THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
CHASE CENTER FOR CIVICS, CULTURE, AND SOCIETY

History in the Shadow of Violence

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August 14, 2025

[1]The Ohio State University

"In the infancey of society, as has been often observed, government must be weak and feeble, and it is long before it's authority can protect the industry of individuals from the rapacity of their neighbours. When people find themselves every moment in danger of being robbed of all they possess, they have no motive to be industrious. There could be little accumulation of stock, because the indolent, which would be the greatest number, would live upon the industrious, and spend whatever they produced. Nothing can be more an obstacle to the progress of opulence."

Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, p. 522

Various development traps

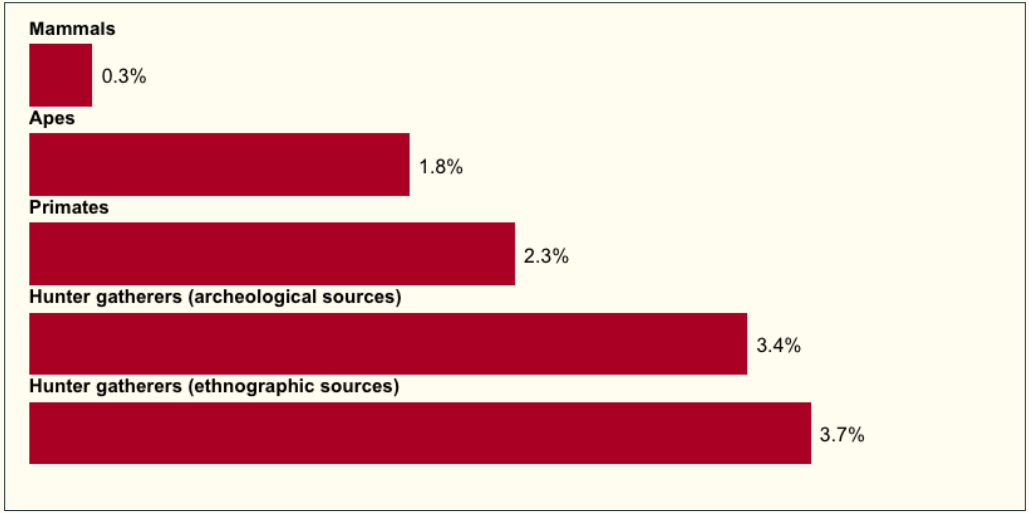
- **Development Trap**: Self-reinforcing mechanisms that prevent countries from embarking on the path of stable development and achieving sustainable economic growth.
- Most economists will point to problems posed by increasing returns to scale.
- But why do developing countries fail to adopt the institutions and policies that promote development?

Various development traps

- **Development Trap**: Self-reinforcing mechanisms that prevent countries from embarking on the path of stable development and achieving sustainable economic growth.
- Most economists will point to problems posed by increasing returns to scale.
- But why do developing countries fail to adopt the institutions and policies that promote development?
- Some political poverty traps:
  1. Persistent internal violence (Collier 2007)
  2. Short time horizon of leaders Leaders have a shorter time (Besley and Persson 2011)
  3. Reforms reduce the probability that the incumbents will stay in office North (North 1981, Acemoglu and Robinson 2006)
  4. The sovereign/elites face credible commitment problems North and Weingast 1989, Acemoglu 2003)
  5. The beneficiaries of the reforms are either unorganized or unknown, and thus cannot lobby for them. (Fernandez and Rodrik 1991)

