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[The Parable Of The Tribes](#)

A new look at how the history of civilization
may have been largely shaped
by the raw struggle for power *between societies*

By Andrew Schmookler

One of the articles in [Governance \(IC#7\)](#)
Originally published in **Autumn 1984** on page 5
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The following article is based on excerpts from the first part of a major new book (same title and author, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, 400pp, \$19.95) that argues that the history of civilization has been largely shaped by the way that, as a system, civilization has no mechanisms for restraining the raw struggle for power between societies. Schmookler brings a remarkable depth of both scholarship and insight to this issue, tracing (in the latter parts of the book) the myriad insidious ways that this struggle has thwarted human choice. He makes it clear that the problems we face now, as we try to come to grips with our planetary interconnectedness, can't simply be blamed on personalities or ideologies, but are rooted in the fundamental structure of 5000 years of international anarchy. The problem of power that he raises and explores is a fundamental challenge for governance (at many levels) that we must deal with somehow if we are to have any hope of creating a humane sustainable culture as a successor to the darkness we call civilization. If you want to deepen your understanding of the full challenge we face, you'll find the book a mind-stretcher and a sobering treat. Reprinted with permission.

The Dynamics of History

THE COMMONSENSE THEORY of social evolution offers a benign and reasonable view of human affairs. According to this image, people are continually hunting for ways to better their condition. (One immediately recognizes the Economic Man of capitalist theory.) The alternatives are readily generated by this pursuit of improvement. The longer the hunt goes on, the more alternatives are discovered. And, since man is an inventive as well as exploratory creature, what is discovered in the world is increasingly supplemented by what people have created. With the passage of time, therefore, more and more cultural alternatives become available for all aspects of our cultural business – how and what to produce, how to govern ourselves, what to think, how to travel, play, make music, and so on. The process of selection is done by people. The criterion for selection? People choose what they believe will best meet their needs, replacing old cultural forms when new and better ones become available. Again, the resonance with economic theory is striking: social evolution is the product of choices made in the marketplace of cultural possibilities.

The commonsense theory of selection by human choice leads one to expect a continuous betterment of the human condition. For a story of improvement, however, the history of civilization makes rather dismal reading, and as the culmination of ten thousand years of progress the twentieth century is deeply disappointing. It is not simply that history is strewn with regrettable events, with accidents leaving carnage and wreckage on the thoroughfare bound for Progress. The road itself has been treacherous. If the stupendous historical transformation in the structure of human life has been the result of people choosing what they believe will best satisfy their needs, why have not human needs been better met?

The idea of history as progress is itself of relatively recent origin. And those who endorse that idea are usually looking only at relatively recent history for support. But even the advances of modern civilization have their nightmarish side, escalating as they have the destructive capacities of civilization. Looking at history as a whole, it is far from clear that the main "advances" of civilized societies have consistently improved the human condition. In earlier eras of history, the cutting edge of civilization's progress led from freedom into bondage for the common person. The great monuments of the ancient world were built with the sweat of slaves whose civilized ancestors had not known the oppressor's whip. After four thousand years the pyramids of Egypt can still stand as an emblem of the

problem of civilization, that its achievements are more reliably impressive than benign.

The idea of progress has relied in another way on the lack of a clear vision of the distant past. The life of primitive peoples is widely assumed to have been nasty, brutish, and short. The step from the "savage" state to the "civilized" is consequently assumed to have been straight up. Increasingly, however, as anthropologists have taken a closer and less ethnocentric look at hunter-gatherers, the evidence has shown that primitive life was not so bad.

Among hunting-and-gathering bands, the burden of labor is comparatively small, leaving more time than most civilized people have known for play, music, dance. The politics of these small societies are largely free of coercion and inequality. Relationships are close and enduring. Primitives enjoy a wholeness and freedom in their lives which many civilized peoples may well envy. This new view of our starting point demands a new look at the entire course.

