CA-06 Extractive and inclusive institutions, the stationary bandit and the narrow corridor

1. Introduction: The Architecture of Governance After Collapse

Following the permanent loss of industrial supply chains and the retreat of state reach, the vacuum of governance is swiftly filled by rudimentary architectures of power. The central question for post-collapse political economy is not how utopian societies might be engineered, but rather which principles of self-governance hold across deep time, how they scale, and how they succumb to—or resist—capture by individuals possessing dark-triad traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy).

This comprehensive report provides a rigorous synthesis of the institutional economics of capture. It systematically evaluates four primary architectures of human organization: Mancur Olson's stationary bandit model[1]; Douglass North, John Wallis, and Barry Weingast's limited access orders[4]; Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson's frameworks of extractive institutions and the "narrow corridor"[6]; and Christopher Boehm's reverse dominance hierarchies[8]. These macroeconomic and anthropological frameworks are stress-tested against empirical data from stateless societies such as the Tiv of Nigeria, historical state-formation in Montenegro, and contemporary state-collapse in Eastern Congo. By separating the self-reported functions of these arrangements from the historical record and modern scholarly inference, this analysis establishes their resilience to dark-triad capture and their viability across eight distinct scales of human organization.

2. The Genesis of Coercion: The Stationary Bandit

The transition from pure anarchy to rudimentary governance is best conceptualized through Mancur Olson's (1993) model of the "stationary bandit"[1]. In a deeply fractured, stateless environment, armed factions initially operate as "roving bandits," engaging in uncoordinated pillage[1]. This behavior effectively imposes a total expropriation rate on populations, utterly destroying incentives for future agricultural or economic production[3]. A rational, self-interested bandit with sufficient coercive capacity will eventually recognize that total plunder creates a deadweight economic loss. Consequently, this actor will seek to eliminate rival predators, establish a territorial monopoly on violence, and become "stationary"[1].

2.1 The Economic Calculus of Stationarity

The stationary bandit maximizes long-term revenue by reducing the rate of extraction to an optimal tax rate (t^*)[2]. A portion of these proceeds is utilized to provide public goods (G), primarily protection and dispute resolution, which increases the total taxable economic output

(Y)[2]. The mathematics of this dynamic reveal that in a society with an underlying rate of embezzlement (α), the provision of public goods is modeled as $G = \frac{(2-\alpha)Y}{4}$ [2]. When external resource rents (r) are introduced—such as mineral wealth—the optimal tax rate on the local population becomes $t^* = \frac{1-2r}{2-2r}$ [2]. Consequently, if a bandit controls resource rents exceeding 50 percent of the economy ($r \geq 0.5$), the tax rate on local labor drops to zero, entirely severing the fiscal social contract and removing the need to provide public goods[2].

This theoretical framework is empirically validated by Raul Sanchez de la Sierra's (2020) exhaustive study of armed groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)[1]. Following the collapse of the Zairean state, armed actors proliferated. Sanchez de la Sierra tracked the behavior of these groups across 650 villages, demonstrating that the transition from roving to stationary banditry was determined by the physical properties of local resources[1]. For example, the Nduma Defense of Congo (NDC-R) established a sophisticated stationary bandit state. By December 2016, the NDC-R controlled 108 villages containing 45,747 inhabitants, enforced by an administration of 2,075 combatants[10]. Their capacity to project violence was underpinned by a precise armory: 32 spears, 50 arrows, 4 guns, 15 grenades, 20 shotguns, 17 rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), 31 PKM machine guns, 7 mortars, 1,702 AK-47 assault rifles, and 94 satellite phones[10].

The decision to form this stationary monopoly was driven by the global demand for coltan. Because coltan is bulky and its output is easily observable, it is highly taxable at geographic chokepoints[1]. An increase in global coltan prices caused armed groups to establish stationary monopolies, introduce taxation systems, and provide basic administration, whereas easily concealable resources like gold did not generate the same state-building incentives[1]. Similar mechanics of protection and extortion scaling are observed in organized crime, such as the Sicilian Mafia, where "protection" is sold as a commodity by an actor monopolizing violence[13].

