Eurocentrism, historical narrowness, and theoretical fragmentation have reduced almost to nothing both its cross-disciplinary influence and its ability to think coherently about either the past or the future. Seeking to emulate and challenge the cross-disciplinary influence of the world systems model, the book recasts the study of International Relations into a macro-historical perspective, shows how its core concepts work across time, and sets out a new theoretical agenda and a new intellectual role for the discipline".

10 of 10 people found the following review helpful.

A highly structured world history from an IR point of view

By Mette Skak

I have used this book several times when teaching at my university in Denmark with stunning success among the students. Nowadays young people lack knowledge about history - some times they don't know much about the most basic of issues - but many of them are quite aware of their shortcomings and for students of political science with some training in theories of international relations (=IR) this book really gives them a highly organized, coherent view of historical development.

One caveat: This is not a book for beginners! The authors are political scientists both notoriously strong on issues of theory, not historians, and their reasoning correspondingly abstract, at times dry as a bone to read.

Nevertheless, following the thorough introduction to the methodology and approach of the book - the English school beefed up with economics and other issue-areas placed into a most structured, Buzantine (ha,ha) analytical framework - the book does offer a sweeping empirical world history, dividing history into three basic eras: prehistory, antiquity and modernity. The core concept of the book is that of international system which the authors claim is of relevance beyond political science. Indeed, they want the other social

sciences including history itself to embrace this concept as the mother-concept of all social science macroanalysis. Even if they may fail to convince scholars outside the IR community I personally consider the book one of the most important macroanalytical works on international relations - a diachronic perspective on all of empirical IR. It deals a heavy blow to Eurocentric, ahistorical neorealism although it has a very Waltzian systemic outlook.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

One of the most compelling books I've ever read about IR theory

By Aaron P. Jackson

I finally finished reading this book a few weeks ago, and I wanted to write a quick review because it is one of the most compelling books I've ever read about international relations (IR) theory. Over the course of the book, Buzan and Little attempt, quite successfully, to conduct a study of international systems throughout the course of world history. They achieve this success for two reasons. First, they have divided the past 60,000 or so into three distinct eras, enabling them to present a compelling *longue durée* history from an international systems perspective. These eras are pre-international systems (approximately 60,000 BC to 3500 BC), multiple interlinked international systems in the ancient and classical era (approximately 3,500 BC to 1,500 BCE) and a global international system in the modern era (1,500 BCE to present).

Second, and arguably more importantly, Buzan and Little devote a great amount of space (110 of the book's 417 pages of text) to developing a theoretical model that enables their subsequent analysis of each era to be conducted with a great deal of insight and clarity despite the long timeframe examined. This theoretical model is three-tier. The first tier, levels of analysis, is common to several branches of IR theory and will be familiar to most who have studied in this field. Buzan and Little use a fairly standard set of levels (system, sub-system, unit, sub-unit, and individual). The second tier is sectors of analysis, of which Buzan and Little identify five: military; political; economic; societal (or socio-cultural); and environmental. Finally, the third tier is 'sources of explanation', which includes interaction capacity (what extent of international interaction does physical technology permit?), process (to what extent and in what ways are these technologies used?) and structure (how is the international system organised? Is it weak or strong? How does this shape the behaviour of actors within it?).

In their subsequent discussion of each era of history, Buzan and Little apply this three-tier theoretical framework to successfully analyse a variety of international systems, from the hunter-gather bands of pre-international society, through the empires and city-states of the ancient and classical era, to the global international system of today. Throughout their analysis, Buzan and Little periodically revisit mainstream IR theory, especially neo-realism, critical theory and the 'English school', and highlight the strengths and shortfalls of these approaches when viewed in the context of world history. The overall effect of this analysis is to demonstrate, first, that recognisable international systems have existed for millennia and, second, that the bulk of extant IR theory is woefully inadequate when it comes to explaining the organisation and operation of pre-Westphalian international systems. Indeed, Buzan and Little have presented an excellent critique of the self-imposed intellectual straightjacket that IR theory has placed upon itself, while concurrently offering a possible means to get out of it. It is a pity that since this book was published at the turn of the millennia, it has not received more attention within the IR discipline.

In light of the length of the period they study, Buzan and Little's prognosis for the near future also warrants mention. Towards the end of the book, they examine the nature of the international system at the turn of the 21st century, producing in support of their analysis an excellent diagrammatical representation of the nature of a possible emerging 'post-modern international system' and contrasting this to the Westphalian system that emerged 350 years prior. Unsurprisingly, Buzan and Little highlight the increasing permeability of the state (which nevertheless remains the key unit in the system) and the rise of other units such as transnational

firms and inter-governmental organisations.

More interestingly, however, they posit that for the first time in history the economic sector (and the processes and structures therein) may be set to overtake the military-political sectors as the prime sector within the international system. Although the European Union, which they use as a core example to support their argument, now appears to be declining, the historical scope of their analysis continues to lend weight to their case. In particular, their study has revealed that interaction capacity, structure and process in the economic sector has consistently advanced ahead of political-military developments in each of these areas, even though the military-political sectors have maintained primacy as historically the most important within international systems. Given that the contemporary global international system is 'closed' (i.e. it cannot physically expand into any new territory), future developments are more likely to involve intensification of process and, to a lesser extent, structure. If economic processes and structures continue to evolve ahead of the military-political ones, Buzan and Little's predictions may well materialise, causing the rise of what they describe as a 'neo-medieval' international system.

Overall, however, it is this book's interaction with existing IR theory that had the greatest appeal to me. When I began to study IR as an undergraduate, it was neo-realism that appealed to me the most; however, as a post-graduate (and having a keen love of history) I began to find several situations which did not fit neatly within this paradigm. Although constructivism and the English school appeared to offer some of the answers, they too seemed incomplete. In putting forward an examination based on a linkage of the disciplines of IR theory and world history, Buzan and Little have helped to address several of the lingering issues that I have had with all of these approaches, and for this reason alone I would recommend the book to anyone attempting to grapple with questions about how and why the world works the way it does.

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