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Review of Laust Shouenborg, International Institutions in World History

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Lund, Sweden, August 10, 2017.

Dear reader,

This is a review article which discusses Laust Schouenborg's *International Institutions in World History*, recently published by Routledge. It is to appear in a forum on [The Disorder of Things](#) website. For now it is here on Academia and also [on my own site](#).

happy end of summer & reading,

Erik

Back in Sweden again

A New Language for a New World:
Review of Laust Schouenborg,
International Institutions in World
History

🕒 Wednesday, August 09, 2017 💬 No comments



The basic insight that drives the argument presented in this book is that we need a new way of thinking about international politics which does not privilege European experiences and the idea of a sovereign state. This is required since we need to be able to talk about other parts of the world, about European history before the rise of the

state, and about a future in which the state no longer will be with us. World history, simply put, is not about the state, and it really isn't the case that *der Gang Gottes in der Welt daß der Staat ist*. And people who claim that this is the case — not only Hegel, but all philosophers of history from Adam Ferguson to Walt Whitman Rostow — are simply mistaken. Compare the recently fashionable idea of a “failed state.” To identify a state as having failed is to identify it as not living up to a European standard. It is like saying that a woman is a “failed man.”

Laust Schouenborg's suggestion is to dispense with state-talk in favor of a discussion of political functions. We should stop talking about what political entities *are* and focus instead on what they *do*. Perhaps we could think of this as a move from ontology to practice. We are in Durkheimian territory, in other words, or Talcott Parsonian. The state, says Schouenborg, can be disaggregated into four functions having to do with 1) legitimacy and membership; 2) conflict regulation; 3) trade, and 4) governance.

Since all polities of whichever kind they may be fulfill these basic functions, this, not the state, should be our focus. Instead of a state-centered vocabulary which only allows us to talk sensibly only about Europe, a function-centered vocabulary allows us to talk sensibly about all of world history and everyone everywhere. This taxonomy provides a “basic grid,” says Schouenborg, which is neutral between historical and geographical contexts. “So, my general argument in this book is not only that four functional categories can be used to capture social institutions throughout history. I also argue that we should

discard the main alternative conceptual framework in the form of the state and the attendant stage models.”

In order to demonstrate the viability of this idea, Schouenborg goes looking in some pretty remote places; the remotest ones, in fact, that he can find: nomadic Central Asia, the rainforests of tropical Africa and the Polynesian islands. If his four functions operate in these environments, is his argument, they should operate everywhere else too. This is why we are treated to a review of topics as diverse as lineages and kinship systems in Polynesia (legitimacy and membership); tribute giving in Northeastern Asia (conflict regulation); the use of raffia cloths among the **Lele** (trade); and sacral kingship among the **Khazars** (governance). Schouenborg has a predilection for the terminology recycled by anthropologists and he sprinkles the terms evenly throughout the book: *bo’ol*, *qarachu*, *qariki*, *tapu*, *aloha*, *trombash*, *gama*, *malaang*, *lamba*, *nenekisi*, *bwami*, and so on. And he likes bizarre examples: in battle the **Marquesans** would beat their enemies to a pulp, cut a slit through their bodies and then wear their them as a large, rather unwieldy, poncho; among the Lele there were “village wives,” purchased with funds from the village treasury, and employed to provide local youths with sexual experiences. Apparently the occasional married man could rely on their services too.

The world really is a weird and wonderful place, and world history even more so, and strange people have done the strangest of things, but — and this is the point of this disparate collection of trivia and obscure terminology — it can all be summarized by means of Schouenborg’s four functions.

The conceptual framework

One obvious question is why we should focus on these four functions and not some others. States are doing many other things after all — dispensing bread and circuses, enforcing religious truths, organizing child care, planning highways, handing out unemployment benefits, and much else besides. Schouenborg's strategy here is to argue either that these other functions are unimportant or that they can be subsumed under one or the other of the four functions he has identified. We might decide to trust him on this, or we might not, and it is interesting in its own right to ask how we ever would decide such an issue. Let us think some more about this.