The Struggle For Power

In his classic, *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes describes what he calls "the state of nature" as an anarchic situation in which all are compelled, for their very survival, to engage in a ceaseless struggle for power. About this "war of all against all," two important points should be made: that Hobbes's vision of the dangers of anarchy captured an important dimension of the human condition, and that to call that condition "the state of nature" is a remarkable misnomer.

In nature, all pursue survival for themselves and their kind. But they can do so only within biologically evolved limits. The living order of nature, though it has no ruler, is not in the least anarchic. Each pursues a kind of self-interest, each is a law unto itself, but the separate interests and laws have been formed over aeons of selection to form part of a tightly ordered harmonious system. Although the state of nature involves struggle, the struggle is part of an order. Each component of the living system has a defined place out of which no ambition can extricate it. Hunting- gathering societies were to a very great extent likewise contained by natural limits.

With the rise of civilization, the limits fall away. The natural self-interest and pursuit of survival remain, but they are no longer governed by any order. The new civilized forms of society, with more complex social and political structures, created the new possibility of indefinite social expansion: more and more people organized over more and more territory. All other forms of life had always found inevitable limits placed upon their growth by scarcity and consequent death. But civilized society was developing the unprecedented capacity for unlimited growth as an entity. (The limitlessness of this possibility does not emerge fully at the outset, but rather becomes progressively more realized over the course of history as people invent methods of transportation, communication, and governance which extend the range within which coherence and order can be maintained.) Out of the living order there emerged a living entity with no defined place.

In a finite world, societies all seeking to escape death- dealing scarcity through expansion will inevitably come to confront each other. Civilized societies, therefore, though lacking inherent limitations to their growth, do encounter new external limits – in the form of one another. Because human beings (like other living creatures) have "excess reproductive capacity," meaning that human numbers tend to increase indefinitely unless a high proportion of the population dies prematurely, each civilized society faces an unpleasant choice. If an expanding society willingly stops where its growth would infringe upon neighboring societies, it allows death to catch up and overtake its population. If it goes beyond those limits, it commits aggression. With no natural order or overarching power to prevent it, some will surely choose to take what belongs to their neighbors rather than to accept the limits that are compulsory for every other form of life.

In such circumstances, a Hobbesian struggle for power among societies becomes inevitable. We see that *what is freedom from the point of view of each single unit is anarchy in an ungoverned system of those units*. A freedom unknown in nature is cruelly transmuted into an equally unnatural state of anarchy, with its terrors and its destructive war of all against all.

As people stepped across the threshold into civilization, they inadvertently stumbled into a chaos that had never before existed. The relations among societies were uncontrolled and virtually uncontrollable. Such an

ungoverned system imposes unchosen necessities: civilized people were compelled to enter a struggle for power.

The meaning of "power," a concept central to this entire work, needs to be explored. Power may be defined as the capacity to achieve one's will against the will of another. The exercise of power thus infringes upon the exercise of choice, for to be the object of another's power is to have his choice substituted for one's own. Power becomes important where two actors (or more) would choose the same thing but cannot have it; power becomes important when the obstacles to the achievement of one's will come from the will of others. Thus as the expanding capacities of human societies created an overlap in the range of their grasp and desire, the intersocietal struggle for power arose.

But the new unavoidability of this struggle is but the first and smaller step in the transmutation of the apparent freedom of civilized peoples into bondage to the necessities of power.

The Parable

The new human freedom made striving for expansion and power possible. Such freedom, when multiplied, creates anarchy. The anarchy among civilized societies meant that the play of power in the system was uncontrollable. In an anarchic situation like that, no one can choose that the struggle for power shall cease. But there is one more element in the picture: *no one is free to choose peace, but anyone can impose upon all the necessity for power.* This is the lesson of the parable of the tribes.

Imagine a group of tribes living within reach of one another. 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 by an ambitious and potent neighbor? Perhaps one tribe is attacked and defeated, its people destroyed and its lands seized for the use of the victors. Another is defeated, but this one is not exterminated; rather, it is subjugated and transformed to serve the conqueror. A third seeking to avoid such disaster flees from the area into some inaccessible (and undesirable) place, and its former homeland becomes part of the growing empire of the power-seeking tribe. Let us

suppose that others observing these developments decide to defend themselves in order to preserve themselves and their autonomy. But the irony is that successful defense against a power-maximizing aggressor requires a society to become more like the society that threatens it. Power can be stopped only by power, and if the threatening society has discovered ways to magnify its power through innovations in organization or technology (or whatever), the defensive society will have to transform itself into something more like its foe in order to resist the external force.

