

Schmookler Replies to Anarchists'

Replies to Schmookler's Reply to the Anarchists

by Andrew Bard Schmookler

As fun as this is, we just can't keep meeting like this. But Christoph Manes has taken our discussion into new terrain, and I can't resist trekking there with him briefly.

Manes leaves behind the war and peace issue and heads for the wilderness. The war and peace issue was at the heart of my essentially Hobbesian critique of anarchy — anarchy seen as inevitably degenerating into Hobbes' "war of all against all" — but Manes now says he is willing to concede me that point momentarily, to focus on what is evidently his chief concern: preservation of wilderness.

Manes now addresses the question: how should human affairs be organized in order to protect the environment? He proceeds to argue that centralization of power is at the heart of the environmental problem, and that anarchy is the only solution.

I share Manes' passion to find a way to change the human system so that the destruction of nature will stop. Many years ago, I had fantasies of what would happen on this planet if all humans suddenly disappeared. If our species was wiped out in some manner that left all else intact, Earth would immediately begin to heal itself. Rivers would grow clear. Overgrazed grasslands would recover their lushness. The primeval forest would break up the concrete. Once again, Earth would be whole. And, without *Homo* so-called *sapiens*, Earth would be safe — at least until, millions of years hence, other creatures (maybe descendants of today's Raccoons) became cultural animals and crossed the fateful threshold into some kind of civilization.

So, I share Manes' concerns about the disease; but we differ on the subject of possible cures. Manes wants power to devolve: we must dismantle the power structures of our civilization and return to wilderness. I want our structures to evolve further: only by creating a better order, more imitative of the intricate order of nature, can we create a benign and viable civilization.

Let me underscore again the point that the further evolution of civilization I advocate is NOT the "all-powerful" world government Robert Goodrich and others have attributed to me in this exchange. My solution to the Hobbesian war of all against all is not the one proposed by Hobbes: that we surrender all our liberties to enthrone an absolute ruler to protect us from one another. Rather, I am more of a Lockean: let's give up only those liberties we must in order to prevent the reign of destruction, and let's create all possible safeguards to protect ourselves from our "protectors."

Whether or not it is possible to *move forward* into a new kind of civilization, we should consider whether it is possible to *return* to the Garden of Eden — to a stateless and environmentally harmonious way of life — as Manes proposes. The problem with Manes' vision of a viable future is that it is based on a past that never was. Like Ronald Reagan's nostalgia for the good old days when everyone was white, self-reliant, and kind to their neighbors (like an ad for Country-time Lemonade), Manes'

politics seem premised on illusions about how destructive power has been wielded in the past. Though I admit the comparison is not nice, it is not altogether invidious: both Manes and Reagan want to get government off our backs, as if government were just a disease and not also a cure to other ills that run rampant in its absence.

Manes says that it is the "power relations" of a "centralized state" that make possible the despoiling of nature. Pre-Columbian Indians and Germanic tribesmen, he says, "may have been anxious about revenge killing, marauding enemies, and any number of human problems, but not about their world being poisoned." Why? Because, he answers, there was "no central power to make possible the wholesale destruction of the environment."

I have spent my adult life studying the course of social evolution, and the record does not support Manes' portrait of a prestate Eden. In our previous exchange, I questioned the historical validity of another of Manes' dichotomies. There, Manes declared a chasm of difference between the violence committed by centralized entities and that by less centralized groups like the Vikings. Manes' eagerness to find the source of all evil in the centralization of power now leads him into a similar distortion with respect to the evil of human despoliation of nature.

It is, of course, true that the Germanic tribes "didn't have to regulate dumping and auto emissions." But it is not true that the human destruction of the environment has historically been — or is now — dependent upon or the consequence of centralized politics.

Arguably the worse ecological damage our species has done to this planet has been through overgrazing. In areas like the Middle East, this process has been ongoing for millennia: herds of domesticated animals, laying bare the topsoil by their over-concentrated and over-protected consumption of plants, have spread desert across mountains and valleys that once were verdant. (The process was slow enough in terms of a human lifetime that no one saw reason to "worry" while contributing to this environmental catastrophe.) Far from being the effect of centralized states, this form of environmental degradation has been the specialty of pastoral peoples who — because of the same qualities of terrain that make herding animals the most suitable means of livelihood — have been the most autonomous from the domination by large power systems.