A problem for all functionalist accounts of society — Schouenborg's included — is that a given social practice simultaneously can serve many different functions. What is the function of a family dinner, we might ask. Surely it is to feed the family members, but it is also to give cohesion to the family, affirm its difference from the outside world, or perhaps to prop up the patriarchal system, or bourgeois society, or the agro-industrial complex. Which of these functions to pick is not obvious, and there is always a temptation — from Marx to Bourdieu — to pick the function which is least obvious to the naked eye. This is one of the ways in which social scientists make themselves into "truth tellers" who reveal the "mechanics" that "underlie" the surfaces of our everyday world. The better hidden the function, we are supposed to believe, the more fundamental it is — and the more remarkable its discoverer.

On the other hand, once we have decided that a certain function must exist, we will always manage to find it. It is a bit like reading a **medical dictionary**. If you read about the symptoms for “gout,” for example, you will inevitably discover that you have them, and the same goes for the symptoms of “tennis elbow” and “housemaid’s knee.” If we say, for example, that all societies must provide answers to questions regarding “the meaning of life,” we will find that this function is fulfilled by churches in some societies, by mosques and temples in others, but also that some societies rely mainly on technology for answers or even on **slivers of wafer-thin mints**. Likewise, if we decide that all societies must find a means of assuring social stability, political legitimacy, justice or freedom, we are bound to find that they all, somehow or another, do. Functionalism, in other words, is difficult to falsify.

Functionalism is also, as **Dennis Wrong** once famously argued, bad at explaining social change. And this is the case since functionalism cannot stipulate the conditions for functional breakdown. And this, in turn, is a result of the bracketing of human agency and the inability to account for the appearance of the new. There is a stasis at the heart of all functional models. Schouenborg inherits these problems but at least he is explicit about it. What interests him is the “second-order dimension” of society, he says, not the “first-order dimension,” that is, individual human beings.

Besides, as he makes clear, he is not in the business of providing explanations anyway. “The functional categories are a typology, a system of classification. They do not explain anything; we are not dealing with an explanatory theory.” The typology may explain something in the future

but “that is beyond the scope of this book.” “I have made an argument for a new measuring rod. That is all for now.”

But this is also the problem. There is no given way in which the world must be and there is consequently no particular way in which it must be divided. There are no concepts, taxonomies or basic grids out there in the world. Instead you divide, conceptualize and taxonomize for a certain purpose, in order to explain a certain thing. Ontology is theory-dependent. This is the reason why you cannot, *in abstracto*, say which conceptual scheme that is better and which one that is worse. This is also why attempts at conceptual legislation fail. The only way you can establish a new conceptualization, and its attendant vocabulary, is by showing what work it can do. If others are convinced by your explanation, they will use the same framework and the taxonomy will eventually stick. But Shouenborg is explicitly not theorizing, only legislating.

The issue here is very similar to the problem that plagues Emanuel Adler and Vincent Poulliot’s recent attempt to convince colleagues to **make use of “practices”** as a key notion in the study of international politics. **“Adler and Poulliot make the mistake of treating practices as though they were “raw data” — data which is given prior to any theorization — yet there can be no such thing as a practice apart from the theories and research questions which identify it.”** Shouenborg, we said, has moved from ontology to practices and he too forswears theories and explanations, but you will never know which way to slice up the world unless you know which slices your theoretical framework requires. Thoughts come before words, not words before thoughts; you need to know what to measure before you

design your measuring rod. Schouenborg's conceptual framework may be brilliant, but him saying so isn't enough.

The empirical cases

Since the empirical case studies are illustrations of the conceptual framework and not studies in their own right it is nitpicky to criticize them. What we are given are not research notes but the notes which Schouenborg's took as he was reading the works of others. And as he rather disarmingly admits, these readings were neither as extensive nor as detailed as he would have wished. This is fine of course. No one really cares about the Lele or the Xiongnu anyway. They are just illustrations. It is the big picture that counts.