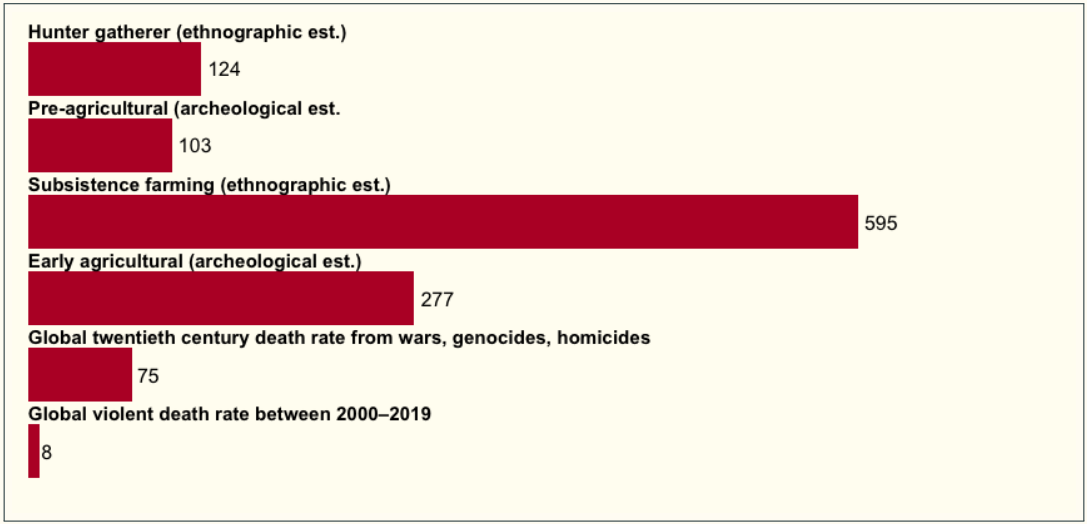
The Problem of Violence

Share of deaths from violence between members of the same species



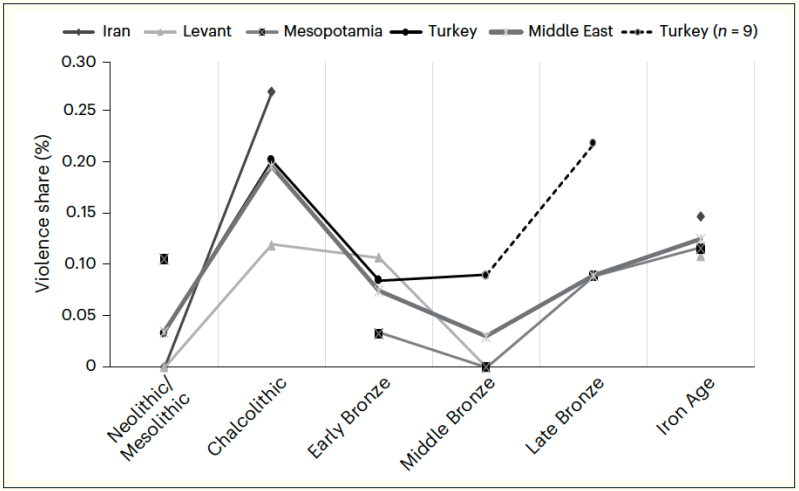
Source: Halstead and Thomson (2025).

Annual rate of violent deaths per 100,000 people



Source: Halstead and Thomson (2025).

Trends in violent trauma in the ancient near east

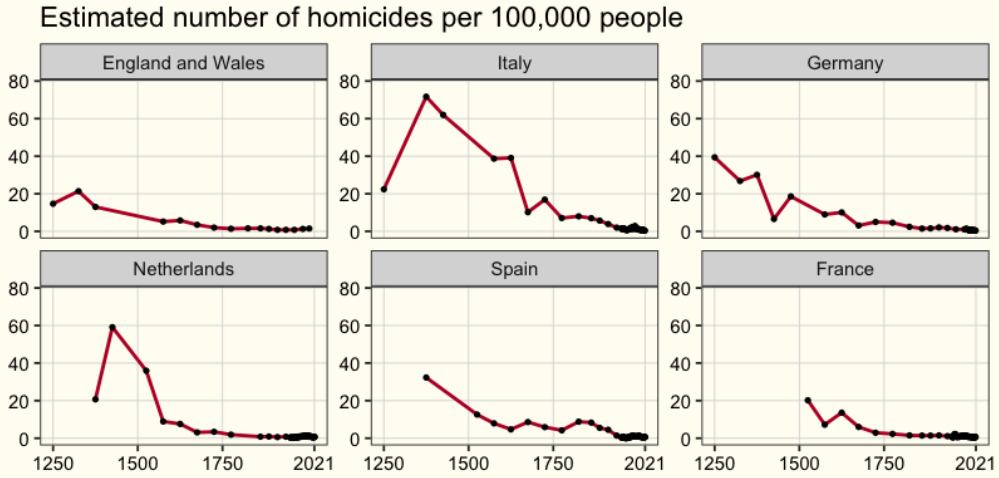


Periods (all B.C.):

Neo & Mesolithic, 12,000–4,500
Chalcolithic, 4,500–3,300
Early Bronze, 3,300–2,000
Middle Bronze, 2,000–1,550
Late Bronze, 1,550–1,200
Iron, 1,200–400

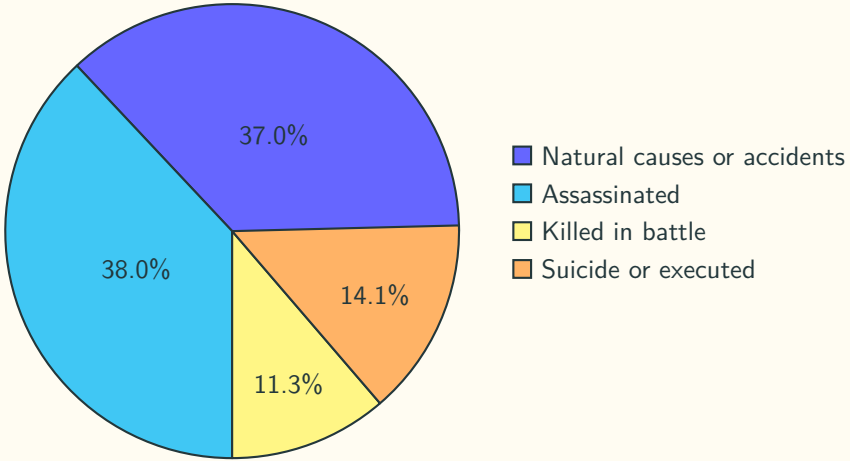
Source: Baten, Giacomo, and Arkadiusz Sołtysiak (2023).