Another major form of degradation of the biosphere has been deforestation. Those pre-state Germanic tribes of whom Manes seems so appreciative were great practitioners of this art. The stripping of Europe's virgin forests to make room for the simpler systems of human agriculture went on for millennia under the aegis of various Aryan and other peoples before, with the rise of Rome, a Julius Caesar ever ventured forth to subdue the Gauls or Visigoths.

The evidence that refutes Manes' linkage between environmental destruction and powerful central authorities remains visible today. I had the mixed fortune of living for years in beautiful Prescott, Arizona, an area where

human carelessness with nature is all too evident. My article on Prescott's Dells that appeared in these pages a few months ago spoke of the libertarian belief of the people in the region in the absolute rights of private property: it was as individuals that the miners and ranchers began the process of despoliation a century ago, and it is because of resistance to the notion that political power should be used to regulate the pursuit of private ends that the process proceeds relatively unchecked. It is not state power, but the ingrained individualist resistance to state power that facilitates the degradation of Prescott's natural beauty.

Only through the exercise of state power can environmental destruction reliably be stopped. When US Steel fights the EPA over government regulations compelling the company to reduce emissions, is it state power that is the environmental villain?

I'm sure that Manes would be uncomfortable with the people I'm lumping into his side of the argument. His anarchist vision is certainly not intended to make the world safer for the US Steels of the world. But our argument is not directly about technology but about political structures or the lack of them. The problem the anarchist must confront is: How will you stop those who would use technology to serve their own ends at the costs of destroying nature?

This is analogous to our previous exchange about violence and injustice. There the issue was not the greedy man who destroys land to mine gold, but the warlord who tramples others to increase his power. The anarchists are not trying to leave the world prey to either US Steel or Ghenghis Kahn. But without state power arrayed against them, what will stop the unfettered expansion of their power at the expense of the well-being of both humans and the biosphere?

Some anarchist analysis may suggest that the lusts for power and wealth that drive the despoilers of the world arise because of our "fallen" condition in a world of centralized politics. It might be presumed that in a world ordered by anarchist principles, these lusts would disappear and there would therefore be no need to erect barriers to contain their free expression. But, with respect to the gangster or the industrial robber baron, such analysis would be unconvincing.

Again, the heart of the present disputation is not, as one might infer from Manes' latest letter, about technology per se but about the question of anarchy against an empowered central government. Manes has brought in technology on the premise that its destructiveness is a function of the emergence of centralized powers. He says we must go back to decentralization to save nature; I say we must go forward, to develop more fully the political order that is required to protect humanity and nature from destructive human action.

Look at the Third World for another demonstration that it is not devolution but further evolution that we need. Many environmentalists now say that it is in the nations of the Third World, more than in the more developed industrial nations, that the biosphere is in

greatest jeopardy. Why is this? Certainty, poverty and the population explosion are part of it: desperate people, like those denuding the last vestiges of vegetation in the Sahel to provide their meager fuel supplies, do what they must or they perish. But another crucial element is the undeveloped nature of their political systems. The state is often still rudimentary, and such political power as there is remains corrupt and unaccountable — as power tends to be in newly emergent systems — and often is simply an extension of private interests. Thus, greedy entrepreneurs face no obstacles to stripping tropical forests to make luxury furniture. And corporations that have been compelled to reduce certain practices in the more developed polities of the North (e.g. the use of hazardous chemicals in the workplace) can use them with impunity in the Third World.

We cannot go back. Our species has discovered the means to exercise power — over each other and over nature — and this power can be controlled only by checks against it, that is, by other power. The problem is not that all humans are devils, it is that not all humans are saints — whatever the nature of their political order or disorder. Some will pursue power and, possessing it, will abuse it. The way power operates in a fragmented system, unless it is checked, enables those with the advantage of power to dictate the course of the evolution of human systems.

Manes challenges me, saying that my position can have "intellectual integrity" only if I confront the problem of technology. Unlike my position, he says, that of the anarchists is truly critical because it "opposes technological culture in its totality." In turn, I challenge the anarchists, saying that their prescription for our ills can be truly therapeutic only if they meet the challenge of containing the contaminant of power. The anarchists' arguments still have not dealt with *The Parable of the Tribes*.

