

# Schmookler Replies to Australopithecus

By Andrew Bard Schmookler

I was delighted that a review of my book, *The Parable of the Tribes: The Problem of Power in Social Evolution*, appeared in *Earth First!*. For much of the passion that inspired the writing of my book is the same as the passion that is blazoned in your pages.

I was pleased also that your reviewer, Australopithecus, evidently from a species akin to my own, the mis-named *Homo sapiens*, thought as highly as he did of *The Parable of the Tribes*. However, there are a few statements in the review that would give your readers an inaccurate understanding of the views I present in my book. I'd like here to correct such misunderstandings.

The review says that I find capitalism basically decent. In fact, while I do find many of the usual left-wing criticisms of the market economy misguided, my purpose in the part of Chapter 7 entitled "The Market as a Power System" was to spell out the strongest legitimate critique possible of the workings of the capitalist economy. My conclusion with respect to the market exemplifies my thesis throughout the book: that the market, like other systems ruled by power, cannot be trusted to rule our destiny wisely or humanely. The market attends well only to certain values, while ignoring others — including most emphatically the panoply of values connected with the natural world. The most that can be said for the market is that, properly limited by political choices reflecting other values, it can be a useful tool.

Nor was I praising our species when I wrote that "there is something special about the human animal." By special I meant unique — as one might also say that the genocide committed by the Nazis was unique. Indeed, I introduce the book with the idea that this book is intended to help remove our remaining prideful illusions about ourselves as a species.

The reviewer suggests that biologists would take issue with my emphasis on competition as the driving force in evolution. He would be right if that were how I characterize biological evolution. But it is not. The whole purpose of Chapter 6, "Systems of Nature and of Civilization," is to delineate the various ways that the evolution of civilization represents a destructive departure from the evolutionary processes that characterized the previous, biological evolution of living systems. I stress that the competition evident in biological nature forms part of a fundamentally synergistic and harmonious order that protects the viability of all the components of the system. Whereas the struggle for power among civilized societies takes place outside the regulation of any life-serving order.

When creatures begin to invent their own way of life, it might appear that their societies would be free to develop in any way the creatures want. But what is freedom for a single society is anarchy in an interacting system of

those societies. Anarchy, which Hobbes regarded as the state of nature, is indeed a state of unnatural — for it had never before existed in the history of life. This is the circumstance from which arise the struggle for power and the inevitable spread of the ways of power that my book describes.

Finally, I'd like to respond to the reviewer's disappointment that I do not have more to say about how to escape our plight. Of the various critiques I have encountered since the book was published a year and a half ago, this has been the most frequent and the most distressing to me.

*The Parable of the Tribes* shows that the essence of our problem lies in the overarching anarchy within which human action takes place. So long as that anarchy persists, the destructive rule of power will persist. The general nature of the solution is clear: we must create a life-serving order that both allows and requires us to act consistently with the needs of human beings and of other living things. If we are to survive for much longer, our present anarchy — a recent development of only some 10,000 years — must be made but a brief interval between two systems that embody wholeness: the pure order of nature from which we emerged, but to which we cannot return; and another framework of human devising to guide and limit human activity.

It is true that these general notions, even if accepted, do not offer detailed guidance on how to get there. Still less do they promise a quick solution to the destruction that plagues us. But that, unfortunately, is the human condition. We will not reach the promised land any time soon; and we are required to grope our way toward it without a map. This is frightening, demanding of us resources of courage and faith. What distresses me is the thought that those who fault a book that diagnoses 10,000 years of destructiveness for not offering a "solution" are shrinking from facing the true nature of our predicament and of what escaping from it demands of us.

I, for one, believe we can make it. I believe that if the readers of *Earth First!* were to see Earth 1000 years from now, they would weep with joy and relief at what they found.

*Andrew Bard Schmookler is the author of Parable of the Tribes and a commentator for All Things Considered on National Public Radio.*

**REVIEWERS REPLY:** Most of my doubts about Schmookler's book have now been dispelled. This is such an excellent response to my misguided review that I'm almost glad I did his book a disservice. However, some of us will be bothered by his negative use of the term "anarchy." Anarchism as advocated by such thinkers as Murray Bookchin seems a very positive and ecological goal toward which society should, perhaps, move. What do you think of Bookchin's advocacy of anarchism, Mr. Schmookler?