

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

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*, *lemba*, *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 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 Schouenborg 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 Pouliot 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.](#)"

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