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# Barry Buzan's Use of Constructivism to Reconstruct the English School: 'Not All the Way Down'

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Emanuel Adler

Barry Buzan has long been a leading member of the English School. During the last decade he has headed a movement to place the English School at the forefront of IR theory. He has not only helped reorganise and enliven a heterogeneous community of scholars from a variety of countries who proudly identify themselves with this school; in a series of recent articles and books he has also suggested a reformed intellectual blueprint for the School. And in his recent *From International to World Society?* – a book that will be read and discussed by generations of scholars and students – Buzan shows a lot of chutzpah and goes where no other member of the School has gone before: the book offers a 'grand theory' of international politics of the kind we thought was no longer possible. It radically redefines the English School (without, however, abandoning most of its basic assumptions) and makes one of the most successful attempts to date at a synthesis of constructivist and materialist modes of inquiry. If this were not enough, he also plants the seeds of several new IR theories, including the vanguard theory of institutional evolution.

Analysing a book of such scope and depth in a short article cannot do it justice. Hence I will review the book from a constructivist perspective only, concentrating on the symbiotic relationship between Buzan's reformulated English School and constructivism. My thesis is that although by borrowing from constructivist theory Buzan has been able to provide a redefined English school with added explanatory power and interpretive depth, he did not go far enough down the constructivist road to develop the English School to its full potential. That would require, for example, moving from subjective to intersubjective understandings, analysing community and society from an interpretive perspective, adding power and language as central elements of inquiry, taking a much more self-conscious epistemological pragmatist approach, and, after disaggregating the English School's analytical and normative dimensions, putting them back together again. In addition, Buzan's redefined English School will need to perceive constructivism not as a competing American version of the English School but as a general social-theory mode of inquiry, such as rational choice, that all international political theories can profit from, regardless of their national origins.

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Finally, to generate a common language and a shared set of conceptual understandings, we need a sustained and focused dialogue between constructivists and members of the English School.

I begin by suggesting why the insights Buzan borrowed from constructivism improve and refine the English School. I then show where Buzan falls short of using constructivism's full explanatory and interpretive power. Finally, I will briefly discuss how a redefined English School might help promote the further development of a constructivist research program.

### Constructivism's Contribution to Buzan's Redefined English School

The argument of English School scholars that their School preceded and affected the development of constructivism is based on the normative, historical, and 'middle ground' nature of their approach<sup>1</sup>, as well as on its critical inclinations (which are mainly associated with a new generation of English School practitioners).<sup>2</sup> The similarities between the two approaches, however, are more apparent than real. First, unlike the English School, whose roots lie mainly in international politics, constructivism began as interpretive ontology and post-positivist epistemology and only then moved to IR theory. Second, constructivism's mainstream emphasis on normative structures and 'the logic of appropriateness',<sup>3</sup> later beefed up with a 'logic of dialogue',<sup>4</sup> was analytical rather than normative; in other words, it purported to explain why and how norms and dialogue matter, rather than offer critical injunctions about social change. The English School's mode of inquiry, on the other hand, was normative and to a great extent historical. Hedley Bull's hugely influential concept of 'anarchical society', for example, was more in the sociological tradition of power-taming than in that of discursive power.<sup>5</sup> Although he and other members of the English

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1. See for example Tim Dunne, 'The Social Construction of International Society', *European Journal of International Relations* 1, no. 3 (1995): 367–89; and also Emanuel Adler, 'Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics', *European Journal of International Relations* 3, no. 3 (1997): 319–63.

2. For example, Tim Dunne and Nicholas J. Wheeler, "'We the Peoples': Contending Discourses of Security in Human Rights Theory and Practice', *International Relations* 18, no. 1 (2004): 9–23.

3. James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, 'The Institutional Dynamics of International Political Orders', *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998): 943–69.

4. Thomas Risse, "'Let's Argue!' Communicative Action in World Politics', *International Organization* 54, no. 1 (2000): 1–40.

