VIOLENCE AND SOCIAL ORDERS

All societies must deal with the possibility of violence, and they do so in different ways. This book integrates the problem of violence into a larger social science and historical framework, showing how economic and political behavior are closely linked. Most societies, which we call natural states, limit violence by political manipulation of the economy to create privileged interests. These privileges limit the use of violence by powerful individuals, but doing so hinders both economic and political development. In contrast, modern societies create open access to economic and political organizations, fostering political and economic competition. The book provides a framework for understanding the two types of social orders, why open access societies are both politically and economically more developed, and how some twenty-five countries have made the transition between the two types.

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This book is dedicated to our wives Elisabeth, Ellen, and Susie
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Every explanation of large-scale social change contains a theory of economics, a theory of politics, and a theory of social behavior. Sometimes, as in the materialist theory of Marx, the theories are explicit. Often, however, they are implicit, and even more often theories of economics and politics are independent. Despite a great deal of attention and effort, social science has not come to grips with how economic and political development are connected either in history or in the modern world. The absence of a workable integrated theory of economics and politics reflects the lack of systematic thinking about the central problem of violence in human societies. How societies solve the ubiquitous threat of violence shapes and constrains the forms that human interaction can take, including the form of political and economic systems.

This book lays out a set of concepts that show how societies have used the control of political, economic, religious, and educational activities to limit and contain violence over the last ten thousand years. In most societies, political, economic, religious, and military powers are created through institutions that structure human organizations and relationships. These institutions simultaneously give individuals control over resources and social functions and, by doing so, limit the use of violence by shaping the incentives faced by individuals and groups who have access to violence. We call these patterns of social organization social orders. Our aim is to understand how social orders structure social interactions.

The conceptual framework articulates the internal logic of the two social orders that dominate the modern world and the process by which societies make the transition from one social order to another (the original social order preceding these was the foraging order characteristic of hunter–gatherer societies). After sketching out the conceptual framework in the
first chapter, we consider the logic of the social order that appeared five to ten millennia ago: the natural state. Natural states use the political system to regulate economic competition and create economic rents; the rents order social relations, control violence, and establish social cooperation. The natural state transformed human history; indeed, the first natural states developed new technologies that resulted in the beginnings of recorded human history. Most of the world still lives in natural states today.

Next we consider the logic of the social order that emerged in a few societies at the beginning of the nineteenth century: the open access society. As with the appearance of natural states, open access societies transformed human history in a fundamental way. Perhaps 25 countries and 15 percent of the world’s population live in open access societies today; the other 175 countries and 85 percent live in natural states. Open access societies regulate economic and political competition in a way that uses the entry and competition to order social relations. The third task of the book is to explain how societies make the transition from natural states to open access societies.

We develop a conceptual framework, not a formal or analytical theory. Our desire was to write a book that is accessible to social scientists and historians of many types. The three social orders identify three distinct patterns in human history. We show how the second and third social orders are structured, why they work the way they do, and the logic underlying the transition from one social order to another. We do not present a formal model that generates explicit empirical tests or deterministic predictions about social change. Instead, we propose a conceptual framework that incorporates explicitly endogenous patterns of social, economic, political, military, religious, and educational behavior. The challenge is to explain how durable and predictable social institutions deal with an ever-changing, unpredictable, and novel world within a framework consistent with the dynamic forces of social change. There is no teleology built into the framework: it is a dynamic explanation of social change, not of social progress.

We interlace historical illustrations with the conceptual discussion to provide enough evidence that these patterns actually exist in the world. In the case of the transition from natural states to open access societies, we show that the forces we identify can be retrieved from the existing historical record. We are not writing a history of the world. The history provides examples and illumination rather than conclusive tests of our ideas. The examples range from the Neolithic revolution to Republican and Imperial Rome to Aztec Mesoamerica to the Middle Ages to the present. Some specialists in the times and places we study will argue that we have
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lifted these examples out of context, and we have. However, our intention is to put these examples in a new context, to provide a new framework for interpreting the course of human history over the past ten thousand years, and to open new ways of thinking about the pressing problems of political and economic development facing the world today.
Although this has been a collaborative effort from the very beginning, John Wallis’s role deserves special mention. He wrote the first draft and rode herd on the project as it evolved through many subsequent drafts. This project benefited from the input, support, and comments of a great many people and institutions, and it is a pleasure to acknowledge our debts.

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