

## Book Reviews

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

Douglass C. North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry R. Weingast. 2009. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN: 978-0-521-76173-4, \$30.00.

*Reviewed by Robert Whaples, Wake Forest University*

As you probably suspect from the subtitle, this is not a modest book. The authors—Nobel-laureate economic historian Douglass North, University of Maryland economic historian John Wallis, and Stanford University political scientist Barry Weingast—want to reorient the way we think about the political and economic structure of society. Rather than offer a formal, testable model, they develop a conceptual framework to explain the logic of traditional “limited access” social orders and modern “open access” orders—as well as the historical dynamic that sometimes leads societies from one to the other. The book is full of profound insights. Reading it will probably change the way you think about some important issues. Because most readers will already have an intuitive grasp of the open access orders in which most of us live, the book’s primary accomplishment is to illuminate the logic of limited access orders.

*Violence and Social Orders* divides all of human history into three social orders. First came the foraging order of small social groups, characteristic of hunter-gatherer societies—about which the volume has little to say. About ten millennia ago the limited access order or “natural state” arose. Limited access orders are characterized by 1) slow-growing economies vulnerable to negative shocks, 2) polities without generalized consent of the governed, 3) relatively small numbers of organizations, 4) small, centralized governments, and 5) a predominance of social relationships organized along personal lines, including privileges, social hierarchies, laws that are enforced unequally, insecure property rights, and a pervasive sense that not all individuals were created equal or are equal. A couple centuries ago, in places like Britain, France, and the United States, open access orders emerged. Open access orders are characterized by 1) political and economic development, 2) economies that rarely experience negative economic growth, 3) rich and vibrant civil societies with lots of organizations, 4) bigger, more decentralized governments, and 5) widespread impersonal social relationships, including the rule of law, secure property rights, fairness and equality—all aspects of treating everyone the same.

North, Wallis and Weingast (NWW) argue that understanding how societies deal with violence is fundamental to understanding how

they click. Because of scarce resources, competition is ubiquitous and individuals always have the option of competing for resources or status through violence. No society solves the problem of organized violence by eliminating it—at best, it can be contained and managed. In order for one violence specialist to stop fighting, he must perceive that it is in the others' interests not to fight, an expectation that specialists must share about each other. Thus, in limited access societies elites agree to respect each other's privileges when they know that violence will reduce their own rents. Mobilizing rents, in turn, requires specialists in other activities. Each of the nonmilitary elites either controls or enjoys privileged access to a vital function like religion, production, community allocation of resources, justice, trade, or education. Among the most valuable sources of elite rents is the privilege of forming organizations that the state will support. The incentives embedded in these organizations produce a "double balance"—a correspondence between the distribution and organization of violence potential and political power on the one hand, and the distribution and organization of economic power on the other hand. Peace depends on the balance of interests created by the rent-creation process.

The authors argue that limited access states can be stable, but never static, because no dominant coalition is permanent. Human mortality, mistakes by leaders and coalition members as well as external, unpredictable changes in prices, climate, technology, and neighbors mean that the elite coalition will change—and this will periodically require a renegotiation of the distribution of privileges and rents within the dominant coalition, as well as changes in the membership of the coalition. Thus, the state cannot be modeled as a single actor. Upward mobility within a limited access order usually occurs through channels of patronage networks. From the viewpoint of modern open access societies, patron-client networks appear inherently corrupt. Access to political and economic power is limited because rents will be dissipated if the elite coalition gets too big. Thus these orders limit access to organizational forms—including those in education and religion—and control trade. Only organizations with direct connections to the state are durable. Because of this, religious organization must become as much a part of the state as military organizations. In natural states, economics is politics by other means; economic and political systems are closely enmeshed, along with religious, military, and educational systems. Organizations span the boundary of public and private, personal and social.

In open access orders, by contrast, control of government is contestable and is subject to clear and well-understood rules, including prohibition on the use of violence. Economists generally take today's open access—freedom of entry into market—as a given and explore its consequence without providing an explanation of why and how the political system defines property rights, enforces contracts, and creates the rule of

law necessary for markets. Open economic access cannot be viewed as autonomous, however. Economic competition requires political competition, which requires economic competition—the “double balance.” Open access orders have these five characteristics: 1) a widely held set of beliefs about the inclusion of and equality for all citizens, 2) entry into economic, political, religious, and educational activities without restraint, 3) support for organizational forms in each activity that is open to all (for example, contract enforcement), 4) rule of law enforced impartially for all citizens, and 5) impersonal exchange (which greatly expands economic opportunities, allowing for economies of scale).