Yet Schouenborg is a prisoner of the books he has come across and this does influence his analysis. [Jan Vansina's](#) work on the [Kuba](#) and the [Anziku](#) in Congo is indeed pathbreaking, but Vansina discussed societies of sedentary farmers not the societies of [Pygmies](#) who also live here. Since Pygmies are hunters and gatherers the logic of their social and political organization is quite different. Compare the unforgettable account of the "forest people" provided by [Colin Turnbull](#).

Similarly, in his discussion of Central Asia Schouenborg relies heavily on the work of [David Sneath](#) and [Nicola di Cosmo](#), but there are no references to [Anatoly Khazanov](#), [Etienne de la Vaissière](#), or even [Owen Lattimore](#). As a result he doesn't confront Khazanov's insistence that the nomads of the steppes always and inextricably were dependent on their farming neighbors and he doesn't deal with Lattimore's

claim that **the walls of northern China** were built to keep Chinese farmers in as much as to keep the nomads out. The Chinese tributary system was not, as Schouenborg implies, a way of extorting revenue from the peoples of the steppe but rather a way for the Chinese to forge a social, patrimonial, relationship with potential enemies.

These facts matter not only for the sake of the historical record but also for the conceptual framework. Take territoriality. The four functions are bound to operate quite differently in a society **which is peripatetic rather than sedentary**. Indeed they may operate sufficiently differently for the functions no longer to be the same. One example is social control. The steppe is vast, and as long as you have two rested horses and a saddlebag of supplies you can escape most attempts to control you. This means that questions of membership and conflict resolution will function quite differently in such a society, but so will questions of trade and governance. If running away and being judged by state courts both are ways of “conflict resolution,” the concept is stretched to breaking-point. A hole made in the sand by a child’s shovel, as **Alasdair MacIntyre famously argued**, and a hole made in the ground by a B52 bomb plane are both “holes,” yet comparing them is unlikely to be all that enlightening.

Moreover, the Mongols did indeed, as Sneath points out, have an “aristocracy,” but aristocracy among nomads is not the same institution as in medieval Europe where aristocrats controlled a piece of territory as well as the peasants who worked on it. You can call both “governance” if you like, but again the conceptual framework is creaking rather loudly.

Or take stateless societies. Many societies of hunters and gatherers have a flat social structure with no inherited inequalities of social status. Indeed societies on the move tend to be more egalitarian than sedentary societies since the kinds of resources that sustain sharp inequalities are difficult to transport. Moreover, in societies where there is no storage of food or other resources, **there are no wars**. These cases of stateless societies do not seem to fit into Schouenborg's conceptual categories. They are further out, further away, than he is able to go.

Conclusion

Schouenborg is very much a card-carrying member of the English School. He dedicates the book to two of its leading proponents — one of whom, he reveals in the preface, writes letters of recommendation for him. He is a professional, in other words, and there is no doubt that he has a promising career ahead of him. At the same time, some of the references to the English School canon are pretty oblique and a bit difficult for non-card-carrying colleagues to follow. It is as though one has stumbled upon a conversation that has been going on for a while: it is difficult to pick up the arguments since we don't know what already has been said, by and to whom.

We can nitpick regarding details; we can rehearse hackneyed critique, but in the end Schouenborg is right of course. We do indeed have to undo, unthink, the sovereign European state. This is imperative both for intellectual and for political reasons. It is only in this way that we properly can understand world history and only in this way that we creatively can confront our future — not to mention

avoiding making a mess of things today. Schouenborg's book is an imaginative and thought-provoking contribution to these crucial tasks.

Share this:



Uncle Bob in Lund

🕒 Monday, April 10, 2017 💬 No comments



Of all our family members, it is really only Uncle Bob who regularly comes to visit. He visited us when we lived in Shanghai, in north London and now in Lund. Yes, he was in Lund last night, our little medieval university town in southern Sweden. I brought Diane and two daughters. Blood is thicker than water.

Bob has once again reinvented himself. "Why change me now?" he asks in a borrowed Sinatra lyric, but it is not us

trying to change him as much as he continuously changing himself. At the age of 75 that's pretty remarkable. Those who are not busy being born are a-busy dying. And Bob Dylan is not dying.