I have just outlined four possible outcomes for the threatened tribes: destruction, absorption and transformation, withdrawal, and imitation. *In every one of these outcomes the ways of power are spread throughout the system.* This is the parable of the tribes.

This parable is a theory of social evolution which shows that power is like a contaminant, a disease, which once introduced will gradually yet inexorably become universal in the system of competing societies. More important than the inevitability of the struggle for power is the profound social evolutionary consequence of that struggle once it begins. *A selection for power among civilized societies is inevitable.* If anarchy assured that power among civilized societies could not be governed, the selection for power signified that increasingly the ways of power would govern the destiny of mankind. This is the new evolutionary principle that came into the world with civilization. Here is the social evolutionary black hole that we have sought as an explanation of the harmful warp in the course of civilization's development.

Power Versus Choice In Social Evolution

The parable of the tribes provides a perspective on social evolution quite different from the commonsense view. Even without rewriting history, the parable of the tribes puts it in a wholly new light.

The Question of Choice The commonsense model emphasizes the role of free human choice: social evolution is directed by a benign process of selection in which people choose what they want from among the cultural alternatives. Viewed from the perspective of the parable of the tribes, human destiny is no longer governed by free human choice. At the heart of

the loss of choice is not that some could impose their will upon others, but that the whole reign of power came unbidden by anyone to dominate human life. People inadvertently stumbled into a struggle for power beyond their ability to avoid or to stop. This struggle generated a selective process, also beyond human control, which molded change in a direction that was inevitable – toward power maximization in human societies.

The parable of the tribes is not, however, rigidly deterministic. It does not maintain that specific events are preordained. Even major developments can arise owing to relatively fortuitous circumstances. The history of a continent may be altered by a burst of human creativity, a people's destiny may hinge on the wisdom or folly of its leaders, the texture of a culture may bear for ages the imprint of some charismatic visionary. What the parable of the tribes does assert is that once mankind had begun the process of developing civilization, the *overall direction* of its evolution was inevitable. This is suggested by the way civilization developed in those regions of the Old and New worlds where it arose more or less independently: their courses show significant parallels. People can act freely and intelligently, but uncontrolled circumstances determine the situation in which they must act and mold the evolution of their systems

Thus we find that the major trends in the transformation of human society have had the effect of increasing competitive power. This effect in itself does not prove that the selection for power has been the cause of these trends, especially since many of these transformations also increase a society's ability to achieve goals outside the realm of competition. A major purpose of my work is to make compelling the case for the contention of the parable of the tribes that the reign of power has been a significant factor in dictating the principal trends of the social evolution.

History-makers People do make history. Historical "forces" can be expressed only in the doings of flesh-and- blood human beings. In the commonsense view of social evolution, history is shaped by "the people" in general. To recognize that some people play a large historical role and that others play almost no role at all still falls within the realm of common sense. This inequality does not challenge the essentially democratic view of history as governed by human choices if the history makers are seen as representative of humanity. They can be representative if, like George Washington, they are first in the hearts of their countrymen, or if, like Bach

or Edison, they have an extraordinary ability to create what the people want.

The parable of the tribes, however, sees the history makers as an unrepresentative lot. To the extent that social evolution is governed by the selection for power, it is the power maximizers who play the important role in the drama of history. This group is selected for its starring role not by the human cast as a whole but by impersonal and ungoverned forces. They are therefore not representative in the democratic sense. Nor in the Gallup Poll sense, for they are selected because of how they are different from the other actors. They are different in their capacity to get and to wield power. Finally, they are not representative in the sense of the hero who carries his community's banner and fulfills his community's aspirations, for the power wielders of history have often been the conquerors, the destroyers, the oppressors of their fellow human beings. Though we must see history as a drama in which the main actors are the powerful and aggressive, we should not slip into seeing them as the villains, for it is not the actors who set the stage or who govern the thrust of the plot.