2.2 Functional Separation: The Stationary Bandit

Perspective	Assessment of the Arrangement
What its own people said it did	Warlords, mafias, and militias (e.g., the NDC-R or the DeCavalcante crime family in New Jersey) claim to provide "liberation," "protection," and "justice" against rival factions and a corrupt central state[12].
What the record shows it did	The record demonstrates the imposition of poll taxes, transit tolls, and consumption taxes, coupled with the violent

	enforcement of territorial boundaries. Protection is primarily an extortion racket, where the population pays to avoid violence from the protector itself[10].
What modern scholarship infers	Scholars infer that the provision of state-like functions (legal systems, property rights, security) is merely a byproduct of a revenue-maximization strategy. The armed elite creates institutions solely to optimize the extraction of surplus value from inelastic labor and observable commodities[1].

2.3 Scale Ledger: The Stationary Bandit

Scale	Viability	Rationale
Household (4-10)	Fails	Too small to generate an extractable surplus capable of sustaining a dedicated, non-producing violent actor.
Hamlet (30-50)	Fails	The aggregate surplus remains insufficient to offset the caloric and material costs of maintaining a permanent coercive apparatus.
Village (150-500)	Works	Proven viable in artisanal mining villages in Eastern Congo; a few armed men can monitor geographic chokepoints and extract surplus[1].
District (1.5k-5k)	Works	Optimal for early warlordism; enables a division of labor between

		frontline tax collectors and rear-guard military enforcers.
Town (15k-50k)	Works	The NDC-R effectively managed approximately 45,000 people across multiple villages using a hierarchical, bureaucratic administration[10].
Region (0.5M-5M)	Works	Manifests as large-scale organized crime (e.g., the Sicilian Mafia controlling regional protection markets under bosses like John Gambino)[13].
Nation (50M-500M)	Works	Scales into autocratic, extractive dictatorships that treat the national economy as a private tax farm[11].
Planet (8 Billion)	Never Tried	Requires an insurmountable global monopoly on violence and logistical extraction capabilities that have never historically existed.

2.4 Capture Test: The Stationary Bandit

The stationary bandit arrangement does not need to be *captured* by individuals with dark-triad traits; it is an institutional manifestation of psychopathy and Machiavellianism. In *Snakes in Suits* (2006), Paul Babiak and Robert D. Hare note that corporate psychopaths display a "parasitic lifestyle," "poor behavioral control," and a profound lack of empathy, representing approximately 3.5 percent of senior executives[15]. In a post-collapse environment, a highly Machiavellian actor calculates that predictable extortion yields higher long-term economic returns than unpredictable slaughter[10]. Historical cases include the Sicilian Mafia (Cosa Nostra) under bosses like John Gotti—whose operations generated $300 million annually—who ruthlessly eliminated rivals to maintain territorial extortion monopolies[14]. Reversing this capture requires exogenous shocks, such as an overwhelming intervention by a stronger state military or a collapse in the price of the taxable commodity, which forces the stationary bandit to

devolve back into a roving bandit[1].

3. The Cartelization of Power: Limited Access Orders

Once a stationary bandit scales, or multiple stationary bandits encounter one another and recognize the mutually destructive costs of perpetual war, the resulting equilibrium is described by North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009) as a "Limited Access Order" (LAO) or "natural state"[4]. The NWW framework posits that the default method for controlling endemic violence throughout the last 10,000 years of human history is the creation of a dominant coalition of elites[4].

3.1 The Mechanics of the Natural State

In an LAO, elites encompassing military, economic, and religious spheres agree not to fight one another. Crucially, this peace is maintained not by a third-party enforcer or a constitution, but by the distribution of economic rents[4]. The system artificially restricts access to resources, trade, and organizations, granting monopoly privileges strictly to coalition members[4]. Because the outbreak of violence would destroy these lucrative rents, elites are heavily incentivized to maintain the peace[4].

The economy of a natural state is inherently personal: whom an individual knows matters substantially more than market efficiency or merit[4]. Laws are applied selectively, and property rights are guaranteed only for the elite. This renders the society highly susceptible to economic shocks and suppresses long-term economic growth, as innovation threatens the established distribution of rents[4].