He has, however, gotten quite a bit older since we saw him in Helsingborg three years ago. He moves more slowly on stage. He dances — yes, dances — but it's all a bit awkward. And he has to leave the keyboard and stand in the middle of the stage with his legs wide apart in order to be able to belt out the jazz standards which now feature as a regular part of his repertoire.

The jazz standards are not bad. Dylan's raspy voice works well in combination with the silky smooth arrangements. And yet, I can't help thinking that he is doing karaoke. Dylan karaoke is better than most kinds of karaoke, and I respect him deeply for doing what he wants to do, but it does sound to me like a hobby project rather than something to take with him around the world.

The real reinvention, however, concerns his transformation from a blues and rock 'n roll artist into a sort of vaudeville performer. He and the band are playing circus music, in a Sergeant Pepper vein, or in the style of Bertold Brecht and Kurt Weill. You fully expect acrobats, jugglers and bearded ladies to come on stage. Yet it is not festive as much as grimy — "After Midnight" — grim — "Paying in Blood" — and sad — "Long and Wasted Years." The furrows in the face of the clown have grown deep, the make-up of the septuagenarian prostitute is running. It's a remarkable world into which Bob inserts the songs from his 1960s song-book as well as the new Sinatra classics. Yes, they all fit, and thanks to the tight accompaniment of the band and the

imaginative arrangements of the songs it's always interesting.

But how good is it? I like my blues rock and the Dylan who stopped by here in Sweden only a few years ago was a first-rate blues and rock man. I liked his harmonica playing, for one thing, but there was no harmonica in sight last night and he made no pretense at playing guitar. The clothes are the same as before — that riverboat gambler outfit — but the band members should really be wearing jester's costumes. I must confess, the vaudeville musician Bob Dylan is all in all less interesting to me than the bluesman, but OMG, he remains endlessly creative, enigmatic and remarkable. We are lucky that he still comes to visit. Come back soon uncle Bob, we already miss you.

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🕒 Saturday, April 08, 2017 💬 No comments





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More on internal exile

🕒 Tuesday, April 04, 2017 💬 No comments



I've thought a lot about **the internal exile** which Brexit/Trump seems to have confined me to. It's not good, it's not responsible. As though I didn't care anymore. I was somewhat encouraged to read this from Tracy B. Strong, written in 2008 and relation to the Bush presidency, not Trump:

"In what does tyranny consist? For Nietzsche, it is the insistence that the world is and is only as I will it to be. Challenges should be ignored or eliminated. Similarly, in the *Persian Letters*, Montesquieu argued that it consists in requiring that others have no existence for oneself except that which one allows them. This seems to me exactly right: tyranny consists in speaking for oneself and having the power to impose that speech on others, to hear only one's own words. I note with political distress that when Bush comes on the TV, I turn to the *World Poker Tour*. I did not do this with Nixon or Reagan, much as I disagreed with them. My distress is almost unpolitical, for my channel changing is a form of not being willing to share the world with G.W. Bush. I want, in other words, not to deal with the fact that he is our president, that is, not to accept that he and I share what Nietzsche called "the life of a people." My avoidance strikes me as dangerous: it is as if I were pretending to myself that he is not our president, refusing to acknowledge the world of which he and I are a part. This is a consequence of tyranny."

Strong, Tracy B. "Nietzsche and the Political: Tyranny, Tragedy, Cultural Revolution, and Democracy." *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 35, no. 1 (November 28, 2008): 62-63.

Share this:



Internal exile

🕒 Saturday, January 28, 2017 💬 1 Comment



I've gone into an external exile. I don't follow the news anymore, don't read things on-line and I don't watch TV. It was Trump and Brexit that did it. I guess I'm in denial. I just don't want to hear about any of it, I don't want to follow the ins and outs of what someone said; who was appointed to what job; what some report is saying. Even the very intelligently argued and perfectly convincing critique is like poison. Even the jokes are concessions. I don't want any of this in my head. This is no longer my world.

