

SCHMOOKLER ON ANARCHY

by Andrew Bard Schmookler

Dear Australopithecus:

You are uneasy with my arguing, in *The Parable of the Tribes*, that at the core of the problems of civilization is anarchy, while some people that you respect argue, rather, that something akin to anarchy is the solution. I appreciate your inviting me to respond to the position of an anarchist like Murray Bookchin. You have also articulated the position to which you wish me to respond. Here, in a nutshell, is my understanding of it: Organic societies — including the original human societies and various other communities appearing in nature — tend to be “spontaneously formed, non-coercive and egalitarian.” The world took a bad turn with the creation in human societies of hierarchies, including the state and male dominated institutions. The hierarchical state brought about the various evils of civilization. We would be better off, therefore, if we could return to “ecological, stateless, communal-based societies.” [Ed. note: Australopithecus thinks we would benefit by returning to such primal societies; Bookchin appears to favor combining the positive qualities of primal societies with the latent positive qualities of modern society.]

I share that primitivist appreciation of the more synergistic structure of natural societies. Where I differ from the above summarized position is in how the origin of evil is to be understood (e.g. the evils of war, tyranny, ecological destructiveness), and therefore in how these evils are best remedied.

The anarchist position suffers from a basic logical flaw: in trying to explain evil, it can't escape the problem of the Prime Mover. On the one hand, the State is the source of evil. On the other hand, the State is itself evil. So what is the source of the evil of the State? Anarchists, who live in societies where evils are accomplished through political systems, mistake the symptom — the state — for the cause, which is the failure to control power.

Anarchists want us to break up political powers, back to a multitude of small and self-governing communities. But the human species tried that experiment — up until 10,000 years ago. And the rest, as saying goes, is history. We had the situation the anarchists desire at the beginning, yet history unfolded into a nightmare nonetheless. What will have changed this time to prevent the groovy many from being brought under the dominion of the ruthless few?

Only if we understand what happened the first time — how the egalitarian anarchy of primitive hunting and

gathering societies evolved/degenerated into the tyrannical and belligerent power structures that have bloodied our history — will we have a chance to truly overcome the problem of power. That is what *The Parable of the Tribes* attempts to do. [Ed. note: This excellent book is now available in paperback from Houghton Mifflin for \$9.95.]

The first point that needs to be made is that anarchy is not what existed before the rise of civilization. True, there was no hierarchical power structure, but there was governing order. The patient process of natural selection molds an order that is governed closely and well. There is no ruler in this lawful order, for the law of nature is part of each separate creature. Each follows only its own law — pursuing its own ends — but this law and these ends are part of a harmonious natural order.

Anarchy, in the sense of action un-governed by any lawful order, becomes possible only when a creature has the creativity to bring its cultural development across the threshold where it can begin to invent its own way of life. The sovereign actors of civilization are un-governed in a way that nothing in the previous history of life has been. If we look at one single actor, it looks like freedom; but if we look at the system as a whole, what we find is anarchy. This unnatural condition of anarchy, far from being our salvation, has been at the root of the torment of civilization. Let us look at anarchy.

The special evil of anarchy is that it brings evil to the fore. Why do we send out the National Guard when a disaster disrupts society's order? It is not because we are all looters waiting for a chance to pounce. But it only takes an uncontrolled few to terrorize the many. We see this problem manifested in Lebanon — the Lebanese have lacked an effective force to hold the violent ones among them in check. When historical circumstance undermined the foundations of Lebanese political order, the ruthless few were loosed from the abyss of the ensuing anarchy to rise to the top. Warlords selected from a struggle for power could then come to rule the destiny of thousands.

Anarchists paint nice pictures of how everyone will behave when the evil state is abolished. But why believe these pictures? Many believed Marx's nice pictures that once capitalism was overthrown, the state would wither away; but the Gulag shows what happens when you mistake the symptom for the disease.

I am not saying that people are evil, but that it is vain to hope that all will be good. What the parable of the tribes says is that if you have anarchy, unless

everyone is good the special evils of power and domination will spread through the system like a contaminant. Unless one is “so far gone in Utopian speculation” (in Madison's fine phrase) as to believe that every community will be immune to unwise ambitions, before embracing anarchism one should ask: in the absence of any overarching governmental structure, what happens if an outlaw community arises?