3.2 Functional Separation: The Limited Access Order

Perspective	Assessment of the Arrangement
What its own people said it did	Elites consistently frame the order as the manifestation of natural law, divine right, or inevitable social hierarchy, claiming it protects the populace from chaos and moral decay[4].
What the record shows it did	The historical record reveals massive wealth inequality, suppressed technological innovation, arbitrary justice, and periodic elite infighting whenever the distribution of economic rents fails to match shifts in de facto military power[4].
What modern scholarship infers	NWW (2009) infer that LAOs are highly rational, functional responses to the omnipresent threat of violence.

	Rent-seeking and patron-client networks, while appearing corrupt from a modern perspective, are the exact mechanisms that prevent civil war[4].

3.3 Scale Ledger: The Limited Access Order

Scale	Viability	Rationale
Household (4-10)	Fails	Operates primarily through familial bonds rather than formalized elite economic cartels.
Hamlet (30-50)	Fails	Lacks sufficient population and economic specialization to generate discrete elites (e.g., distinct military and religious leaders).
Village (150-500)	Works	Manifests as a stabilizing pact between the village headman, the chief priest or shaman, and the wealthiest landowner to divide local surplus.
District (1.5k-5k)	Works	Local elites form councils to divide land rents and suppress peasant uprisings through collective militia action.
Town (15k-50k)	Works	Warlord coalitions, guild monopolies, and local magistrates collude to control regional trade and limit entry to markets.

Region (0.5M-5M)	Works	Manifests as feudal systems; regional barons limit violence by intermarrying and dividing territorial tax farms.
Nation (50M-500M)	Works	The standard form of human civilization for the last 10,000 years (e.g., pre-1688 England, ancient Egypt)[4].
Planet (8 Billion)	Never Tried	Requires a unified global elite capable of enforcing absolute limits on organization formation globally, which logistical constraints prevent.

3.4 Capture Test: The Limited Access Order

LAOs are extraordinarily vulnerable to Machiavellian capture via "robust action"—a concept formalized by John F. Padgett and Christopher K. Ansell (1993) in their structural analysis of the rise of the Medici in Renaissance Florence (1400–1434)[19]. Cosimo de' Medici captured the Florentine LAO by strategically positioning himself at the structural hole of multiple, disconnected elite networks encompassing patronage, marriage, and banking[20]. By keeping his own intentions opaque and manipulating factions against each other without their knowledge, Cosimo achieved total administrative capture[20]. Dark-triad traits heavily facilitate success in an LAO because upward mobility depends entirely on personal manipulation, deception, and the ruthless protection of monopoly rents[4]. Resistance to this capture usually requires a systemic collapse or the rare transition to an Open Access Order (OAO), where impersonal institutions and creative destruction undermine elite monopolies.

4. Extractive Institutions and the Narrow Corridor

While NWW focus on elite pacts, Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson explore the tension between the state and society. In *Why Nations Fail* (2012), they differentiate between "extractive" institutions—which funnel resources to a narrow elite while failing to protect property rights—and "inclusive" institutions, which distribute political power widely and create a level playing field[7].

In *The Narrow Corridor* (2019), they expand this to argue that liberty and prosperity exist only in a narrow space where the power of the state (the Leviathan) and the power of society are maintained in balance[6]. If the state is overwhelmingly powerful, a "Despotic Leviathan" emerges, stifling innovation and extracting wealth, as historically seen in the forced starvation

documented by Yang Jisheng's *Tombstone* during China's Great Leap Forward[6]. If society is too powerful, the state cannot resolve conflicts or provide infrastructure, leading to the "Absent Leviathan" or statelessness[6]. When they balance each other, they enter a "Red Queen" dynamic: the state expands its capacity, and society mobilizes to shackle it, mutually reinforcing one another over time, as seen in Costa Rica following the 1948 civil war led by José Figueres[6].

4.1 The Absent Leviathan: The Cost of Statelessness

To avoid the naturalistic fallacy and the romance of the primitive, one must rigorously examine the reality of societies that successfully resisted state centralization and operated outside the corridor.