NWW laud open access orders as adaptive and uniquely capable of solving seemingly intractable problems by altering policies in ways that accommodate both sides. One example given is that the United States “solved four major crises in the nineteenth century with pacts: the Compromises of 1820, 1833, 1850, and 1877” (p. 135). Oddly, this leaves out the major failure that punctuates this series (the Civil War) and ignores the fact that the last of these compromises involved limiting political access (and inevitably economic access) by a major subset of the population—African-Americans. They downplay fears that open-access democratic political orders can stifle economic efficiency by rampant redistribution. Democracies’ redistributive programs are generally “not mere transfers of income with deadweight losses, but are public goods that generate positive economic returns” (p. 143). They argue that social welfare policies tend to “cushion market dislocations” inducing workers to make firm- and industry-specific investments that have payoffs for both workers and firms. In other words, national health insurance, in which everyone else pays for my cancer treatment, cushions me from a “market dislocation,” making me more willing to invest in human capital despite ever steeper marginal tax rates, and Social Security gets me to work smarter and not retire so soon? This sounds naïve and somewhat partisan to me. Their faith in open access orders to solve intractable political policy problems will raise suspicions on both the right and the left. Thomas Friedman’s frustration with democratic nations’ inability to do something meaningful about global climate change in *Hot, Flat, and Crowded* (2008) leads him to muse about being “China for a day”—dispensing with democratic, interest-group gridlock and forcing his favorite solution on society. Unfortunately, NWW have virtually nothing to say about historical or contemporary China—or the rest of Asia. Their evidence is confined almost entirely to the European world.

Perhaps I should not make too much of the volume’s grandiose subtitle, but it may be useful to consider alternative frameworks that attempt to explain all of human history. Karl Marx attempted a similar task, but history has not been kind to his model of the world. Do Christians have

an alternative conceptual framework? I think we do—although we may disagree among ourselves on some of the details—but the conceptual framework focuses primarily on other aspects of human history like the Fall, covenants God has made with man, the birth, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the descent of the Holy Spirit, the foundation of the Church, and how these things have affected mankind. What do these two frameworks have to say to each other? In general, they talk past each other because the NWW framework (indeed almost all of modern history and social science) sees little or no reason to address the tenets of Christianity. It provides a few insights into the most mundane of these items—the history of the Church—primarily emphasizing that natural states *require* religious organizations to be part of the political-economic-military-religious-educational power structure. NWW do not seem to countenance the possibility that religion ever has much of an independent role or that it could explain why the Christian West was the place where political freedoms and economic prosperity first flourished. This part of their story seems to have big holes—e.g., early Christianity grew for centuries despite opposition in the Roman Empire and it and other religions have flourished in opposition to tyrannical power in modern closed access societies such as Soviet-run Poland. Their message when it comes to the practice of historical religious organizations seems to be “do not expect anything from religion and do not ‘blame’ religious leaders for becoming ‘corrupt’, because ‘corruption’ had a different definition than it does today.” Tell that to the prophets in the Old Testament who set forth poignant denunciations of biased judges and oppressive rulers.

Finally, one might raise the question of whether or not today’s open access orders really are less violent than limited access societies. In the United States, an open access order, about one in four babies die a violent death, since about one in four pregnancies ends in abortion. This rate grossly exceeds all of the historical probabilities of violent trauma reported in one of NWW’s appendices. One way of interpreting this is that, in fact, ours is not an open access order. We close access to life itself for those whose very existence might threaten members of the dominant coalition. Fetuses have no political power. Why, then, do non-voting newborns have political rights? This is an important issue to consider in a framework for understanding “violence and social order,” but to understand it I think we need to somehow bring together religious frameworks with the not-so-all-encompassing frameworks of social scientists.

### **References**

- Friedman, T.L.** (2008). *Hot, flat, and crowded: Why we need a green revolution, and how it can renew America*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux ■