

# Schmookler Replies to the Anarchists

by Andrew Bard Schmookler

Dear Australopithecus

Thank you for sending me the thoughtful responses to my letter. I thank the writers of these letters.

I do not expect that we will achieve, through this correspondence, a complete meeting of minds. But my correspondents and I do share some fundamental values, and a deep outrage at the destructiveness of our civilization. So, it does seem worthwhile to continue the dialogue to see if greater mutual understanding can be gained.

The basic question at issue is: what is the source of violence and oppression which have plagued humankind, and what is required for eliminating (or greatly reducing) the role of those evils in human affairs? How one diagnoses the ills is, of course, closely related to how one prescribes for their cure.

My correspondents, most of whom describe themselves as anarchists, are understandably offended at my attributing our problems to anarchy. Likewise, since they evidently regard centralized, governing powers as the chief agents of evil, and since they interpret my call for a "world order" as implying a global centralized power, they are outraged by my proposed cure, regarding it as simply the ultimate apotheosis of the disease. But, as several of them indicate, some of the disagreement can be alleviated by clarifying our definitions.

## ANARCHY AND VIOLENCE: DEFINITIONS AND SUBSTANCE

Let us take, first, the concept of "anarchy." One theme in several of the letters is that it is unfair of me to use anarchy as a synonym for chaos. Mr. Abbey bids us remember that anarchy means not "no rule" but "no rulers." Another correspondent says that "anarchy means lack of hierarchy." The picture of the anarchic society that emerges from these letters is one that is somewhat loosely and informally organized (dare I say governed?) through direct democratic cooperative mechanisms. (Local communities might set up "organs" that could "coordinate" but not "govern," as one correspondent puts it.)

How does this portrait relate to my definition of anarchy? According to my definition, a system is anarchic to the extent that the system as a whole lacks the means substantially to control or prevent reasonably anticipatable unjust violence or other forms of coercive domination by one part of the system against another. (I recognize that by this definition anarchy characterizes not only an ungoverned situation like that in Lebanon but also a tyrannical government like that of Nazi Germany or Pol Pot's Cambodia. The "anarchists" and I thus share a common concern: for eliminating the condition where the use of power is not adequately governed. This condition probably applies — to some degree — to all civilized societies.)

One of the correspondents claims that anarchy is not the Hobbesian war of all against all. But the question remains whether, if society were set up as he would like, that Hobbesian condition would develop.

A system must be able to deal with "reasonably anticipatable" attempts of some to abuse others. One divergence in our analyses seems to be about the nature of the threat with which the system must be prepared to deal. When my correspondents face this threat at all, it is generally in terms of the aberrant criminal individual. Manes says that those whose rights are violated must deal with the situation as best they can; while Abbey speaks of "vigilante justice," which he'd prefer to call "democratic justice."

But the anarchic community must be able to deal with more than just the neighborhood bully. Organized gangs will arise — not because human nature is evil, but simply because what can happen generally does. (One correspondent suggests that the world he envisions — having "abolished material deprivation" — will be immune to the evils of power-seeking. This reflects a simplistic view of why our history has been so plagued by the rule of power-maximizing individuals and systems.) This is where *The*

*Parable of the Tribes* becomes relevant, because it shows how a system that cannot defend itself against the worst will develop in directions dictated by the worst. My correspondents underestimate the dangers from uncontrolled power against which a civilized system must guard. This contributes to their overly sanguine view of a world of loosely knit autonomous communities.

## AN EVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVE

Understanding the way our systems evolve is essential to grasping the problem of power. This is what is lacking in Manes' analysis. In several places, Manes draws a chasm of a distinction between violence among centralized states and that among less centralized entities, such as "pre-Columbian tribes going on the warpath, or Vikings sacking Lindisfarne." But even if the difference were as great as he suggests — which I question — the important point is that violence (or, the operation of power) at one level leads toward the escalation of violence to a new evolutionary level.

This pattern of escalation has been repeated through history and across the world. (Among the works I cite on this subject in *The Parable of the Tribes*, that of the anthropologist Robert Carneiro is most pertinent.) Two correspondents fault me for condemning anarchy on the basis of history's course: just because a fragmented (or, as they would prefer, decentralized) system evolved in destructive ways once, they argue, there's no reason to assume an inherent tendency for it to do so. But it did not happen only once. Civilization developed more or less independently a half dozen times. The uncontrolled interactions among tribes led to their consolidations into chiefdoms, and the struggle among chiefdoms led to the first imperial systems, and so the initially fragmented communities were ultimately unified under the domination of oppressive centralized states. This basic pattern was repeated in Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, India, Mesoamerica and coastal Peru.