The "condition of our freedom," Manes says, is "being in a state of nature." If he's right, we're in trouble. We've already been in the state of nature, and the rest, to make literal use of a figure of speech, is history. If we could go back, we'd just recapitulate the ugly course we've already taken.

Manes' option is a fond illusion. There is no way to put the djinni of our power back into the bottle. But there is the possibility that we can learn to tame it. This way entails moving forward toward a more whole order, a Local Order of order that keeps as much power dispersed in the parts as is consistent with preventing injustice and that hedges whatever power must be invested in the center with checks and balances.

Clearly, Manes will have nothing of this "taming" of the djinni. To him, this djinni is the Evil One, and those who try to learn to live with the devil seal a damned fate for themselves. Manes decries efforts to use the weight of law to bend the use of technology into a viable form. "One could easily get the impression," he writes, that I "would be satisfied with a rational exploitation of resources, a rational abatement of pollution."

Indeed I would. What is rational for our species is to conduct ourselves in a way that can perpetuate the viability of the Earth's living system, on which our survival also depends. Since the beginnings of civilization, and accelerated as human powers have grown, our species has wielded its tech-

nology in a way that undermines the foundations of the biosphere. But no creature, as Gregory Bateson says, can win against its environment for long. The pursuit of "victories" of this sort is not rational.

Ten thousand years of civilization acting liker a cancer in the biosphere does not mean that no other kind of civilization is possible. To understand how we might tame our hitherto destructive powers, we have to see this human experiment in a larger evolutionary perspective.

To us as mortal creatures, 10,000 years seems like a long time, but in the perspective of the history of life, it is but an instant. The evolutionary process that knit such harmony in the biosphere is laboring also through us to bring this sudden, new offshoot called civilization into harmony with the whole. And one of the channels through which it is working is that same rational faculty by which we came to possess these dangerous powers: the capacity to understand how the world works, and to adjust our actions in it accordingly in order to protect our survival. Increasingly, reasonable people are becoming aware that a truly rational strategy for species survival must take into account far more than our own immediate needs.

Epochal changes are occurring: slow from the perspective of our day-to-day experience, but rapid in historical terms. The very fact that, unlike the Germanic deforesters, we do worry about the future of our planet is itself one of the hopeful new signs. Even in the course of my own lifetime, the forces of wholeness have made progress in restraining our abuse of nature. In the most developed countries, the means of restraint (virtually nil not long ago) have grown more rapidly than — and thus have gained upon — the momentum of destruction. This is not to say that the destructive process has yet been arrested, let alone reversed. But I would wager that within the lifetime of a baby born today the degradation of the environment in North America (above the Rio Grande) and perhaps in Europe will be brought to a halt.

"Technological culture" — and that's what "civilization" is — does not have to be of the strip-mining, smoke-belching sort. Already, the movement of technology — with silicon chips and electromagnetic communications — suggests that technological development need not be synonymous with ever-increasing intrusion upon nature. I do not presume to know what the technology of a viable civilization would look like, but we need not assume that only in a "state of nature" can human beings live in harmony with nature. Manes denigrates my call for some sort of global order as requiring technology (roads, communication, etc.) and thus mandating the continuation of civilization's destructiveness. But the global coordination and regulation that is required to contain the problem of power does not condemn us to perpetuating the blight upon the Earth that our civilization has historically been.

Bringing this viable civilization into being is not impossible, but its birth pangs may be severe. We are in an evolutionary crisis. Negotiating it successfully will take all the courage and intelligence and caring we can muster.

My anarchist interlocutors and I share fundamental values pertinent to this crisis. Goodrich is right that we are essentially allies. (I've not dealt with Goodrich's critique of me because I'd simply have repeated what I wrote here in the previous exchange.)

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Our differences can be important too. The reshaping of our power systems is the only means to save Earth. We meet in the pages of *Earth First!* because we are committed to protecting those sacred "interests" that our systems so shamefully neglect. It would be a shame if people who share those values, led astray by the anarchists' wholesale rejection of our systems, contented themselves with outrage at the abuse of power, and scorned to enter the arena of power where our destiny will be decided.

We cannot afford for some of the most passionate lovers of Earth to sit out what is, for humankind, the only game in town.