5. Bull, *Anarchical Society*.

School, such as Martin Wight and R. J. Vincent, saw very far, their approaches had little to do with the construction of social facts by socially constructed knowledge<sup>6</sup> and language.

Buzan realised constructivism's added-value. While remaining faithful to the core principles of the English School, he decided to build on a social definition of structure. He probably thought that this move, in addition to helping position the English School as a global research tradition (mainly because it would be more amenable to American social science), would also be able to explain how and why norms tame power and why international society may evolve toward world society.

Buzan's most significant move was to draw on Alexander Wendt.<sup>7</sup> The similarities between Wendt's three cultures – Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian – and the English School's three traditions – Hobbesian, Grotian, and Kantian – are obvious. Less apparent, however, is that Wendt's cultures are neither normative positions in a spectrum nor 'cultures' in a general sense, but social structures that constitute the identities and interests of states. Moreover, they are based on ideas, but 'not all the way down'; the material world also counts. Seizing on this idea allowed Buzan to take a social approach to structures and a structural approach to society and to turn the English School into a more 'scientific' approach, while remaining deeply committed to values, norms, and institutions.

The result was a focus on several types of second-order societies, defined as organised collectivities; the classic English School's normative classification of international system, international society, and world societies (corresponding roughly to the Hobbesian, Grotian, and Kantian worlds) was replaced by an improved *structural* trilogy of inter-state, inter-human, and transnational societies, which Buzan distinguished according to the type of actors composing them. Defining society from an analytical/structural perspective allowed Buzan to do three things. First, he was able to transcend a normative conception of world society as representing the becoming of a Kantian cosmopolitan community, thereby making analytical room for non-liberal world societies. Second, by arguing, on constructivist grounds, that the distinction between material systems and social systems does not make much analytical sense, Buzan could replace the English School's classic distinction between international system and international society with a dyad of international and world society. Third, Buzan used Wendt's

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6. Stefano Guzzini, 'A Reconstruction of Constructivism in International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations* 6, no. 2 (2000): 147–82.

7. In particular Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

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notion that all types of social structures can be internalised via coercion, calculation, and belief, thus relegating the distinction between society and community to the depth of internalisation of social relationships. Finally, the social-structural move allowed Buzan to improve on Wendt by systemically theorising both state and non-state actors.

Constructivism also came in handy when Buzan turned to revising the English School's distinction between pluralist societies and solidarist societies. If one accepts the argument that all of international relations is social, that 'enemies' is just as much a social structure as 'rivals' or 'friends', then the term 'interstate society' covers a wide spectrum of phenomena ranging from Hobbesian social structures on one end, to Kantian on the other. In this perspective the debate about pluralism and solidarism can be seen largely as a debate about types of interstate society, with pluralism representing a Westphalian model, and solidarism covering a swath of the spectrum from 'pluralism-plus' through Kantianism to the fringes of federation.<sup>8</sup>

This move allowed Buzan to take a hard look at the type of values shared. This is important because the construction of social reality depends on socially constructed knowledge. He was thus able to separate the notion of solidarism from liberalism and embed it in other types of collective understandings, such as religion. Moreover, tying solidarism to social thickness led Buzan to highlight the need to inquire how values enter into the construction of social homogeneity at the regional and global levels, as in 'pluralistic security communities'<sup>9</sup> and the evolution of the European Union (EU), and into the social construction of cultural heterogeneity, as in Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations'<sup>10</sup> and post-9/11 IR.

Next, Buzan's construal of 'primary institutions' exemplifies how he used constructivist materials on top of English School concepts. Wight, Bull and others have referred to the 'institutions of international society' (Bull's language) – such as balance of power, international law, diplomacy, great powers, and war – as one of the English School's most important concepts. But this concept was not well defined and was insufficiently theorised. Buzan realised (with some help from John Searle and John Ruggie's notion of constitutive and regulative norms and from Christian Reus-Smit's notion of institutions hierarchically

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8. Buzan, *FIWS?*, 140.