“Imagine a group of tribes living within reach of each other. If all choose the way of peace, then all may live in peace. But what if all but one choose peace, and that one is ambitious for expansion and conquest? What can happen to the others when confronted with an ambitious and potent neighbor?” This is the question I ask in my book, and then I answer: there are four alternatives, none of them good. They are: destruction of the weaker society; its transformation and absorption; its withdrawal from the area; and its successful self-defense, which regrettably requires imitating the aggressor to get a comparable level of competitive power.

The state is but a symptom of the fundamental problem, which is anarchy. Power is necessary for social survival, and hierarchy has enhanced power — from the emergence of the chiefdom, through the rise of the kingship, to the far-reaching tentacles of the nation state. (Male domination is also a symptom of the inescapability of the struggle for power: When groups are beset by external threats, greater power and status inevitably go to the protectors. The evils of patriarchy are to be seen not as the evils of men, but as the evils of having to maximize social power.)

The struggle for power, and the selection for the ways of power, have condemned civilization also to that other evil: environmental destruction. A society cannot survive the long run unless it survives the short run. To survive the short run, it must have power enough to resist potential aggressors. Much of power comes from harnessing nature, and the maximal immediate power seems to be yielded by practices that are destructive in the long term. A society, therefore, whose own exploitation of nature cannot be sustained over the long term, can render unviable other societies whose practices are ecologically sound (though less productive of competitive power). (What is happening today in the Amazon — the displacement of ecologically sound cultures by the powerful but ecologically unsound — is typical of the social evolutionary process of the past 10,000 years.) Civilization has thus been like a mad dog — sick to the death, but able to infect the healthy with its disease.

All this leads to the very unanarchistic conclusion that if we want to eliminate these evils from human practice, we had better create sufficient government to control the free play of power. This means that if we do decentralize civilization into smaller communities — which I think would be a good move in many ways — there should be at the

same time a world order sufficient at least to keep would-be conquerors from entering that time-dishonored profession. And since the biosphere is a globally interdependent web, that world order should be able to constrain any of the actors from fouling the earth. This requires laws and means of enforcement.

At the minimum, a world order needs to protect communities from the unjust intrusion of others in the form of war and environmental degradation. Whether this order should go further — as in some kind of global bill of rights to protect individuals from injustice within their communities — is a question of a different sort. I believe in cultural diversity, but I am not sure I'm willing, in the name of that value, to make disasters like Jonestown a purely "domestic" matter.

The solution to our problems requires structures to govern the play of power. Admittedly, government is often simply an embodiment of the corrupt rule of power; government is often only warfare in static form, with the strong standing with a foot on the neck of the weak. But tyranny does not support a case against government. On the contrary, tyranny is the form of government to which the anarchic struggle for power gives rise. Only when the operation of power is strictly governed can justice result. Only government can restrain power in the interests of other values.

Government is a paradox, but there is no escaping it. This is because power is a paradox: our emergence out of the natural order makes power an inevitable problem for human affairs, and only power can control power. [Ed. note: True; our fall was our "emergence out of the natural order."] It is fortunate for us that the framers of the US Constitution understood this paradoxical problem: that is why we in this society, for all its glaring imperfections, can freely discuss the evils that the play of power produces around us, and freely search for solutions.

If you want to know how terribly difficult it is to solve the problem of power through setting up good governmental structures, ask us Americans. But if you want to know how profoundly nightmarish the problem of power can be in the absence of a governing order, ask the Lebanese.

Sincerely,

Andrew Bard Schmookler

Andrew Bard Schmookler is one of the best ecological thinkers in the US, and we strongly recommend his book.

Ed. note: We encourage a discussion in our pages on anarchism, the state and its relation to environmental destruction, and visions of future ecological societies. We would especially appreciate receiving letters or essays from some of the deeply ecological writers, such as Dolores LaChapelle, Schmookler, Bookchin, Starhawk, Karen Warren, Ed Abbey, Bill Devall, Joanna Macy, Michael Cohen, Gary Snyder and George Sessions.