that the outside world should tolerate China's orderly elite consensus as a step toward maturing its natural state and preparing the doorstep conditions for a transition to an open-access system. On the other hand, it implies that economic growth will be unsustainable unless the Chinese elites agree sooner or later to step across that threshold. North, Wallis, and Weingast have thus given us valuable tools for thinking about some of the most important issues of our own day, as well as the rest of "recorded human history."

Notes

1 Posen 1993.
2 See the debate summarized in Carothers 2007 and continued in the July 2007 issue of the *Journal of Democracy.*

References

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Caroline Hartzell

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This is an ambitious and thought-provoking study that seeks to account for the marked differences in economic and political development that have emerged among two groups of societies. Drawing on a wealth of anthropological, historical, and other forms of evidence, Douglass North, John Wallis, and Barry Weingast distinguish between *natural states,* or limited-access orders, the type of social order that appeared some five to 10 millennia ago, and *open-access societies,* the social order that emerged in a handful of countries some 200 years ago. Natural states, maintain the authors, privilege some elites with the ability to establish organizations, while open-access societies permit all citizens to join and leave organizations at will. It is because the more fluid social arrangements characteristic of open-access orders foster competition and allow those societies to respond more flexibly to changing conditions, they argue, that those countries have become more stable and wealthier than natural states in which rent creation and limits on competition hinder economic and political development.

What explains why some societies limit and others open access to organizations? The answer lies in the different means that societies have used to confront what the authors consider the central problem facing all societies—limiting and controlling violence. Natural states constrain violence by providing powerful individuals and groups with incentives to refrain from using or threatening to use force. These incentives take the form of access to rents and the ability to form organizations that limit access to valuable resources to members of the dominant coalition. Because elite rents will shrink if violence breaks out, members of the dominant coalition have an incentive to commit to one another to limit violence. The control of violence in open-access societies occurs through the threat of punishment by a state that possesses a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. In these societies, political actors are constrained from using the security forces to coerce others by the ability of other actors to use easily accessed organizations to compete for political control.

Violence and Social Orders joins a number of other prominent scholarly works that have sought to link processes of political and economic development to efforts to manage violence. North, Wallis, and Weingast contribute to this literature by conceiving of states as "organizations of organizations" (p. 31). Rather than depicting the state as a single actor, as have others, they characterize it as an entity in which powerful elites—the leaders, variously, of military,

Caroline Hartzell is professor of political science and Director of the Globalization Studies program at Gettysburg College.

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political, economic, and religious organizations—constitute multiple sources of power. Balance is maintained and conflict is limited among these actors through their personal relationships, access to special privileges, and their dispersed control of violence. It is because power, violence, and coercion are distributed in this manner within natural states that we see such a close interrelationship between economics and politics in limited-access orders. It is only when conditions that enable elites to develop impersonal social relationships arise in a natural state that the transition to an open-access order, in which the political and economic systems emerge as distinct spheres of activity, becomes possible. These conditions, which the authors refer to as the "doorstep conditions," include rule of law for elites, perpetually lived organizations in the public and private spheres, and consolidated control of the military. The doorstep conditions materialize, according to North, Wallis, and Weingast, when some elites come to believe that adopting more impersonal relations make them better off without threatening the stability of the dominant coalition. When does this occur? Unfortunately, they do not offer clear guidelines to help the reader identify this critical moment in the development of social orders.

Because the need to limit and control violence figures prominently in their conceptual framework, it is surprising that the authors devote little attention to the nature of violence. This constitutes a significant omission from their conceptual framework if there is a relationship between different types of violence and the rise of distinct social orders. They do not make clear, for example, whether efforts to limit organized violence within societies (civil war) lead to different patterns of development than do efforts to control violence between or among societies or states (interstate war). The experiences of Latin American countries suggest that this distinction matters. Interstate war has been rare in Latin America and, when it has occurred, has been limited in nature. One consequence of this relative absence of war, argues Miguel Angel Centeno, has been to limit the need to develop state institutions to manage the conduct of war.[1] As North, Wallis, and Weingast's discussion of Britain's development of a system for provisioning its navy during the 1758 blockade of France makes clear, this institution, developed during an interstate war, proved important for the emergence of consolidated control of the military in Britain, one of the doorstep conditions necessary for that country to have made the transition from a natural state to an open-access society.

Does this imply that societies that have not engaged in extensive interstate violence are less likely to develop the doorstep conditions necessary to make the transition from one type of social order to the other? Would participation in interstate wars today produce the same types of institutional effects in an international system that has been transformed by the presence of superpowers, United Nations peacekeeping troops, and a variety of transnational actors? Investigation of these issues could provide further insight into the circumstances that give rise to different social orders.