The Tiv of Nigeria: The Tiv operated as a segmentary lineage society, vehemently resisting centralized authority. To prevent the rise of a stationary bandit or a Despotic Leviathan, the Tiv utilized extreme leveling mechanisms, most notably witchcraft allegations (*tsav*)[29]. Any individual who accumulated too much wealth or power was accused of using witchcraft to drain the vitality of others, triggering extreme social sanction, expropriation, or assassination[26]. While this preserved egalitarianism, anthropological and archaeological data demonstrate that life expectancy at birth in such stateless societies varied between 21 and 37 years, heavily curtailed by continuous interpersonal violence[26].

Montenegro (Pre-1800): Historically, Montenegrin highlanders fiercely defended their tribal autonomy against the Ottoman Empire and internal centralization[28]. Justice was administered strictly through brutal, inter-generational blood feuds, leading to a Hobbesian state of continuous violence[26]. It was only when Petar I Petrović Njegoš began centralizing power and introduced the Legal Code of Petar I in October 1798 in Cetinje—creating a rudimentary Shackled Leviathan—that blood feuds were slowly curtailed and property rights stabilized[31].

Modern Urban Statelessness (Lagos): State absence in a modern context is equally brutal. In 1999, Lagos, Nigeria, operated with virtually no publicly provided electricity, running water, or refuse collection[26]. Gangs known as "area boys" preyed on businessmen, extorting and murdering them, creating a society dominated by fear and arbitrary violence[26].

4.2 Functional Separation: The Absent Leviathan (Statelessness)

Perspective	Assessment of the Arrangement
What its own people said it did	The Tiv claimed they were protecting the community from spiritual evil and witchcraft; Montenegrin tribes claimed they were preserving their sacred honor and freedom from tyranny[28].
What the record shows it did	The historical record shows the systematic destruction of ambitious individuals, the prevention of economic accumulation, and

	endemic inter-clan warfare that kept regions destitute and life expectancies incredibly low[26].
What modern scholarship infers	Modern scholarship (e.g., Paul Bohannan 1958) infers this was a profound structural levelling mechanism to preserve political egalitarianism at the direct expense of physical safety and economic development[29].

4.3 Scale Ledger: The Absent Leviathan (Statelessness)

Scale	Viability	Rationale
Household (4-10)	Works	Kinship ties suppress the need for formalized coercive structures.
Hamlet (30-50)	Works	Face-to-face monitoring allows gossip and ostracism to effectively level power.
Village (150-500)	Works	Operates via complex lineage systems (like the Tiv); relies on aggressive levelling mechanisms (witchcraft allegations) to stop wealth accumulation[29].
District (1.5k-5k)	Fails	Without hierarchy, coordination costs become too high; lineage factions fracture into perpetual blood feuding (e.g., pre-1798 Montenegro)[31].
Town+ (15k+)	Never Tried	Large populations cannot be managed by segmentary lineage alone without resulting in

		catastrophic anarchy or immediate conquest by neighbors.

4.4 Capture Test: The Absent Leviathan

A narcissist or psychopath attempting to take over a stateless society initially thrives on charisma, but quickly triggers profound societal defense mechanisms. If they attempt to centralize power or extract tribute, they are accused of witchcraft or simply assassinated by a coalition of subordinates[29]. The system aggressively *resists* internal capture by executing the would-be captor. However, this arrangement is exceptionally vulnerable to *external* capture; because the society refuses to centralize military capacity or generate economic surplus, it is easily conquered by any neighboring stationary bandit or imperial power.

5. Intentional Egalitarianism: The Reverse Dominance Hierarchy

Christopher Boehm's (1993, 1999) *Hierarchy in the Forest* provides the anthropological foundation for how small-scale stateless societies maintain equality[8]. Boehm counters the romantic assumption that humans are naturally egalitarian. Instead, humans are naturally hierarchical and prone to dominance, but hunter-gatherer societies engage in "intentional egalitarianism" through a "reverse dominance hierarchy"[8].

5.1 The Mechanics of Reverse Dominance

In this system, the political rank and file forms a united coalition to actively dominate the strong[8]. If an alpha-type individual exhibits bossiness, greed, or bullying, the group utilizes an escalating series of sanctions. As observed among the Hadza and the Iban, these sanctions begin with public ridicule and disobedience, escalate to exclusion, and ultimately culminate in capital punishment (assassination by the group)[8].