Historical rates of homicide in Europe



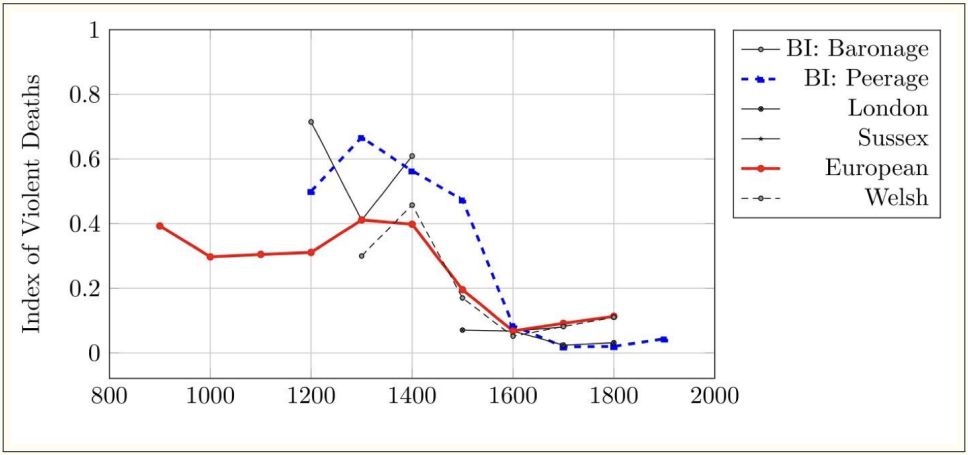
Source: Eisner (2014); WHO Mortality Database (2022).

Methods of Death of Roman Emperors (AD 14 - 395)



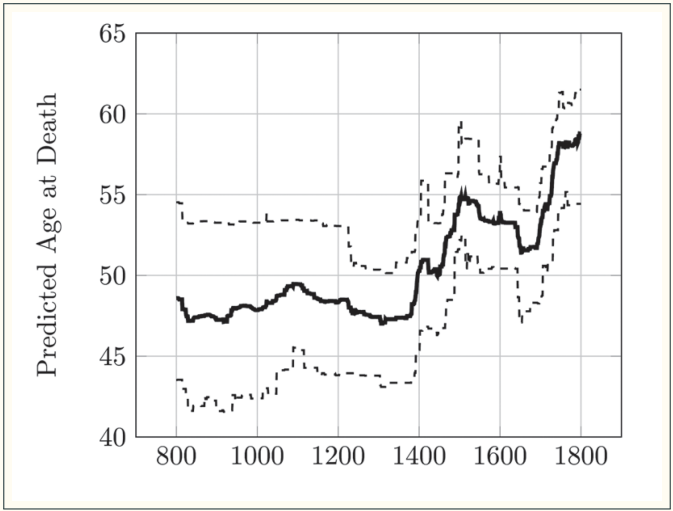
Source: Data collected from Wikipedia's *List of Roman Emperors*

Noble Male Violent Deaths



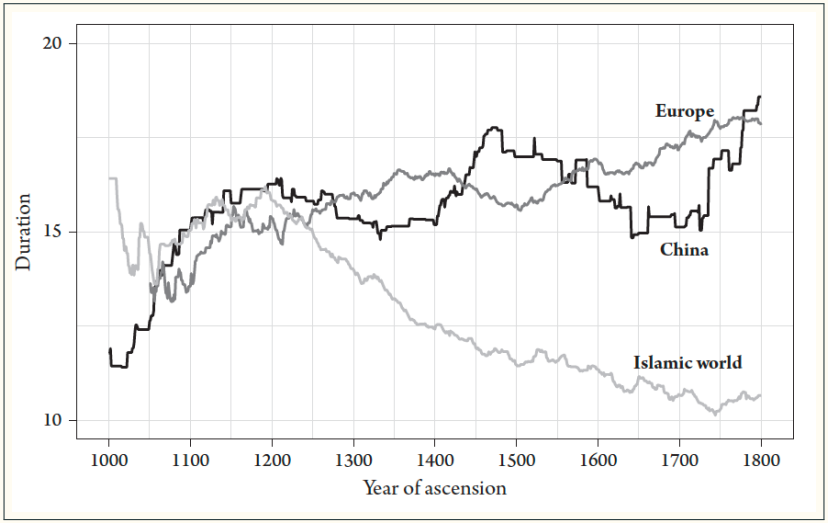
Source: Cummins (2017)

European adult noble longevity



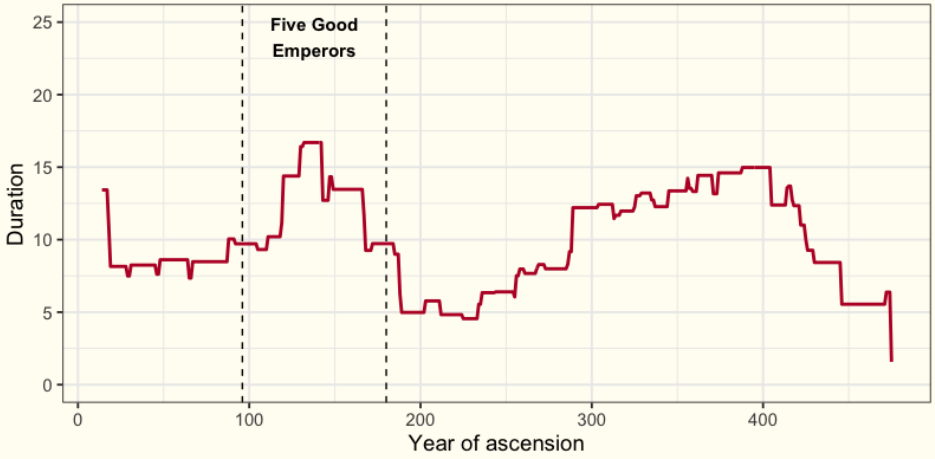
Source: Cummins (2017)