The category of "power maximizers" embraces a couple of different kinds of actors in the human drama. Most especially, it includes entire sovereign social entities (like the imperialistic tribes of the parable) who impinge upon other, previously autonomous societies. The parable of the tribes focuses primarily on the intersocietal system because that system forms the comprehensive context for human action, but more importantly because in that system anarchy has been most complete and least curable. Anarchy is at the core of the problem of power, making struggle inevitable and allowing the ways of power to spread uncontrolled throughout the whole like a contaminant. Thus, nowhere has power had so free and decisive a reign as in that arena of sovereign actors where, by definition, there is no power to hold all in awe.

Yet the problem of power exists in some form also within societies; for even though in one sense societies are governed, in another more profound sense they are usually subject to anarchy. The formation of government and the establishment of the rule of law can be – and usually have been in large measure – the embodiment of the rule of raw power rather than a restraint upon it. The search for a fuller understanding of the problem of power in social evolution leads therefore to an *intrasocietal analogue* of the parable

of the tribes. And the category of history's power maximizers includes those groups (like the feudal class) and individuals (like Stalin) who are successful in competing for power within a society's boundaries. Again, it is those distinguished by their capacity to grasp and wield power who gain the means to shape the whole (social) system according to their ways and their vision. And again, the history makers are cast in their roles not by the people affected but by an unchosen selective process; and generally, they are not those whom mankind would choose to guide its destiny.

The Spread of Cultural Innovations Both the commonsense view and the parable of the tribes would predict that innovations tend to spread from their place of origin. Both would predict an erosion of cultural diversity among societies, but the two theories view this process of cultural homogenization differently. If innovations are seen as "improvements," naturally they will spread. When people in more "backward" areas learn of better ways of meeting their needs, they will adopt them. Cultural diversity is thus diminished by a process of diffusion. In the perspective of the parable of the tribes, the historic trend toward cultural homogeneity is decreed by the reign of power. Whether or not a cultural innovation spreads throughout the system of interacting societies depends not so much on its ability to enhance the quality of human life as on its capacity to increase the competitive power of those who adopt it. The ways of power inevitably become universal. While the diffusion model represents cultural homogenization as the result of free human choice, the parable of the tribes stresses the role of compulsion: the conqueror spreads his ways either directly or by compelling others to imitate him in self-defense.

Civilization and Human Needs If civilization were governed by human choice, we would expect it to be fairly well designed for the fulfillment of human needs. This expectation led us earlier to the Rube Goldberg problem, the ludicrous disproportion between the gargantuan apparatus of civilization and the disappointing benefit in human terms. The parable of the tribes sweeps aside this dilemma. If the selection for power, and not choice, has governed the evolving shape of civilized society, there is no reason to expect the design to correspond with the needs of human beings. According to the parable of the tribes, civilized peoples have been compelled to live in societies organized for the maximization of competitive power. People become the servants of their evolving systems, rather than civilized society being the instrument of its members.

Not that the selection for power systematically selects what is injurious to people. The process is not hostile to human welfare, simply indifferent. Many things that serve power serve people as well, such as a degree of social order and the provision of adequate nutrition to keep people functioning. (As this implies, there are a great many roads to hell that the need for social power helps close off.) But the parable of the tribes suggests that the service to people of such power-enhancing attributes of society may be entirely incidental to their *raison d'être*. Those of us who now enjoy affluence and freedom as well as power are predisposed to believe that benign forces shape our destiny. But to the extent that our blessings are incidental by-products of the strategy for power at this point in the evolution of civilization, our optimism may be ill-founded. If the forces that now favor us are the same as those that earlier condemned masses of people to tyranny and bondage, the future requirements of power maximization may compel mankind not toward the heavenly utopia to which we aspire but toward the hellish dystopias that some like Orwell and Huxley have envisioned. Our well-being may prove to be less like that of the squire who feeds himself well off the land that he rules than like that of the dairy cow who, though pampered and well fed, is not served but exploited by the system in which she lives. The bottom line that governs her fate is not her own calculation; when she is worth more for meat than for milk, off she goes to the slaughterhouse.

Power and Choice Wisdom is often less a matter of choosing a particular view as the truth than of combining different truths in a balanced way. So it is with the parable of the tribes and the commonsense view of social evolution. The selection for power does govern a good deal of the evolution of civilization, but people also shape their destiny by their choices. The power wielders are, to be sure, prominent in the human drama, but there are creative and charismatic figures (Shakespeare, Buddha) whom we choose to give a very different kind of power to shape our experience. The ways of power may spread by compulsion, but antibiotics, fine silks, and the idea of liberty can diffuse throughout the world by human choice. Thus, while human well-being may be incidental to one major social- evolutionary force, there is room for human aspiration to dictate a part of the story. I therefore argue not that the parable of the tribes has been the sole force directing the evolution of civilization but only that it has been an extremely important one.

The evolution of civilization can be seen as dialectic between the systematic selection for power and the human striving for a humane world, between the necessities imposed upon humankind regardless of their wishes and their efforts to be able to choose the cultural environment in which they will live.

BOOK REVIEW BY RICHARD ADRIAN REESE

The Parable of the Tribes, by Andrew Bard Schmoookler

Schmoookler, Andrew Bard, *The Parable of the Tribes — The Problem of Power in Social Evolution*, SUNY Press, Albany, New York, 1995, second edition.

Once upon a time, I was on an internet mailing list that jabbered about “saving the world.” Industrial civilization was hammering the planet. What should we do? Some advocated dropping out and creating self-sufficient eco-villages. Others thought that industrial civilization had to be smashed first, because nothing would be safe until then. A philosopher from Florida persistently asked: “How can we expect to stop them by emulating those that have been destroyed?” His question was not easy to dismiss, and it made the pacifists squirm.

Andrew Bard Schmoookler’s book, *The Parable of the Tribes*, takes a long hard look at the problem of power and exploitation. Schmoookler believed that wild humans enjoyed lives of wholeness and freedom that modern folks can barely imagine. In the good old days, human societies were stable, because our development was guided by genetic evolution, a slow-moving process. Nature provided our sustenance, and we took only what we needed. We were not in control of the world, nature was. Humans were just one member of the great family, and nothing more.

Slowly, very slowly, over the course of many generations, cultures began to emerge. Gradually, cultures passed more and more knowledge from one generation to the next, which improved our skills at exploiting nature. Eventually, our growing cleverness led us to attempt an escape from the control of nature, and its limits — an impossible goal in the long run, but we tried.

We moved away from the wild buffet, and began producing our own food, in abundant quantities. We cut down forests and replaced wild ecosystems with colonies of domesticated plants and animals. By doing this, we were able to temporarily extract far more energy from nature, and this moved us into the

fast lane. The monstrosity that we were creating made us unstable, unpredictable, and dangerous.

Of course, more food always leads to more hungry mouths, and farming societies grew and grew. First, they expanded by swiping the lands of wild humans, and when they ran out of those lands, they had to make a choice. They could either limit their population, or they could conquer other farming societies. Well, the farmers were bloated with overconfidence. If they were powerful enough to escape from the limits of wild nature, then they were certainly powerful enough to swipe the lands of their lazy, stupid, sub-human neighbors. Fetch the war paint, lads!

In the struggle between growing societies, the process selected for power. Aggressive ruthless bullies were the most likely to come out on top. Eventually, this led to hierarchical society and civilization. Most humans were reduced to bondage, and legions of slaves built awesome monuments celebrating the gory glory of notorious bullies. Warfare became a popular pastime. For the first time, domination and control — *power* — was introduced into the world.

“Power” is a keyword in this book. It meant forcing your will against the will of another. Power provided the black magic juju for dancing to the beat of conquest and exploitation. It was a new form of energy on the planet. Wild people had no use for it, because they lived within nature, and all was well. Power was the mother of “civilization,” another disgusting profanity.