5.2 Functional Separation: The Reverse Dominance Hierarchy

Perspective	Assessment of the Arrangement
What its own people said it did	Participants state that they value autonomy, hate arrogance, and are punishing individuals who fail to share or who act superior[33].
What the record shows it did	The ethnographic record shows high rates of collective execution for aggressive, physically dominant men in these societies[33].

What modern scholarship infers	Scholarship infers that this represents a bimodal view of aggression, where reactive, collective aggression is utilized to suppress proactive, individual despotism, thereby reducing sexual dimorphism and fostering cooperative survival[36].

5.3 Scale Ledger: The Reverse Dominance Hierarchy

Scale	Viability	Rationale
Household (4-10)	Works	Easily enforced by adult pairs against aggressive or hoarding behavior.
Hamlet (30-50)	Works	Optimal size for universal consensus and rapid collective sanction without coordination failures.
Village (150-500)	Works	Locally autonomous groups actively suppress authoritative leadership but naturally subdivide and fracture when they reach a few hundred persons[35].
District (1.5k+)	Fails	The mechanism relies entirely on small social scale; face-to-face public opinion cannot scale to thousands without formal institutions[35].

5.4 Capture Test: The Reverse Dominance Hierarchy

Corporate psychopaths operate by breaking rules, blaming others, and finding patrons to protect them on their rise, leaving a trail of shattered expectations[15]. In a modern corporate hierarchy, such an individual charms superiors, abuses subordinates, and causes psychological distress while securing promotions[39]. In a reverse dominance hierarchy, this same psychopath is identified almost immediately because there is no formal hierarchy to hide behind[33]. Their charm fails against collective public opinion, and their abuse triggers a lethal coalition. The

psychopath is ridiculed, exiled, or murdered in their sleep by the collective[33].

6. The Strongest Case Against: Leading Critics

While the institutional paradigms of Acemoglu/Robinson and North/Wallis/Weingast dominate modern political economy, they face severe criticism regarding methodology, geographical determinism, and historical accuracy.

6.1 Geography and State Capacity (Sachs, Diamond, Vries)

Jeffrey Sachs (2012) and Jared Diamond (2012) argue that Acemoglu and Robinson systematically ignore the role of geography. Sachs contends that geographical determinism—disease burdens, soil quality, navigability, and climate—dictates economic prosperity long before institutions are formed[7]. Diamond argues that many supposedly "inclusive" economies contain highly extractive practices (e.g., resource stripping), and that agricultural practices shaped by geography dictate social structures, not the reverse[7].

Peer Vries (2013, 2015) launches a devastating critique from a global history perspective. Vries points out that the definition of "failing nations" conflates economic poverty with state failure[43]. Many of the poorest nations actually possessed incredibly powerful, functional states that deliberately chose to impoverish their citizens—a feature acknowledged but theoretically underdeveloped by institutionalists[43]. Furthermore, Vries argues that the role of military power and the fiscal-military state in the Great Divergence is ignored, reducing the vast complexity of global history to a simplistic binary of inclusive versus extractive[45].

6.2 The Intellectual Monopoly Critique (Boldrin & Levine)

Michele Boldrin, David K. Levine, and Salvatore Modica (2012) heavily critique *Why Nations Fail* for its reliance on historical anecdotes rather than rigorous statistical evidence[47]. Boldrin and Levine target the claim that strong property rights (specifically intellectual property like patents) are the cornerstone of inclusive institutions[48]. They argue the exact opposite: patents are an extractive institution designed to create monopoly power that suppresses innovation[48]. They demonstrate that weak patent systems (e.g., historical Germany) spurred innovation by covering only production processes, while strong ones in the US, UK, and France hindered it. Thus, the "inclusive" umbrella obscures the highly rent-seeking nature of modern intellectual property[48].

7. Implementability After the Fall

If industrial civilization and the central state fall, communities will immediately revert to the localized institutional mechanics detailed above. The following outlines the minimum viable versions of self-governance under extreme deprivation.

Household (4 to 10 people)

- **Minimum Viable Version:** Reverse dominance hierarchy. Patriarchal or matriarchal authority moderated by intentional egalitarianism and physical leveling among adults.
- **Starting Needs:** Shared shelter, basic caloric production (foraging/subsistence farming), shared language.
- **First Failure to Expect:** Despotism by the physically strongest male, leading to family fracturing, exile, or internal violence if leveling mechanisms (e.g., adult coalitions) fail.