Ruler duration



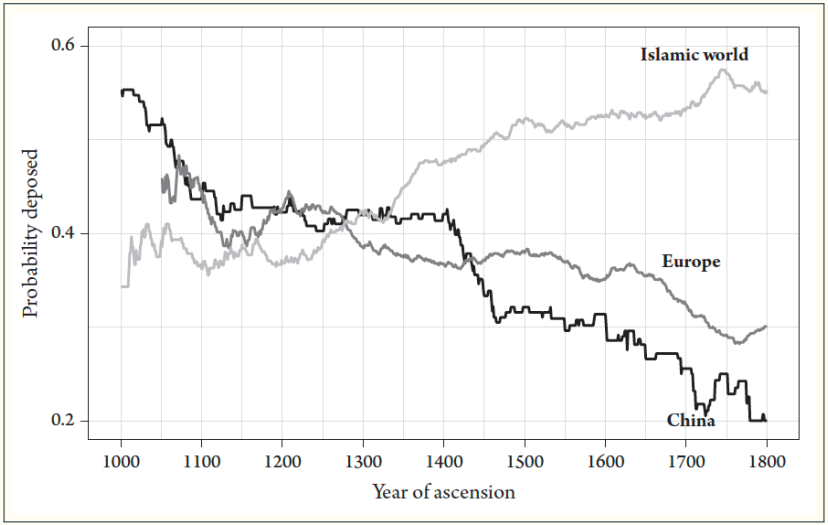
Source: Blaydes and Chaney (2013), Wang (2022)

Ruler duration in the Western Roman Empire



Source: Data collected from Wikipedia's *List of Roman Emperors*

Probability of ruler being deposed



Source: Blaydes and Chaney (2013), Wang (2022)

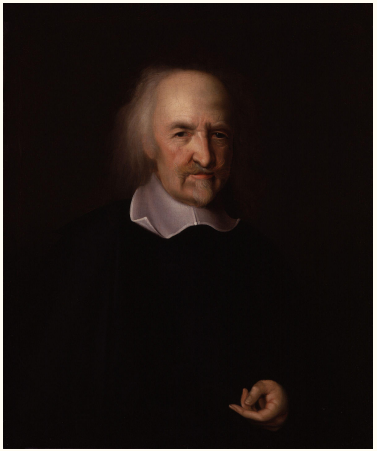
Regime duration since 1840

Percentile	All countries	Below-median GDP pc	75th–90th percentile GDP pc	Top decile GDP pc
10	1	1	2	10
25	3	2	4	34
50	8	7	12.5	60
75	24	17	45.5	88
90	50	34	71	131

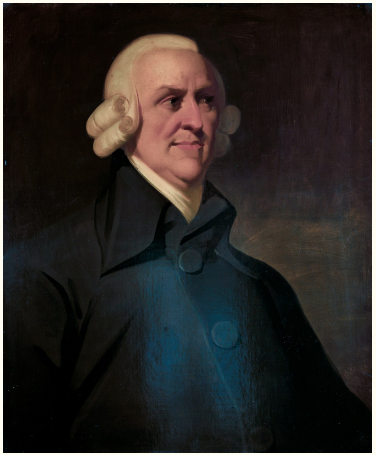
Source: Cox, North, and Weingast (2019). Note: 697 Regimes in 162 countries since 1840

Why can't we just get along?

The Hobbes vs Smith Problem



Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679)
Author of *Leviathan*



Adam Smith (1723-1790)
Author of *The Wealth of Nations*

A Simple Bargaining Model

- Actors know that violence is inefficient (socially, not always personally) and that if a negotiation can be reached without conflict then both parties will be better off.
- The challenge is to understand why negotiations often fail despite this recognition.
- The bargaining situation actors find themselves in is characterized by four features.
  1. The military cost of fighting (exogenous)
  2. The actors' violence potential (endogenous to the current period)
  3. the actors' share of the current regime's spoils (endogenous)
  4. the actors' commitments or actions that they take to reduce their own violence potential (ie. disarmament) or to raise the cost of fighting (ie. taking hostages) (endogenous)

A Simple Bargaining Model

- Players A and B bargain over government rents π.
- Violence capacity V_A and V_B depend on past arms investment.
- If they were to fight, the payoff to A, assuming he is risk-neutral, is:

$$P_A(V_A, V_B) \cdot \pi - c_A$$

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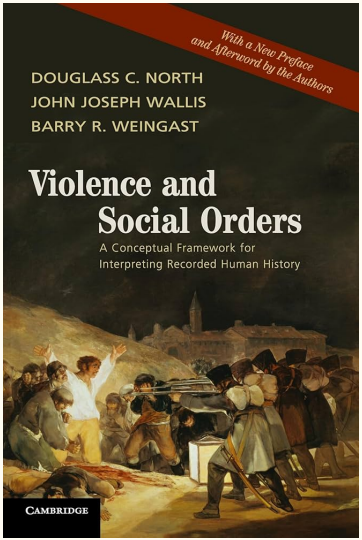
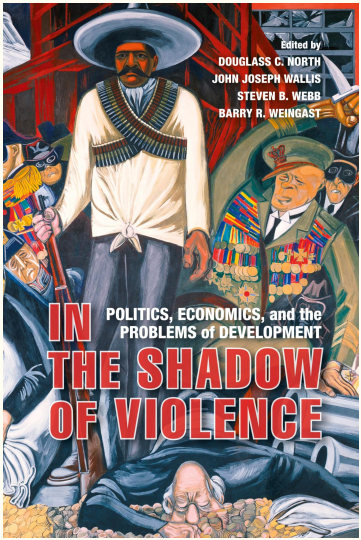
- c_A reflects both the military cost of fighting and the economic costs due to disruptions caused by conflict in A's transactions with all other actors, including B.
- Generalizing beyond 2 players:

$$P_j(V_j, V_{-j})\pi - c_j, \text{ for all } j \in J$$

Mitigating Violence


With a New Preface and Afterword by the Authors
DOUGLASS C. NORTH
JOHN JOSEPH WALLIS
BARRY R. WEINGAST
Violence and Social Orders
A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History
CAMBRIDGE