I'm reminded of the way some scholars and artists survived in Germany during the Nazis or in China during the Cultural

Revolution. Disgusted with the turn events had taken, yet utterly powerless, they decided that the best thing they could do under the circumstances was to focus on maintaining their humanity. When the world is going crazy, maintaining your humanity is the ultimate act of defiance. There were for example these Chinese artists who took to the forest, far away from the Red Guards. To mimic the official art was of course unthinkable, but so was lampooning it. Instead they spent their time painting beautiful things, landscapes, city streets and flowers. See above.

This is of course not good for me professionally. I teach political science at a university after all; I'm supposed to know what's in the news. The time has already come when my students refer to things I know nothing about. What did I make of Trump's inauguration? "What inauguration?"

Basically I feel like it's 1913 all over again. There is a hard rain a-gonna fall. Btw, the works of some of those Chinese artists was recently exhibited at the Asia Society in Hong Kong — "Light before Dawn."

Share this:



My web pages are back up again

🕒 Thursday, January 05, 2017 💬 No comments



These web pages have existed in various incarnations for some 15 years. During the last two years, however, they have been down more than up. I switched from WordPress to Joomla and it first it was a great choice. Joomla is powerful and I could do a lot of things that weren't possible on WordPress. But increasingly Joomla became vulnerable to attacks by spammers and in the end it was too time consuming to defend the site. I just took it down. This past Christmas, however, I've moved all the material back to WordPress again. Coming back has been great. WordPress is in wonderful shape with lots of excellent features. And most important of all: it seems very secure against spammers.

I will not be blogging like I did in the heady days of 2006, but the pages are indispensable for the various projects I'm working on — I use them to collect primary sources, gather links, and develop textbook chapters. There is, and there will continue to be, a lot to read. Enjoy!

yours always,

Erik

Share this:



Uncle Bob in Helsingborg

🕒 Thursday, July 17, 2014 💬 No comments





We went to see Uncle Bob last night — Bob Dylan was playing in Helsingborg which is only one town over from Lund where we live. I see Uncle Bob more often than most other members of my family, mainly since he comes to visit more often. I saw him in Shanghai two years ago, and in England a couple of times before that. The really crazy time was when he played in Finsbury Park in London, literally in our own backyard. Since Bob is stopping by we simply have to show up and say hi. We rented a car and drove to Sofiero, a royal palace and garden, with Helsingor, of Hamlet fame, on the other side of the water. The sky was dark and ominous-looking but it wasn't cold and it only drizzled a bit in the end. A large crowd had turned up. Well over 7,000 people.

The stage was simple, with none of the light-show of an indoor arena, and suddenly Bob and the band were just standing there. No introduction, no symphonic overture. We found a place a bit off to the side of the stage, but really pretty close. Bob came on at 10 and by that time it was getting dark and quite intimate despite the outdoor setting.

No, I'm not the kind of Dylan fan who always loves everything he does. Some concerts — like the one in Bournemouth in 2006 — can be terrible, and beforehand I'm always apprehensive about how the evening will turn out. I so want it to be great, and it isn't always. The opening number, "Things Have Changed," gave me a sinking feeling. That cowboy beat takes all the power out of the song, and besides the band didn't sync it right. Bob got the stresses wrong and it sounded off. Happily, things improved after that and very rapidly too. "She Belongs to Me" worked well and with "Beyond Here Lies Nothing" the band had definitely found its groove.

Very unexpectedly and slightly bizarrely, the evening turned into a jazz club event of sorts. The sound level was actually turned down quite low and the sound, from where we were standing, was crystal clear. You could hear every instrument very distinctly, neatly separated. Bob played the piano throughout, and it was very high in the mix. He sounded like a lounge lizard crooning his songs, despite the fact that he plays the piano mainly as a percussion instrument. And he sang really well. Better than in decades. He's got to stop improving like this or he'll turn into Frank Sinatra before long.

I got to hear "Workingman's Blues," and "Spirit on the Water," but I must confess that I didn't recognize the waltzy

“Waiting for You.” I realize that this identifies me as a normal Dylan fan, not as a freak. I like his music, I like him, but I have a life.