Village of 300 (No state, no grid, no internet)

- **Minimum Viable Version:** Segmentary lineage system and direct democracy, utilizing reverse dominance (ridicule, ostracism).
- **Starting Needs:** A central meeting place (e.g., a physical square), a shared calendar (to coordinate agricultural cycles and assemblies), oral records of kinship and land borders.
- **First Failure to Expect:** The "Tiv trap." A charismatic, highly productive individual will accumulate excess grain or weapons. The village will either execute them (destroying their productive capacity) or fail to stop them, allowing them to declare a local monopoly on violence, effectively becoming a stationary bandit.

District of 3,000 (No state, no grid, no internet)

- **Minimum Viable Version:** Limited Access Order (Elite Pact).
- **Starting Needs:** Literacy (to write treaties between villages), physical ledgers (to track tax/tribute), a militia, and a hierarchy of local elites (headmen, priests).
- **First Failure to Expect:** Elite infighting. When the harvest fails or the militia grows restless, the rent distribution will break down. A Machiavellian actor will utilize robust action to pit villages against each other, seizing absolute control and transitioning the district into an extractive autocracy.

8. Summary of Robust Findings

#	Finding
1	Anarchy is swiftly replaced by stationary bandits who monopolize violence to maximize long-term tax extraction.
2	Stationary bandits will provide public goods and security strictly when doing so increases their total extractable economic revenue.
3	Violence at a regional scale is historically constrained by Limited Access Orders, where elites share economic rents to disincentivize mutual destruction.
4	Stateless, purely egalitarian societies existed, but suffered from massive internal violence and extremely low life expectancies (21 to 37 years).
5	Small-scale egalitarianism is not natural; it is

	actively engineered through reverse dominance hierarchies that lethally suppress ambitious individuals.
6	Reverse dominance requires face-to-face interaction and inevitably fractures or fails when groups exceed a few hundred people.
7	As society's capacity to resist the state grows, it must be matched by state capacity, or the system collapses into either despotism or violent anarchy.
8	Psychopaths are effectively neutralized in small bands via assassination but thrive in the opaque, complex hierarchies of Limited Access Orders.
9	Supposedly "inclusive" institutions often harbor highly extractive mechanics (like patents) that create monopolies while disguised as broad property rights.
10	The transition to higher scales of governance inherently requires the abandonment of pure egalitarianism in favor of delegated, coercive hierarchies.

9. Contested or Open Questions

- **The Primacy of Geography:** To what extent does geographical determinism (disease vectors, soil, climate) preclude the establishment of inclusive institutions, regardless of human agency?
- **The Legibility of Wealth:** Does the transition from roving to stationary banditry depend entirely on the physical nature of the local resource (e.g., the observability of coltan versus the concealability of gold), or do cultural factors play a mitigating role?
- **The Transition Point:** How exactly does a Limited Access Order transition into an Open Access Order without the elite coalition triggering a catastrophic civil war during the loss of their monopoly rents?
- **The Upper Limit of Egalitarianism:** Can modern information technology (if restored)

mimic the face-to-face leveling mechanisms of the reverse dominance hierarchy, allowing it to scale effectively beyond 300 people?

10. Principles

- As the observability and bulk of local economic output increases, the probability of stationary banditry replacing roving banditry increases.
- The provision of justice and protection by a non-democratic actor is a function of revenue maximization, not moral obligation.
- In the absence of a third-party enforcer, peace between elite factions is only maintained by the artificial restriction of market access and the creation of shared economic rents.
- Egalitarianism in human groups is not a passive default, but an active, engineered suppression of innate hierarchical and despotic behaviors.
- The face-to-face leveling mechanisms of a reverse dominance hierarchy cease to function when the population exceeds the cognitive limits of mutual monitoring.
- Individuals with dark-triad traits are rapidly identified and eliminated in small-scale egalitarian networks but are selectively advantaged in the opaque networks of Limited Access Orders.
- A society that successfully eliminates all internal hierarchies will lack the centralized military capacity required to survive external conquest.
- The power of the state and the power of society must scale proportionally; an imbalance inevitably yields either violent statelessness or despotic tyranny.

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