Edited by
DOUGLASS C. NORTH
JOHN JOSEPH WALLIS
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BARRY R. WEINGAST
IN THE SHADOW OF VIOLENCE
POLITICS, ECONOMICS, and the PROBLEMS of DEVELOPMENT

Social Orders

- Patterns of social organization
- Characterized by the ways that societies:
  - Craft institutions that enable specific forms of organization
  - Limit or open access to those organizations
  - Create incentives through patterns of organization
- These characteristics of social orders are a related to how societies limit and control violence.
- Social orders shape patterns of behavior and beliefs about how people should thus behave.

Two types of social orders

1. The Limited Access Order ("The Natural State")
2. The Open Access Order

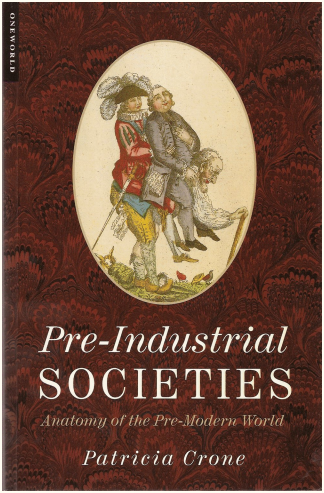
Some characteristics of Limited Access Orders

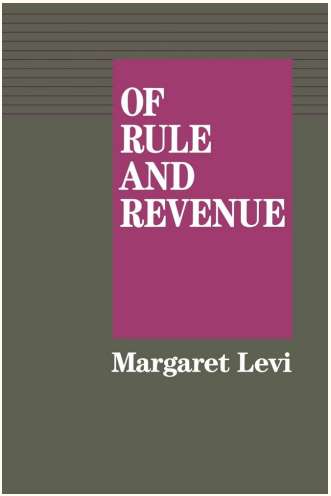
1. Control of violence through elite privileges.
2. Limits on access to trade.
3. Relatively strong property right protection for elites and relatively weak property right protection for non-elites. To the extent a natural state is characterized by the rule of law, it is for elites.
4. Restrictions on entry into and exit from economic, political, religious, educational, and military organizations.
5. Rely on "identity rules" to govern.

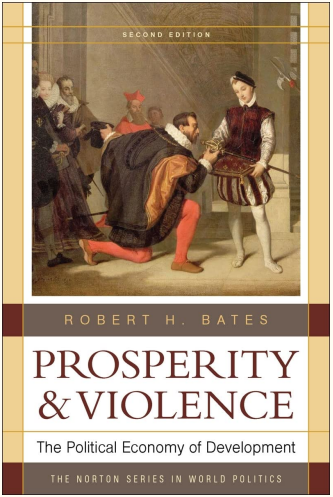
Some characteristics of Open Access Orders

1. A monopoly on the ("legitimate") use of violence in the hands of the state
2. A widely held set of beliefs about the inclusion of and inequality for all citizens.
3. Entry into economic, political, religious, and educational activities without restraint.
4. Support for organizational forms in each activity that is open to all.
5. Rule of law enforced impartially for all citizens
6. Impersonal exchange

The Logic of the Natural State


ONE WORLD
Pre-Industrial
SOCIETIES
Anatomy of the Pre-Modern World
Patricia Crone


OF
RULE
AND
REVENUE
Margaret Levi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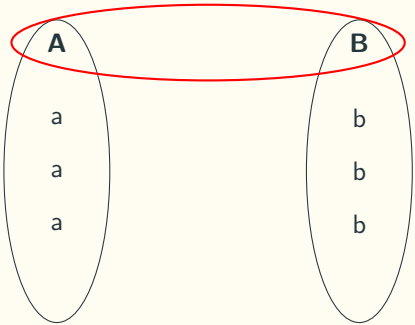
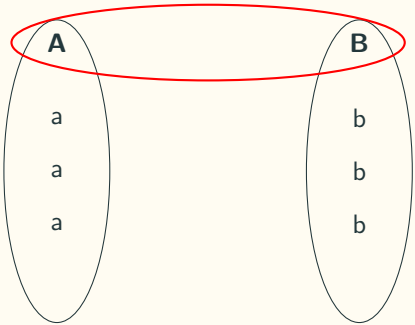
Mitigating the Problem of Violence in LAOs

- LAOs manage violence by forming a dominant coalition that limits access to valuable resources and activities to elite groups.
- Privileges generate rents, and leaders can credibly commit to not fighting or else they lose those rents.
- Elites do *not* disarm.
- The glue that holds the DC together:
  1. Rents and privileges
  2. Limitations on access to the dominant coalition
  3. Personal commitments



Mitigating the Problem of Violence in LAOs

- Members of the DC will be economic, political, and religious elites.
  - In fact, in the LAO those things tend to run together.
- The vertical organizations might be: political parties, ethnic groups, patron-client networks, crime families, etc.