9. Ibid. For a constructivist interpretation of security communities, see Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, eds., *Security Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

10. Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

arranged according to their constitutive importance)<sup>11</sup> that what primary institutions have in common is that not only do they stand in hierarchical relation to 'secondary' institutions, such as 'international regimes',<sup>12</sup> they are also 'constitutive of actors and their patterns of legitimate activity in relation to each other'.<sup>13</sup> In other words, primary institutions construct the actors and the rules of the game, thus helping to constitute not only inter-state but also inter-human and transnational societies. Hence a research program on primary institutions should consist primarily of a study of their social construction and evolution.

With the help of constructivism, Buzan has also brought geography and regionalism back in the study of international and world society, thus injecting some optimism into the classic English School. If international society and world society can also be found at the regional level (e.g., 'the West' and the EU, respectively), their realisation becomes more likely. This move helped Buzan locate the study of Europe's social construction in the English School and ask important questions about social space; about the overlap, congruity, or incongruity between global societies and regional societies, and also, therefore, about the social construction of cultural homogeneity via coercion, self-interest, and identity. Approaching these questions with the help of Christopher Weller's notion that conflicts are more likely to be prevented when patterns of identity and rational contractual relations coincide geographically<sup>14</sup> enabled Buzan to pinpoint one of the most important political questions of our time: whether the expansion of 'the West' toward the Muslim world will be challenged by a disruption in the inter-human domain (for example, via market mechanisms), or, alternatively, will encourage changes of inter-human identity in the Muslim world, leading to coexistence, co-operation, and, perhaps later, cultural convergence.

Once Buzan connected the dots between the incongruity among societies at the global and regional levels and institutionalisation, the road was paved to a 'vanguard' theory of international society in which,

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11. John G. Ruggie, 'What Makes the World Hang Together? Neo-Utilitarianism and the Social Constructivist Challenge', *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998): 855–86; and Christian Reus-Smit, 'The Constitutional Structure of International Society and the Nature of Fundamental Institutions', *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (1997): 555–89.

12. Stephen D. Krasner, ed., *International Regimes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983).

13. Buzan, *FIWS?*, 167.

14. Christopher Weller, 'Collective Identities in World Society', in *Civilizing World Politics: Society and Community Beyond the State*, eds. Mathias Albert, Lothar Brock and Klaus Dieter Wolf (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 45–68.

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as with the banning of slavery, global social structures evolve, inside out, from local sub-system beginnings. This idea resonates with my own understanding of institutionalisation, which is based on ‘cognitive evolution’<sup>15</sup> – a collective learning process that consists in the expansion in time and space of the background knowledge that constitutes practices – and, thus, also in the expansion of ‘communities of practice’<sup>16</sup> – the material representation of background knowledge in like-minded groups of individuals who practice the same practice. A sustained dialogue between the English School and constructivism about the evolution of international and global society and systems of governance may produce important theoretical pay-offs.

### **Buzan’s New English School and Constructivism: The Missing Links**

This section aims less to offer a laundry list of constructivist themes overlooked by Buzan than to show how a reworked understanding of community or an emphasis on productive and institutional power could help strengthen the English School’s interpretive and explanatory power as well as promote synthesis in IR theory.

#### *Society and Community*

By approaching society and community as the combined subjective experience of collective actors, rather than as intersubjective knowledge, Buzan falls short of getting at the full potential of social structures. As webs of meanings sustained by social communication, intersubjective structures constitute the content and boundaries of identities, practices, and institutions. Without individuals’ minds, of course, there would be no intersubjective webs of significance; but without these webs, minds would be nearly empty and there would be no institutions. Even in inter-human societies, it is the social frame of collective meanings that matters most for individuals’ competence and intentional actions and organises them into epistemic communities, social movements, terrorist networks, and world religions. Had Buzan taken social structures as intersubjective knowledge he could have studied social thickness as a consequence not only of the depth of the internalisation of norms in the minds of individuals, but also of the institutionalisation and diffusion of intersubjective knowledge across national and societal borders. It would

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15. Emanuel Adler, *Communitarian International Relations: The Epistemic Foundations of International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2005).

16. Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

also have enabled Buzan to explore the role of social communication, discourses, and social mechanisms (such as learning and socialisation) in the social construction of intersubjectivity and thus in the evolution of societies and communities. Finally, he might have discovered that the mechanism that makes it possible for global society to evolve from a 'vanguard' is not ideas that jump from mind to mind, but expanding intersubjective knowledge that takes root in peoples' minds.

In addition, had Buzan approached society and community as intersubjective, he might have discovered that societies do not necessarily exhibit 'thin' or contractual relationships. For example, it is precisely social relationships based on self-interest that exhibit the deepest internalisation of intersubjective ideas. In this case, ideas are so institutionalised and taken for granted that people may be unaware of their existence. He might also have discovered that communities are not necessarily characterised by 'thick' social relationships, whether based on internalised ideas, tradition, or affection.<sup>17</sup> To see this we need to understand that communities are social spaces and fabrics of relationships through which individuals acquire their practical knowledge of self and others and also – via social communication, discourse, or practice – purchase their understanding of reasonableness and morality in given circumstances.<sup>18</sup> Thus, while ethnic and national communities are usually at the thick end of the social spectrum, 'epistemic communities', 'Internet communities', 'communities of discourse', and 'communities of practice' are usually at the thin end. Society and community are differentiated primarily by the function played by intersubjective knowledge in the constitution of social relationships. Societies are based on intersubjective understandings that constitute the association and organisation of actors. Communities, on the other hand, are based on intersubjective ideas that constitute not only actors' understanding of self and others, but also their practical reason and moral behaviour.

### *Agency*

Buzan's adoption of Wendt's notion of social structure is important; like Wendt, however, Buzan partly overlooked structure's inseparable twin, agency. It is precisely because of the (old and new) English School's

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17. Buzan also might have discovered that he uses two different definitions of society – both social structures made of differentiated types of collective actors and 'thin' social relationships.

18. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).



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emphasis on history that a solid conceptualisation of the role of agents in societal evolution is required. What, for example, turns a regional 'vanguard' into a global social structure, if not agents? While Buzan stopped short of developing a theory of societal agency, however, he nonetheless lays the foundations for shifting the agency debate from the ontological status of states and individuals to the different combinations of agents that are involved in the evolution of societies and institutions in particular historical and cultural contexts. Theorising agency, therefore, may involve dealing with the weight that some kinds of agencies have vis-à-vis others in particular circumstances.

### *Where is Power?*

As soon as Buzan collapses the international system into international and world societies, conceived as social structures, power disappears. Material power almost vanishes as a conceptualisation of structure, while social structure carries no alternative conceptualisation of power. The only traces of power in Buzan's theory are found in the mechanisms of coercion through which values and norms are internalised. Power should enter a social theory of international politics, however, not only as material and institutional resources, but also as dominant normative understandings and discourses that help build subjectivity,<sup>19</sup> institutionalise practices, and construct and transform social structures. A striking example is the EU's 'normative power',<sup>20</sup> which is based on the ability to create social homogeneity around a set of normative injunctions. More specifically, power enters as epistemic authority, the ability to socially construct dominant understandings and discourses<sup>21</sup> – for example, about the legitimate

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19. Emanuel Adler and Steven Bernstein, 'Knowledge in Power: The Epistemic Construction of Global Governance', in *Power in Global Governance*, eds. Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 294–318; Stefano Guzzini, 'The Concept of Power: A Constructivist Perspective', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 33, no. 3 (2005): 495–521; and Anna Holzscheiter, 'Discourse as Capability: Non-State Actors' Capital in Global Governance', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 33, no. 3 (2005): 723–46.