Schmookler wrote that this struggle between societies was rooted in “anarchy” — meaning a dangerous, uncontrollable, state of disorder. This confused me at first, because anarchy can also simply mean the absence of government. For almost all of human history, anarchy worked wonderfully well in isolated wild societies that were based on self-control, cooperation, sharing, and freedom. Wild societies were a normal functional component of the natural order; they had no need for rulers. Anarchy is not a four-letter word.

Our school systems teach a “commonsense” version of history that ignores almost everything that preceded civilization. It’s a mythical story of progress, in which highly intelligent humans made continuous advancements by deliberate choice, bringing us to the techno-utopia of modern times. Schmookler hates his myth because, in reality, civilization has generally done a poor job of meeting human needs, except for the elites — and it’s been a huge disaster for ecosystems.

Schmookler offered a very different story, which he called *the parable of the tribes*. He thought that as civilizations grew, they began to bump into each other, leading to conflict. One day, tribe A massacred tribe B and — shazaam! — power was introduced into the world, like the rat-infested ship that delivered the Black Death to Europe in 1347. When one society in a region began to utilize power, stability came to an end, replaced by treacherous anarchy. At

this point, it became impossible to choose a life of peace. The only way to survive with a bully in the neighborhood was to become a bully too — only power can stop power.

The bottom line is that Schmookler foresees two possible outcomes for humankind: (1) mutual annihilation or (2) a global civilization that can unify humankind, and put an end to the struggle for power — a just world order guided by reason and values. To stop the never-ending conflicts between civilizations, the solution is to create the mother of all civilizations. It's a surprising idea in a book that majors in tirelessly criticizing civilization from every conceivable angle.

“How can we expect to stop them by emulating those that have been destroyed?” Who is “them?” Would the mother of all civilizations be emulating Uruk, Babylon, and Timbuktu — proud civilizations destroyed long ago?

Schmookler does not recommend solving our problems by violent revolution, because revolutions have a reliable habit of replacing old tyrants with new ones — a bloody waste of energy. We're so far from home that simple strategies are not enough. Utopia is not just a revolution away. Healing will take generations, and the disease will leave permanent scars.

Years ago, before I became politically correct, I used to cite Reese's Law: “The <sphincters> always win.” It was so frustrating that the savages with the spears almost never massacred the white dudes with the smallpox, artillery, and machine guns. The beautiful wild folks who lived sustainably, and treated the land with respect and reverence, always got stomped by ecocidal maniacs. Where was the justice? Why did they have to die running?

Well, Schmookler gives us a model that makes our predicament comprehensible, and that's what makes this book important. It delivers pieces missing from the great puzzle. Power just happened, by accident, and once it was born, nothing could stop it. So, humans aren't evil. There's no need to feel guilty about our ancestors' boo-boos. We've inherited problems that have been growing for thousands of years. It feels better to understand this, but it doesn't rinse away the bitter taste of tragedy and injustice.

His solution is a throwaway, because predicaments have no solutions (only problems can be solved). I think that there are many more than two possible outcomes. Mutual annihilation will remain a real risk. A benevolent global civilization is highly dubious on the grounds of human nature alone, but Peak Cheap Energy will render it impossible. Industrial civilization is in the beginning stages of collapse, and we are moving toward a future that is going to be local and muscle-powered. Current patterns of living and thinking will disintegrate. This will open the doors to many new possibilities, one of which is a return to sustainable living. As Schmookler says, “the future remains to be written.”

Today's benediction comes from J. C. Smuts: “When I look at history, I am a pessimist... but when I look at prehistory, I am an optimist.” Amen!

Schmookler, Andrew Bard, *The Parable of the Tribes — The Problem of Power in Social Evolution*, SUNY Press, Albany, New York, 1995, second edition.

Keywords: civilization, exploitation, power, control, peace, anarchy, human nature, agriculture, warfare, cultural evolution, social evolution, ecological history, hunter-gatherer, one world, globalization