Numbers and incomes of English magnates

Year	Number of magnates	Average income
1086	170 barons	£200
1166	133 barons	£200
1200	160 barons	£200
1300	220 greater barons (196 peers)	£668
1436	73 peers	£881

Source: Turchin and Nefedov (2009); Data from Painter (1943) and Given-Wilson (1987)

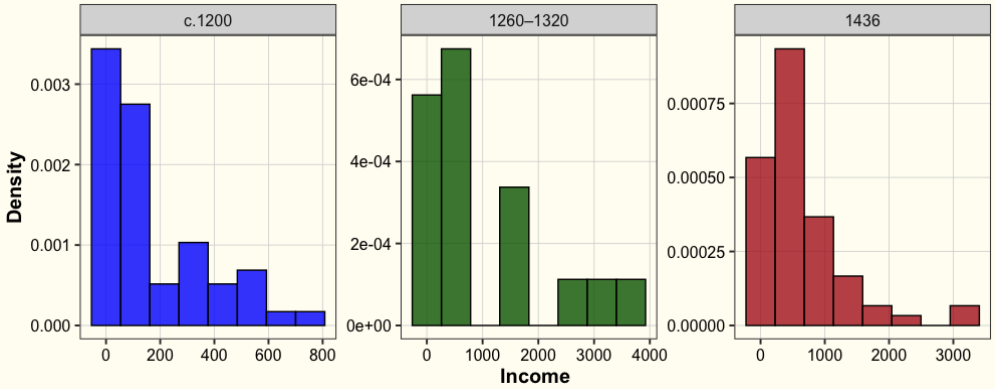
Noble Families in England (14th–15th centuries)

Period	Families at start	New families summoned	Total	Extinctions during period	Extinction rate)
1300–1325	136	60	196	51	26.0%
1325–1350	145	47	192	45	23.4%
1350–1375	147	29	176	50	28.4%
1375–1400	126	17	143	41	28.7%
1400–1425	102	11	113	40	35.4%
1425–1450	73	25	98	25	25.5%
1450–1475	73	22	95	24	25.2%
1475–1500	71	10	81	20	24.7%

Source: Turchin and Nefedov (2009); Data from McFarlane (1973: Appendix B).

Note: Noble families are defined as those whose head received a writ of summons to a parliament after 1295.

The Distribution of English Baronial Income



Source: Painter (1943), Gray (1934)

Rents and Privileges

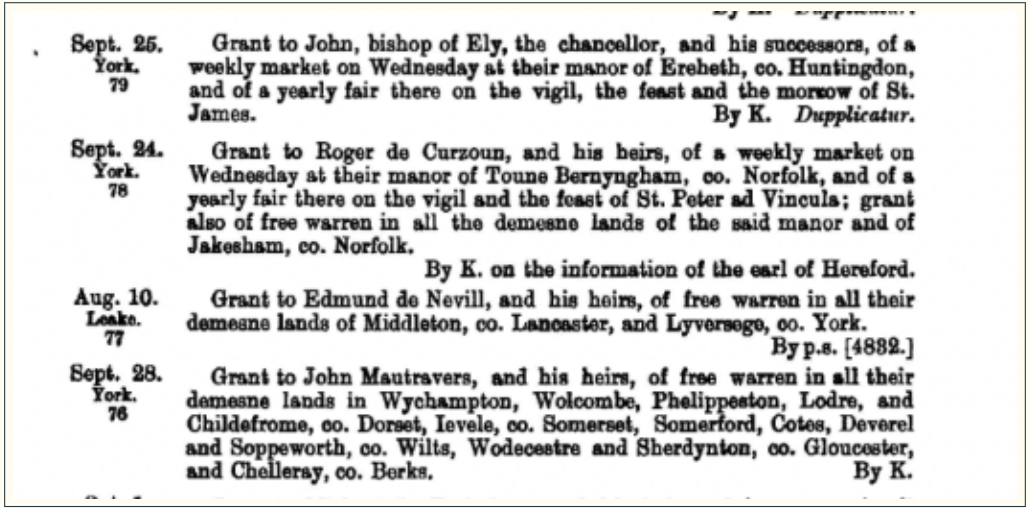
- To maintain peace, rents and privileges must allocated to ensure that potentially violent actors are better off cooperating rather than fighting.
- Proportionality principle: Rents must be allocated roughly proportional to violence potential.
- Peace can only be maintained if:

$$R_j > P_j(V_j, V_{-j})\pi - c_j \text{ for all } j \in J$$

Limits on Access

- LAOs limit access to regime outsiders in joining or forming organizations.
- Organizations allow interest groups to become powerful
- Limiting access creates (monopoly) rents that accrue to members of the DC.
  - Necessary for generating R_j.
- Limiting access prevents the stream of rents from being dissipated by new potential competitors.
  - Impacts R_j, but also ensures the violence potential, V_j of groups outside of the DC remains low.

Limits on Access



Sept. 25. York. 79 — Grant to John, bishop of Ely, the chancellor, and his successors, of a weekly market on Wednesday at their manor of Ereheth, co. Huntingdon, and of a yearly fair there on the vigil, the feast and the morrow of St. James. By K. *Dupplicatur.*

Sept. 24. York. 78 — Grant to Roger de Curzoun, and his heirs, of a weekly market on Wednesday at their manor of Toune Bernyngham, co. Norfolk, and of a yearly fair there on the vigil and the feast of St. Peter ad Vincula; grant also of free warren in all the demesne lands of the said manor and of Jakesham, co. Norfolk. By K. on the information of the earl of Hereford.

Aug. 10. Leake. 77 — Grant to Edmund de Nevill, and his heirs, of free warren in all their demesne lands of Middleton, co. Lancaster, and Lyversege, co. York. By p.s. [4882.]