20. Ian Manners, 'Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40, no. 2 (2002): 235–58; and Thomas Diez, 'Constructing the Self and Changing Others: Reconsidering "Normative Power Europe"', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 33, no. 3 (2005): 613–36.

21. Anna Leander, 'The Power to Construct International Society: On the Significance of Private Military Companies', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 33, no. 3 (2005): 803–26.

use of force.<sup>22</sup> Power also enters as the control exerted by institutions from afar through the determination of the explicit and tacit rules of the game.<sup>23</sup> And, as Janice Bially Mattern has shown, power also enters in the discursive ability of agents, in time of crisis, to force other agents to change for the sake of restoring their mutual 'we-feeling'.<sup>24</sup> I can summarise my argument about power by mentioning one of Buzan's favourite illustrations, the confrontation between 'the West' and 'Islam' after 9/11. Whether the West creates a common culture with the Muslim world, or at least a thin coexistence, or explodes in a 'clash of civilisations' will depend not only on how and why values and norms are internalised (and certainly not on coercion). Rather, it will depend on the skilful use of social power for the sake of changing not only 'the other', but also oneself.

### *Regions are Socially Constructed*

Bringing in geography and regionalism helps Buzan deepen our understanding of the intricate relations between community and society and between the different types of international societies. By taking territorial space and regions as almost synonymous, however, Buzan overlooks the notion that regions such as Europe rely for their definition not only on geography, but increasingly on collective identity. This means that understanding international societal dynamics requires transcending a static view of geography as the background of changing norms and adopting a dynamic view of both geography and values. Avoiding regional violent conflict, for example, may depend less on the fit between contractual and identity relations in a static geographical space than on the construction of geographical spaces as security communities. In recent years, this understanding has given birth to a communitarian practice of region-building, including the EU's attempts to stabilise its 'near abroad' with a 'Neighbourhood' policy and the heroic but probably futile American attempts to construct the 'Greater Middle East' as a democratic region.

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22. Corneliu Bjola, 'Legitimizing the Use of Force in International Politics: A Communicative Action Perspective', *European Journal of International Relations* 11, no. 2 (2005): 266-303.

23. Barnett and Duvall, *Power in Global Governance*.

24. Janice Bially Mattern, 'The Power Politics of Identity', *European Journal of International Relations* 7, no. 3 (2001): 349-97; and 'Why "Soft Power" Isn't So Soft: Representational Force and the Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 33, no. 3 (2005): 583-612.

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### Territorial and Non-Territorial Spaces

Buzan is right that to be able to transcend a purely normative understanding of international society and realise how deeply antagonistic and yet interdependent territorial and non-territorial spaces are, we need to analytically separate territorial (state) and non-territorial (non-state) spaces.<sup>25</sup> Then, however, we must put territorial and non-territorial spaces together again, if only because what Buzan calls non-territorial spaces are in fact both social and territorial. Transnational networks, for example, are made of individuals who represent a variety of state and non-state actors.<sup>26</sup> Communities of practice – such as transnational human-rights communities and international arms-control communities – are grounded in physical places and are thus territorial. Their territoriality does not match that of states; but like states, they hold epistemic authority over the physical spaces they happen to influence. For example, global environmentalists help socially construct national and transnational territory as environmental safe havens, while those involved in global trade play a role in socially constructing territory as tax havens.

### *Positivism*

By characterising positivism as the antithesis of normative theory and as synonymous with systematic research, and defining its aims as 'finding sets of analytical constructs with which to describe and theorise about what goes on in the world',<sup>27</sup> Buzan can claim that his theory is positivist. But is it? First, not all non-normative arguments are positivist; they also can be based on scientific-realist or pragmatist philosophies of science. Second, positivism does not hold a monopoly on systematic research. Research based on either of the latter two philosophical approaches can produce an analysis that is just as systematic, if not more so, than positivism can. Third, both positivist and non-positivist theorists construct artificial worlds; even though they disagree whether the world can be known in unvarnished ways, they still try to make sense of the 'stuff' out there. Scientific realists search for material and social mechanisms that can explain social causality or constitution. Pragmatists use reason and empirical evidence to arrive at consensual understandings about intersubjective phenomena.

