

*"Violence and Social Orders:
A Conceptual Framework for Recorded Human History"*

by Douglass North, John Wallis
and, Barry Weingast

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Regarding its subtitle, "A Conceptual Framework for Recorded Human History", North, Wallis, and Weingast's *Violence and Social Orders*, aims high as it unearths a timeless model for the evolution of human societies. The authors ultimately identify a universal mechanism for the formation (and evolution) of societies, namely the need to resolve the endemic tendency of humans to compete for power through violent means. Using a wide sample of geographic histories and nuanced analysis, they have succeeded in creating a seminal contribution to state-building and development theory.

Reaching from pre-Neolithic times to the present, *Violence and Social Orders* identifies three main forms of social organization. The first, which logically receives limited attention, is the *foraging order*, a basic arrangement of personal relationships amongst powerful individuals in an agrarian society. In sequence, they identify the *natural order*, a series of impersonalized relationships falling under dominant coalitions that dictate access to power and violence. The third system is the *open access order*, a stable, adaptive, and democratic society characterized by institutional mitigation of the personal risk inherent in market and social participation. Ultimately, *open access societies* address violent tendencies of competing dominant coalitions by replacing them with fair political competition, shared market gains, and incentives for turnover in political leadership. Central to such societies are perpetually-lived institutions (the modern corporation, for example) and repeated impersonal interactions that enable efficiency and wealth generation.

Underneath this general typology is the engaging analysis of the mechanism(s) by which a society advances through the three social orders. At the center of their thesis is the link between participatory markets and political systems as ample incentives to deter violent dissent or competition. As they draw on detailed historical case studies of (as contextually divergent as the Aztec and Holy Roman Empire), the historical precedent for their theory gains ground.

In order to explain why dominant coalitions of elites in the *natural order* would ultimately cede power to the public in a democratic transition to an *open access order*, three "Door Step Conditions" are developed. In brief, they are: the rule of law for the elite, organizations (public and private) that have a life "beyond the life of its individual members", and consolidated control of the military. Each, typically arising in succession, represents a functional underpinning that gives elites sufficient guarantee that sacrificing political, economic, and violent power in the natural state will yield another (even greater) power. While these conditions may foster *open access* and participation, the authors do well to distinguish several examples of states that satisfied all three conditions but failed to advance or eventually reverted to a *natural order*. In explaining these counter-examples the necessary self-reinforcing mechanisms of open access orders are manifest; namely, the institutionalization of open access and the subsequent fear of instability should an elite or elite coalition break with the evolving open access system.

This analysis is particularly poignant in the context of Western Europe and North America, where most *open access orders* are today. The greatest test of this theoretical framework then lies in explaining which states develop and which are left behind. North, Wallis, and Weingast present the explanation that intellectual enlightenment brought about the institutionalization of open access, and that open access institutions changed the social contract in these societies. Furthermore, they argue that the geographically localized nature of the Enlightenment led to a similarly localized jump towards *open access* societies.

Whereas the most of the authors' analysis is fortified by their ability to bring together otherwise competing theories of social change, this critical theme may have been tempered by the inclusion of globalization theory. In general, the authors tend to observe *natural orders* as operating on a level playing field before the appropriate triggers carry them to a threshold of

evolution. This would suggest that societies have equal opportunities to evolve to *limited access orders*. Prior to the evolution of the first limited, then open orders, this is logically concordant, as international trade and relations only became relevant after limited access orders and “perpetually lived” institutions proliferated.

Given the authors’ emphasis on the role of perpetual organizations, *Violence and Social Orders* appears primed to discuss the one of chief catalysts of early global powers, the joint-stock company (and later modern corporation.) In the century leading up to social development in the West, the extraction of food commodities and natural resources from far-away colonies required financing beyond what many monarchies and oligarchies were willing to or able to finance. Thus the joint stock company—arguably the first modern incarnation of a perpetual organization—became this bridge, allowing entrepreneurs to participate in wealth-generating activities and encouraging repeated impersonal transactions. The normalization of commerce via corporate charter further reduced the risk of investment and incentivized institutionalized economic power, rather than violent power¹. This example of institutional innovation provides a central example of how the “transition proper” to *open access society* was in part a global process.

In a more modern context, globalization not only aided the West in reaching development thresholds, but also often has influenced political and social life in African, Asian, and Latin American societies. This includes trade policy and regulations that some argue subject countries to the economic will of more influential open access states². A more benevolent dimension of global power includes conflict intervention, which, at face value may amplify the effect of the authors’ mechanisms by further incentivizing non-violent, institutional power.

While the overall argument of the authors’ articulates well with much of contemporary state-building literature, it seems developing points on globalization and global power may have provided a more forward-looking disposition to balance their erudite analysis of the previous

millennia. While discussing these themes risks bringing the book closer to ongoing normative debates, it may have furthered the universality of the authors’ conclusions.

In sum, *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History* remains a most useful unified review of many classic social evolution theories. Broad historical analysis and exceptionally accessible diction make the poignant model and pointed insights a necessary inclusion in state-building and social development bibliographies.

1- Robertson’s *The Three Waves of Globalization* (2003) offers a more in-depth analysis of the interaction of conquest and commerce as means of growth and security in the pre-industrial era.

2- *Industrial Convergence, Globalization, and the Persistence of the North-South Divide*. Studies in Comparative International Development (Spring 2003).