Sept. 28. York. 76 — Grant to John Mautravers, and his heirs, of free warren in all their demesne lands in Wychampton, Wolcombe, Phelippeston, Lodre, and Childefrome, co. Dorset, Ievele, co. Somerset, Somerford, Cotes, Deverel and Soppeworth, co. Wilts, Wodecestre and Sherdynton, co. Gloucester, and Chelleray, co. Berks. By K.

Source: Calendar of Charter Rolls of Edward II, p. 391

The Problem of Royal Favoritism

Edward II. and his Favourite, Piers Gaveston by Marcus Stone, 1872

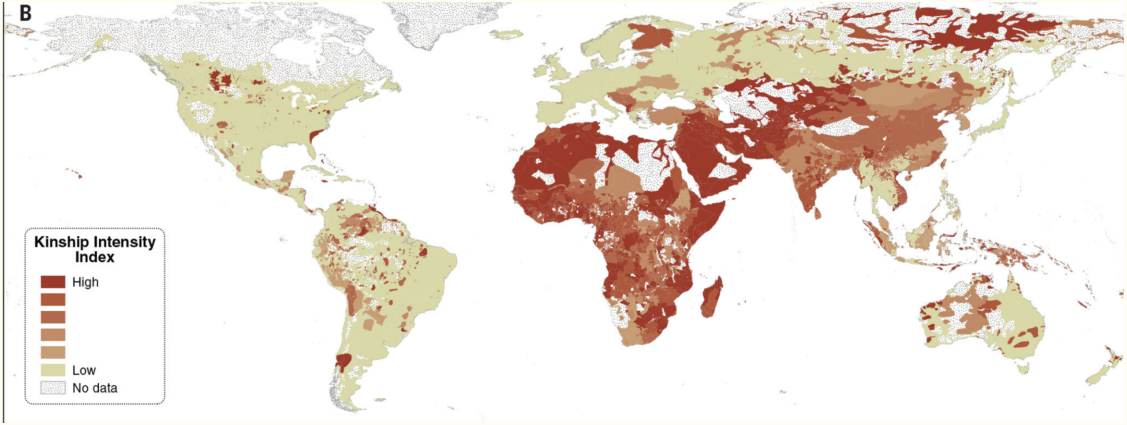
Personal Commitments

- Establishing strong personal commitments:
  1. Raises the cost of violent outbursts (c_j).
  2. Lowers the parties' capabilities of violence (V_j).
- Examples (think "mutual assured destruction"):
  - Hostage exchange (often children) between DC members
  - Intermarrying between rival-DC members
  - Specialization-and-exchange relationships that will be profitable if and only if the factions remain at peace.

In many parts of the world, people live within dense kin networks that are characterised by co-residency of extended families, communal organisation based on descent such as clans and lineages, and norms favouring cousin-marriage practices.

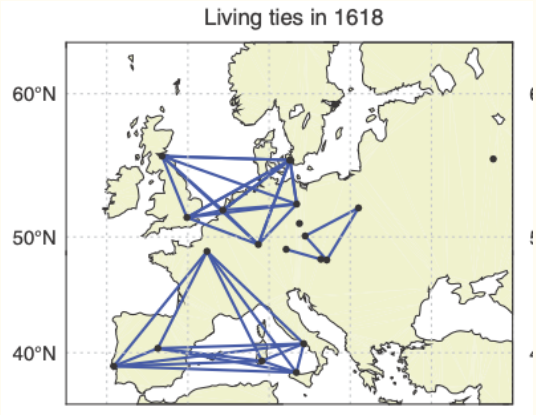
Jonathan Schulz,
Kin Networks and Institutional Development; *Economic Journal*, 2022

Dense kin networks and cousin marriage

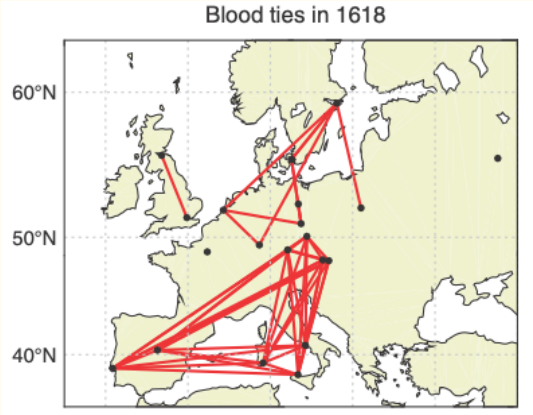


Source: Schulz, Beauchamp, Bahrami-Rad, and Henrich (2019)

A network of thrones



(a) Living ties in 1618



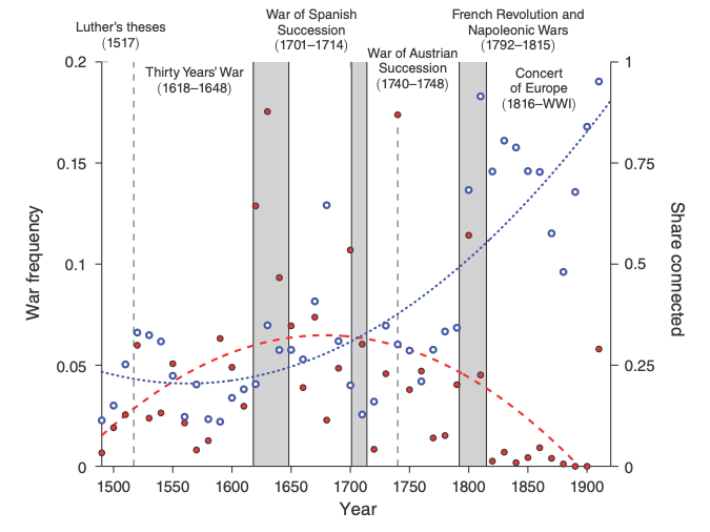
(b) Blood ties in 1618

Source: Benzell and Cooke (2021)

"Let others wage war; you, happy Austria, marry. For what Mars awards to others, Venus gives to thee."