I thought he botched “Love Sick” a bit. It sounded hurried. The song must be hard to do at an outdoor concert when there are a lot of different things going on. It must be difficult to build up the evocative atmosphere required. Or perhaps the band just needed to have a pee — it was the last song before the intermission.

After the break we got four songs from *Tempest*, and two from other recent albums, in excellent renditions. Bob may have lost the incredible power and energy of his younger days, but he has found other things — irony and tenderness and compassion. “Forgetful Heart,” and “Long and Wasted Years,” both give a very jaded view of middle age. But man, has he got things to tell us about ourselves? He sings the admittedly sometimes rather inane lyrics as though they conveyed eternal truths, and we listen attentively because we know he is right. He is right.

It doesn't apply to all of the audience by any means, but the people around us seemed mainly to have showed up to gawk at a celebrity and to sing along with well-known tunes. When they had gawked enough and the well-known tunes didn't come, they turned to their phones. They should have stayed at home. The reviews in the local papers complained: 1) that Bob doesn't sing well; 2) that he rearranges his tunes so that we cannot recognize them; 3) that he doesn't do his greatest hits. One of the local journalists even suggested he should wind up his Never Ending Tour. Oh well, what else is new? “I don't believe you, you're a liar!”

The thing is: a Dylan concert is about here and now and it has nothing to do with nostalgia and “old hits.” He’s got absolutely nothing to prove, and yet he insists on his right to do it at every concert.

Fans complain about “Watchtower” as an encore, but I think it really, really works. True enough, it too lacks energy, but at the same time it seems Bob finally has **reclaimed it from Jimi Hendrix**. He is singing it much more the way he did on the original recording. It’s mysterious and medieval. And here too there is compassion and tenderness.

After the concert I had this terrible the-circus-is-leaving-town feeling that I always get after a Dylan concert. The next day we suppressed an urge to drive the 250 kilometers to Gothenburg and see him once more. Seeing more concerts provides no cure. Dylan comes into our lives, to remind us of our better selves, of how creative and exceptional life can be, and then he is gone again. The only consolation is that he’ll be back again next year. We’ll be there too. Thanks Uncle Bob for stopping by. We love you.

Share this:



Robert Dahl, 1915-2014

🕒 Thursday, July 03, 2014 💬 No comments





The head of the Yale political science department just sent around an email saying that Robert Dahl has died. He was 98. Dahl was the leading political scientist in the US, and arguably the world, for some 50 years. He made a name for himself in the 1950s by advocating a pluralist interpretation of politics. It is indeed the case, he concluded, that we are ruled by elites, but there is not only one elite group but many, they are powerful within slightly different areas, and they take turns having an influence on political outcomes. Dahl called this system of rule “polyarchy” to distinguish it from the ideal-type of a democracy. His interpretation became enormously influential first of all since there was much empirical evidence for it, but also since it saved West’s image of itself. People in Western countries don’t want to think they are run by elites. We like to think that we live in democracies. Dahl forced us to acknowledge that elites

indeed rule us, but he made us feel good again by concluding that there is competition among elites.

I just missed Dahl at Yale. He had finally retired a few year before I got there, and I never got a chance to take classes with him. Still he was very much onsite, regularly showing up in his old office and coming to various seminars and events. "I wrote a book about local politics in New Haven," he once said in a seminar, referring to *Who Governs?*. and it suddenly struck me that this was the author of the most famous polisci book of the post-war era. In fact, when I worked for Bruce Russett, managing a journal he was editing, Dahl's office was right next door. He used to come in and ask me questions about his computer. I tried to help him. Once I ran into him on York Street and he said "Hi Erik." I returned a "Hi Bob!" — and I felt really, really cool.

Dahl got his PhD in 1940. His thinking was very much colored by the Depression and by the hardships of American workers. He was one of the very last representatives of American radicalism. Of course, we still have [Charles Lindblom](#). He is only 97.

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‘m not applying for research funding!

🕒 Saturday, June 21, 2014 💬 No comments