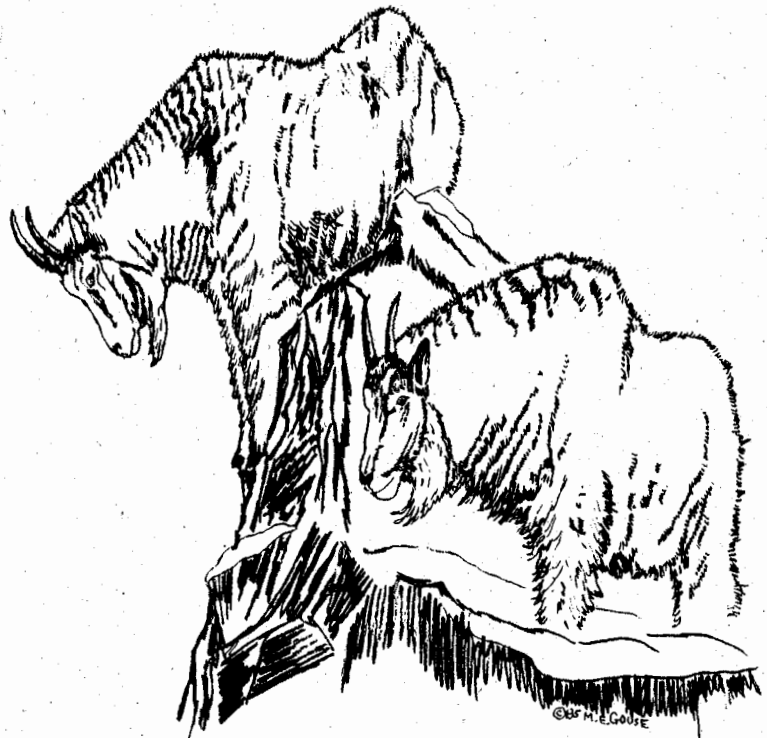
An evolutionary understanding of the struggle for power tells us that whatever way we design our civilization, it must be able to contain the contaminant of power.

## CONTROLLING POWER

My correspondents are justifiably apprehensive about a single global power, a Hobbesian kind of solution. "A world government equipped with supreme power," writes Abbey, "suggests a planetary tyranny." ("What," writes another, "will protect us against a global state headed by some closet Nazi like former UN head Kurt Waldheim?") Several correspondents seem to assume that my call for a "world order" entailed establishing such a supreme power. But I, too, would prefer a less centralized solution. (As my correspondents disliked my equating anarchy with the war of all against all, so I disliked their equating "world order" with global tyranny.)

Manes proposes what, in the study of international affairs, is called "collective security." If one community "begins to centralize its power" — which in Manes' demography stands for the whole panoply of social evils — wouldn't a threatened community "do everything possible to stop them? And wouldn't similar communities feel obliged to help?"

Collective security is an appealing solution, allowing each "ally" to remain autonomous. But this approach to security has the fault of its virtues, namely that action that is voluntary may prove unreliable. Machiavelli described this problem, writing in a fragmented Italy which, to his distress, was being picked apart by external powers. The ancient Romans, he wrote, demonstrated that while the "potent prince" is making war upon one, the "other powers that are more distant and have no immediate intercourse with him will look upon this as a matter too remote for them to be concerned about, and will continue in this error until the conflagration spreads to their door, when they will have no means for extinguishing it except their own forces, which will no longer suffice when the fire has once gained the upper hand." In our century,



when Mussolini — the leader of an Italy at last unified — invaded Abyssinia, other nations did nothing, in disregard of their obligations under the collective security agreement of the League of Nations.

Nonetheless, at the global level — given the dangers of creating a single inescapable tyranny — I think that a collective security system, in conjunction with a small international peacekeeping force, might be the best solution. This could only work if the most potent conceivable actors had very limited military power in comparison with the power of the collective response that would check aggression, unlike the situation today where there are powers with virtual veto power over the survival of the globe.