Unofficial Habsburg Motto

Kinship and European conflict



Source: Benzell and Cooke (2021)

"Although marriages may secure peace, they certainly cannot make it perpetual; for as soon as one of the pair dies, the bond of accord is broken . . . "

Desiderius Erasmus, *Education of a Christian Prince*, 1532

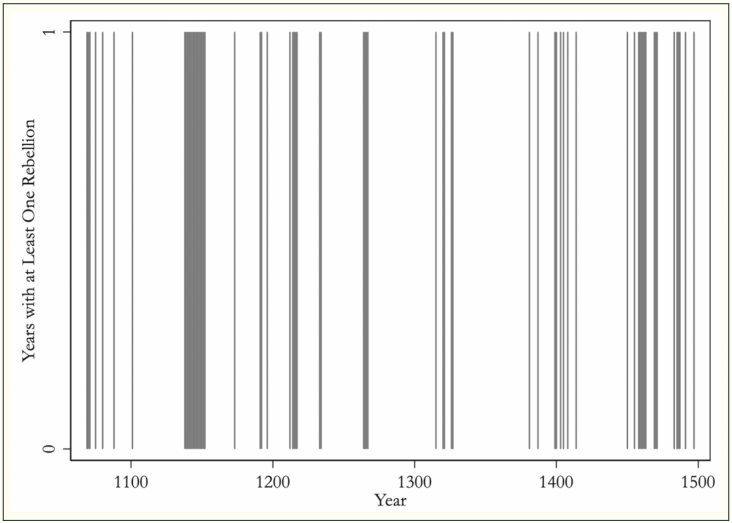
Adaptive Inefficiency

- Exogenous shocks to the economy may alter the violence potential of specialists or change the costs of engaging in violence
- Shocks alter the balance of power so much that the existing distribution of rents and the existing matrix of commitments become inadequate to maintain cooperation and prevent violence.
- As power shifts, maintaining peace requires that natural states adjust the allocation of rents to reflect the new balance of power.
  - Thus, natural states tend to experience cycles of violence.
- But reallocation is difficult and slow.
  1. Information asymmetries concerning violence potential
  2. The glue that held the LAO together is the main inhibitor to adaptation

The glue that held the LAO together makes change difficult.

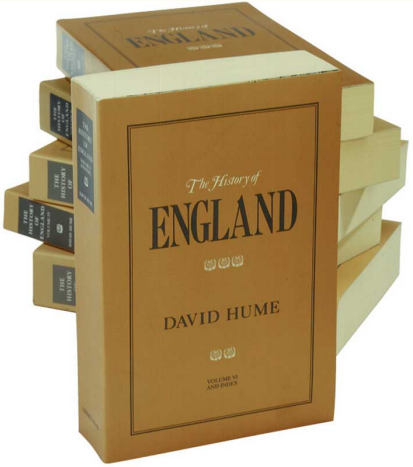
- Rents are often conferred on particular persons by virtue of their violence potentials and are typically not transferable.
- The lack of organizational access makes it difficult for a currently unrepresented group to bargain.
- Commitments are made by bilateral exchanges of hostages or specialized investments in joint economic enterprises; which are difficult to change.

Rebellion in England, 1066-1500



Source: Desierto and Koyama (2024)

David Hume (1711–1776)
Author of *The History of England*



The Violence Trap

- Natural states can always attempt economic and political reform by lowering rents, relaxing limits on access, and fostering impersonal commitments.
  - But they don't. They have no incentive to do so. In fact, it things might turn out worse.
- Opening up access allows new entrants to compete away rents, which may lead to powerful actors to use force to restore their rents and privileges.
- What happens once the oppressed are granted organizational rights? There is a real fear of forced wealth redistributed or violent reprisal.

The Takeaway

The policies that mitigate violence and help maintain some semblance of political stability, choke off long-run economic growth.

The logic of the transition from the LAO to the OAO

- Two obstacles:
  1. The transition must be consistent with the natural state logic.
  2. Why would elites ever permit reform?
- The transition's two stages:
  1. A LAO must develop institutional arrangements that enable elites to create the possibility of impersonal elite relationships.
  2. The transition properly begins when the DC finds it in the interest of elites to expand impersonal exchange with the elite and institutionalize open elite access to organizations.

Conditions for explaining transition to the open access order

1. The institutions, organizations, and behavior of individuals in place at the beginning of the transition must be consistent with behavior in the natural state.
2. The changes in institutions, organizations, and behavior that occur during the transition must be explained as intentional acts consistent with the interests of the dominant coalition, but the results of those changes need not be consistent with their intentions.
3. The transition occurs in historical time through a series of reinforcing changes in institutions, systems, and individual behaviors. Incremental increases in access must be sustained by the existing political and economic systems at each step along the way.

The Doorstep Conditions

1. Rule of Law for elites
2. Perpetually lived organizations in the public and private spheres
3. Consolidated control of the military

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History in the Shadow of Violence

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