

By Australopithecus

Review of *The Parable of the Tribes: The Problem of Power in Social Evolution* by Andrew Bard Schmookler. University of California Press. 400pp., \$19.95

Andrew Bard Schmookler's recent book, *The Parable of the Tribes*, is one of the more impressive and important books of this decade. In it, Schmookler looks back through history and pre-history to learn how we humans got ourselves and all life into such a dismal mess.

Schmookler's basic thesis is that after civilization began, violence between different peoples — and stemming from that, violence against Earth — became an inevitable part of the evolution of humanity. The "parable of the tribes" explains this inevitability roughly as follows: As long as neighboring tribes all act peacefully, peace reigns; but as soon as any one tribe becomes aggressive, all tribes must adopt the ways of violence. Consider a tribe's alternatives when faced by a hostile neighbor: The peaceful tribe can surrender, flee, or fight; any of which amounts to a victory for the ways of violence. Even as natural

evolution selects for the strongest organisms and/or communities of organisms, social evolution selects for the most powerful societies. (Schmookler uses the word 'power' in the sense of power over; it would be worthwhile to see a critique of Schmookler's theories by someone, e.g. Joanna Macy, within the growing movement of persons who think that power in the sense of power over could be replaced by power in the sense of power with.) Societies attain power partly by developing technologies which exploit nature, hence nature too becomes a victim of the power struggles of social evolution.

Schmookler's parable offers a simple yet compelling theory on the downfall of humanity. For this and many other reasons, Schmookler's work is brilliant. One of the most pleasing aspects of the book for those of us with a primeval bent is his discussion of the harmonious ways of life of primal peoples. Primal peoples generally seem to have lived lives unfettered by the many restrictions that make modern life unpleasant; restrictions such as tedious labor, or contrived notions of good and evil (morality is a human construct arising after humanity's fall from the state of nature, Schmookler's work suggests).

Despite all its good points, Schmookler's book will often disappoint many readers. Political leftists will be aghast to read his discussion of the merits of US capitalism vs. Soviet communism, in which Schmookler says that the US system is basically decent whereas the Soviet system is basically bad. The latter claim is reasonable; the former is not. Feminists may resent the lack of attention Schmookler pays to the ways in which violence against Earth and humans has been historically tied to the male dominance of societies for the past 8000 years or so. Ernest Becker, the late highly acclaimed author of *The Denial of Death* would think that Schmookler overlooks the immense importance of fear of death in shaping human cultures. Biologists might question his strong stress on competition as the driving force in evolution, insofar as he underrates the importance of cooperation (symbiosis) in shaping evolution. We radical ecologists wish Schmookler had discussed in more detail how his parable ties in with violence against Earth. Furthermore, we may question whether Schmookler's is a biocentric perspective on life. Some of us grow apprehensive when we read "there is something special about the human animal." We are apt to agree more with his suggestion that human consciousness may prove to be merely an unsuccessful evolutionary experiment.

Lastly, anyone wishing for an answer to the world's desperate plight will not find it. Schmookler explains how we entered our plight, but not how we can escape it. He hints that his theoretical solution is forthcoming. This does not inspire confidence; if he is as thorough in this next project, it may not appear until after most of Earth is a wasteland.

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