To keep the peace among the smaller communities my correspondents envision, however, I think collective security would be a poor choice. In a network of such small and scattered entities, less formal and more voluntary security systems would be much less effective. Furthermore, the dangers of tyranny at the sub-global level would be less catastrophic. Here I think constituting (or retaining) some kind of limited central power would be necessary.

## THE DEMONIZATION OF CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

Just as I find my correspondents insufficiently concerned about the dangers of fragmentation (decentralization) of power in civilization, so do they seem to me too sweeping in their condemnation of centralized power.

But there is much in their view of centralized power and its corruption with which I agree. One says, "The state is both a source of and a product of social injustice." This statement — if the "is" were changed to "has usually been" — I would accept as good as one sentence summary as I could find of a section in *The Parable of the Tribes*, entitled "Men Are Not Ants: The Problem of Power in the Body Politic." That section reinforces the theme in these letters that it is often the worst among us who have risen to positions of power in civilized systems.

I also agree that the best protection against having power abused is to distribute it equally. In general I also favor participatory, direct democracy wherever it is feasible. Power to the people!

## EQUATING CENTRALIZATION WITH TYRANNY

However, I think two different meanings of "centralization" need to be recognized: 1) centralization meaning gross inequalities of power between members of a given polity, and 2) centralization meaning the constitution by the people, who retain ultimate power, of a central agency to perform functions on behalf of the whole. My correspondents treat the second as if it were simply and automatically a version of the

first. It is not.

Any division of labor, any hierarchical organization, any differentiation of a governing apparatus from the body politic carries real and serious dangers. But however difficult may be the task of creating a specialized apparatus system of governance without destroying the essentially democratic distribution of power, the task is not futile.

Moreover it is necessary. Not only for solving the problem of "anarchy" as I define it, but for other purposes as well. I cannot see, for example, how we will protect Earth from those who would despoil it for their own gain without a global system of law, monitoring and enforcement. And that requires a formal apparatus.

Also there are the general problems of making a society work well. My correspondents seem sanguine about the ability of loosely organized, directly participatory systems of governance to create the fair world they envision. A couple mention small-scale or shortlived examples. But what it takes to govern a little collective is as different from what it takes to govern a large, complex social system as are the differences between ventilating a little cottage and ventilating a large building. The cottage ventilates naturally through the cracks; try that in a large building and the air will be dead. Some might like to throw out everything in our society that makes it complex, but I'm not sure that is a realistic or desirable course. And when we do have complexity, the people need to delegate some of their collective governing tasks.

I spend several hours a day on keeping informed, but there's too much I don't know about. Even fulfilling one's responsibility in a representative democracy, let alone a direct one, is very difficult. Our elected national representatives — who generally work harder and are ethically no worse than most people — are overwhelmed with the many issues on which they must decide. They too lean on colleagues, not to mention their innumerable legislative and committee staff people, for expertise in various areas. Making a civilized society work — even for one who makes it a full time job and has the noblest of intentions — is a job of staggering complexity.

A jury, spending weeks weighing testimony, can generally deliver a reasonably just verdict. But the members of the jury focus on a single decision. We can't all serve on all the juries at once to make all the decisions that need to be made.

If the achievement of important social goals does require the existence of some formal governmental apparatus, then the question arises whether the costs of having such institutions are worth paying. My correspondents, writing about our representative democracy as if it were essentially equivalent to an

oligarchical tyranny, regard the costs as catastrophic. This seems to me a view, like in a carnival fun-mirror, that takes the actual elements but so changes their proportions as to produce a fundamentally distorted picture.

"Representative democracy," I recognize, is rife with dangers of corruption. The "representatives" can become powers in their own right, and the democracy eroded. They can, moreover, be servants of other powerful interests. But though the state is always at least partially "a source and product of social injustice," it is not always equally so. My correspondents condemn "the American Experiment" as a failure, citing the undeniable injustices of power in the US. I concur in many of their critiques. I know that, as one correspondent points out, the framers of the Constitution I praised were seeking a framework to serve their interests, and that subsequently power in the US has been used to help the most powerful few maintain and extend their domination over the many. But those who created the Constitution were not *only* serving themselves, they were also genuinely interested in constructing a just democracy. Consequently, power in the system they created is not *only* in the hands of the few, nor is it *only* used unjustly.