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25. Buzan, *FIWS?*, 88-89.

26. Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

27. Buzan, *FIWS?*, 12, 14.

Finding no traces of positivism in Buzan's theory, recognising his emphasis on construction, aware that construction is also consistent with scientific realism and pragmatism, and cognisant of Buzan's efforts to seek consensus through persuasion, rather than through laws, I conclude that Buzan's theory is closer to a pragmatist mode of inquiry than he would probably like to admit. The fact that we can explore many of Buzan's theoretical arguments empirically, with the help of contingent hypotheses, reinforces my argument.

### *Analytical and Normative IR Theory*

Ignoring the normative dimension, which was historically central to the English School, for conceptual and explanatory reasons, as Buzan did, seems too high a price to pay for firmly placing the English School on purely analytical grounds. Thus, arguing that an IR theoretical synthesis must bridge not only between constructivism and rationalism, but also between analytical and normative IR theory, I claim that Buzan's theory will be strengthened if, after methodically distinguishing analytical from normative IR theory, he reintroduces critical and normative features. Once we bring in norms, normative arguments follow uninvited. Fearon and Wendt, referring to the socially constructed nature of agents or subjects, and especially the notion that 'one cannot be a certain kind of subject . . . unless others in the society make it possible', argue that whether agents or structures are the starting point is not merely an epistemological question but 'ultimately a political question of whether society can be normatively grounded on the liberal conception of the individual as some kind of natural baseline'.<sup>28</sup> Steven Bernstein and I, in turn, show that studying the nature of changes in knowledge, values, and material power, which can help bring about better practices and a fairer global governance system,<sup>29</sup> combines analytical and normative theory in ways that promote systematic and synthetic analysis. The synthesis I am driving at would help root analytical IR theory in political theory and provide normative IR theory with ontological and epistemological tools for arguing why normative futures are not only desirable, but also achievable.

### **Buzan's Potential Contribution to Constructivism**

In recent years, constructivism has taken important steps toward understanding the social and ideational factors that enter into the

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28. James Fearon and Alexander Wendt, 'Rationalism vs. Constructivism: A Skeptical View', in *Handbook of International Relations*, eds. Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth A. Simmons (London: Sage, 2002), 57.

29. Adler and Bernstein, 'Knowledge in Power'.

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construction of international and transnational relations.<sup>30</sup> Constructivism, however, lacks a theory of politics of the kind behind Realist and Liberal paradigms. *From International to World Society?* can contribute a few significant insights about how to turn constructivism into a paradigm of international *politics*. First, constructivists should embed social theoretical analysis in the quality of politics and the nature of values that can be conducive to peaceful change and human welfare and rights. For example, Buzan's argument that our theories of the evolution of international society should allow for non-liberal political philosophies and voices may promote political and normative dialogue across socially reified cultures and thus help us avoid social constructions about a 'Clash of Civilisations'. Second, his insights about primary institutions are important in their own right and should be pursued further. But they may also help modernist constructivism, which is mainly concerned with analytical issues, study the design of new primary institutions with the help of normative insights, for example, about human security. Third, Buzan's theory raises important issues about the role of geography in the evolution of society and community, which constructivists may use to study the evolution of global governance 'best' practices and institutions. Fourth, constructivism should borrow more consistently from the distinctive historical inclination of the (old and new) English School and turn it into an investigation of how past, present, and future are socially constructed. Finally, all of the above requires a sustained and institutionalised dialogue between the two traditions, which should aim at the development of a comprehensive synthesis of analytical and normative IR theory.

*Emanuel Adler is the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Professor of Israeli Studies at the University of Toronto*

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30. See, for example, Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).