Should we consider the limited number of societies that have become open-access orders to have reached the apotheosis of political and economic development? North, Wallis, and Weingast are careful to avoid making such a claim; indeed, they note that "most societies move backwards and forwards with respect to political and economic development" (p. 12). Nevertheless, their conceptual framework does appear to suggest that open-access orders may constitute the organizational equivalent of the "end of history." One oft-stated reason for the resilience of open-access orders is their ability to cope with change over the long run better than do natural states. Decentralized decision makers in economic and political organizations enjoy a greater degree of adaptive efficiency, maintain the authors, than do elites wary of innovations that may threat rent creation. Recent efforts by the United States Treasury to stave off the collapse of the financial sector through the rapid design and implementation of the Troubled Asset Relief Program certainly constitute one piece of empirical evidence in support of this claim. On the other hand, the massive stimulus package that China announced in the wake of the global financial crisis suggests that at least some natural states may be quite as capable of adapting to global shocks and other sources of change as are open-access orders.

More troubling is the authors' assertion that open-access orders are characterized by "an equilibrium set of politically active groups," some of which "form in opposition to systematic attempts to dismantle an open access order through privilege and rent-creation" (p. 141). This notion of balance among groups suggests a world of self-enforcing institutions impervious to any challenge from within society. How well does this accord with empirical reality? Examples such as the recent changes in tax laws in the United States that have contributed to increased income inequality indicate that groups are affected differently by the rules and policies in force in open-access societies. The growing gap in resources between haves and have-nots in this country and the implications this has for different groups' ability and willingness to act politically to protect their interests does not mesh neatly with the authors' description of groups easily able to mobilize in response to a threat to their interests. Open-access orders may well prove stable, but that is more likely to be because they generate defenders with a stake in the existing order and weaken opponents than because myriad organized groups constantly and reflexively act to balance and check one another.[2]

Despite its limitations, *Violence and Social Orders* is a book worth grappling with for those interested in issues of conflict, development, and democracy. The book's emphasis on the logic of natural states serves as an important

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corrective to contemporary accounts that focus on disorder and anarchy as the dominant forces in natural states. Before seeking to transplant institutions devised in open-access orders to natural states, as the international community has been prone to do, we would do well to understand the mechanisms that natural states have developed for providing order and stability. Natural states function as they do for sound reasons. This book goes a long way toward helping us understand what those reasons are and the consequences that follow from them.

Notes

1 Centeno 2002.
2 See Lake n.d. for a discussion of the process by which individuals and groups "vest" themselves in a particular social order.

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Jean Bethke Elshtain

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When I first cracked the pages of this ambitious book it was with a sense of trepidation. In George Eliot's masterwork, *Middlemarch*, the desiccated scholar Causuban spends his entire life composing a towering—and never complete—theory of everything existing. Was this to be a social science version of the hapless Causuban's project? I was soon relieved on that score. The book is nothing if not ambitious, but the authors' goal is merely to account for all social and political phenomena since recorded history. A breathtaking aim, that, but at least it is not everything. How well do they do in establishing this new conceptual framework?

There are many virtues to this work. It is clearly and crisply written. The authors are forthright about their guiding assumptions. They take up some unusual topics for a work of social science, offering, for example, a smart, serious consideration of the medieval church with its extraordinarily complex structure of law and authority. There is a gap here that means they cannot claim comprehensiveness for this account, however, as they do not discuss in any detail the regnant medieval theory—the "two swords" doctrine—that held there were two legitimate swords, one "secular" (as we might say), the other sacred. The challenge, then, was to figure out who had effective authority over whom and what. There was ambiguity in all of this that is ignored in the book's discussion (more in the following). Still: they pay attention where very few do and that is all to the good. There are other such moments as well.

Violence and Social Orders must be assessed, finally, not on whether it incorporates phenomena social scientists often ignore but on its conceptual framework and whether one finds it compelling or not. The power of the book's argument hinges on whether one is persuaded that all of human history can be encapsulated in three states or conditions of rule: the natural state, the limited-access order, and the open-access order. Douglass North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry Weingast do not argue that all states everywhere transition through these phases at the same time—clearly an impossibility—but, rather, that these are identifiable stages in all societies known to us historically. The conceptual framework is laid out in the first chapter. The historic transitions are covered in subsequent chapters, as the authors unpack the logic of social orders, from millennia in the natural state to orders that emerged at the beginning of the nineteenth century, from limited- to open-access orders. It is the internal logic of orders that interests

Jean Bethke Elshtain is the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Professor of Social and Political Ethics in the Divinity School; also in the Department of Political Science and the Committee on International Relations, at the University of Chicago.

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