Abbey writes that "government serves the caprice of any person — philosopher or madman — who succeeds in seizing the levers of control." But government can have safety features built into it to prevent such seizure. Indeed, constitutional government in the US has for 200 years protected us — pretty well — from being subject to the caprice of madmen and criminals.

The workings of the American system are deeply flawed, but the differences between this system and the systems that are unadulterated manifestations of social injustice are as important as the differences between what we have and the ideal we can envision.

#### THE DANGERS OF REVOLUTIONARY UTOPIANISM

This leads to a fundamental difference: how we are to use our visions of an ideal world. On this crucial issue, both the right and the left make typical mistakes.

The error of the right is to regard the world as is as the best of all possible worlds. The right is so wedded to its "realism" that it entertains no image of an ideal world.

To the extent that conservative thought is truly based on principle, and not just dedicated to protecting those interests that are best served by the status quo, it understands but exaggerates the evils that must be contained by order. Exaggerating those evils, the right-wing ideology is often unconcerned with the evils of the existing system.

Several of my correspondents see me as one of these. A few of them describe my thinking as being itself a manifestation of the evil power-systems. (Manes, for example, says I fail to break out of the universe of discourse created by "centralization.") I agree that our power systems do make us think of human life in ways that interfere with our ability to change the world. But lumping me with the apologists of power is a bum rap.

*The Parable of the Tribes* is a truly radical critique of civilization. And my work continues to be devoted to providing a deep critique of what makes us destructive and to seeking a path to a more humane civilization. My coming, during the formulation of *The Parable of the Tribes*, to see our dilemma in terms more tragic than those of the utopian

#### Letters (cont)

*with us only slows us down. That's not to say that there isn't plenty for such people to do in the larger environmental movement (or that their involvement in EF! as a fellow-traveler or as a subscriber to this newspaper isn't welcome as long as they accept the rest of us for what we are and what we do and don't try to compromise us). But we are a very specific part of that larger movement. We do what we do best when we don't have to defend our use of a clenched green fist or monkeywrench as logos, when we can chant "Forests Yes, Freddies No!" without some liberal complaining that we're being "divisive" or some such rot. Besides, it is precisely that attitude of toughness, of no-compromise, of not nagging someone to join us that has attracted thousands of people to our banner without our having to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars in banal direct mail. Except for the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society (which is allied with us), we are the only tough, non-timid preservation group around. There is plenty of room for the timid in the environmental movement, but there has been no place for those who are tired of being timid until Earth First!. (Besides, Howard, I know that you are not timid. Your hardass approach on ORVs back when I worked for The Wilderness Society was a major inspiration to me to help start EF!.)— DF*

Dear SFB,

I was amused to read Roger Featherstone and Nancy Morton's "Open Letter to the 87 Rendezvous Committee" following close behind articles on anarchy. It clearly defined the age old anarchists' paradox: how do you organize the anarchists' picnic? That

pian revolutionary was not a cop out; it was working toward a balanced understanding.

If to my correspondents I seem to commit the error of the right, to me they seem to commit the error of the left. The error of the left has two related parts. The first is to condemn utterly whatever falls short of the ideal: whatever is tainted with evil is regarded as wholly evil. The second is to believe that if they can sweep away the world as it is, it will be replaced by the world as they see it in their ideal. The left often underestimates the multiplicity of factors that keep the world from realizing their ideal.

This error, as the history of revolutionary politics shows, is dangerous. A vision that damns indiscriminately all that is imperfect helps create hell on Earth. A policy that collapses the good but deeply flawed into the same file with the fundamentally evil helps create the conditions where evil thrives. If we recklessly sweep aside our flawed political structures, what fills the vacuum will not be the utopia for which we yearn but a still more tyrannical structure.

Wisdom requires a synthesis of the valid understandings of both left and right. We need the left's acute sensitivity to the injustices of the status quo, and the left's ceaseless struggle to set things right. But we also need the right's sense of caution. We need the understanding that some evils are necessary, and that rectifying even those evils that are unnecessary must be done carefully, lest we plunge from bad to worse.

*Andrew Bard Schmookler is nearing completion of his sequel to The Parable of the Tribes. This second book, which will undoubtedly be important and controversial, will discuss the origins of war.*

