

# Ascent to Anarchy

by Christoph Manes

People who believe, as I do, that only something akin to anarchy harmonizes with a healthy planet and human freedom can righteously pound the table and cough up bread at the flaws in Schmookler's critique of anarchy in his *Parable of the Tribes*. What we cannot do is ignore the problem he articulates if this belief is to have any spiritual integrity. Schmookler seems to be right: when one community begins to centralize power, all others must do so or perish or flee. How, then, can anarchy be sustained (never mind attained) if the first step the power-hungry take toward empire stamps it out?

I know Schmookler would disagree with the way I've restated his terms. But his definition of anarchy is idiosyncratic and confusing, and it produces a contradictory conclusion. If anarchy is "uncontrolled power" which leads to violence between two parties (however centralized they may be), then their subordination to a higher administration, a "world order," would theoretically lead to world pacification, according to Schmookler. But there is not only a quantitative but a qualitative difference between violence in a decentralized community and a centralized state, between revenge killing in Iron Age Sweden and the nuclear arms race. The violence of societies where power has not congealed into a state cannot disrupt the cycles of nature or transform the land into war material. State violence (even when it is "benevolent," even when it is used, as Schmookler wishes, to prevent violence) is predicated on just such a disruption, on mobilizing people and resources into a network of use. The existence of government — however kindly or ecologically aware — requires the concentration and projection of power. Which means to a greater or lesser extent the transmutation of Earth into exploitable material, the creation of means of production, roads, armaments, and the ideologies which support these. And the fact is, such ideologies are never kind or ecological.

Centralization is structurally, globally, violent. And it creates a universe of discourse which blames all its inadequacies on lack of control, on anarchy. When Schmookler uses Lebanon as an argument against anarchy, he fails to break out of this universe of discourse (that is, his thinking is no longer critical). The violence in Lebanon is only possible within the context of arms manufacturing and the worldwide network — of mining, smelting, chemical techniques, transportation, currency, education, etc. — which this requires; of the concentration of diverse cultures within artificial political boundaries; of the hierarchical ideologies of Islam and Christianity. Lebanon is the ugly anatomy of the modern state stripped of its short-term prosperity. It is its destiny.

Now, humanists might deplore pre-Columbian tribes going on the warpath, or Vikings sacking Lindisfarne. From an ecological perspective, however, these conflicts are neutral. I think there will always be physical violence among people, which they will have to deal with as it affects them. Other anarchists disagree. But one thing is clear: violence that doesn't stem from an organized government which mobilizes resources is no threat to Earth, and therefore has

the same status as the "wars" between bees and wasps.

Of course, there is a historical relation between disorganized and organized violence. But is it invariably genetic, as Schmookler argues, or is this view merely part of the universe of discourse industrial societies use to propagate themselves? It's true that up to now history has seen greater and greater centralization. It's also true, however, that this centralization is so disruptive of natural cycles that it is as impermanent as the exotic elements brewed in cyclotrons. Anarchy is ineluctable. And so the question again is, how do we sustain it?

Imagine a community based on kinship ties, perhaps tribal-communal, perhaps made up of small landholders. They have laws, but no executive power. Those whose rights are violated must deal with the situation as they see fit. It isn't paradise, but then paradise is for dead people, not men and women, and they believe the stories of what life was like before — the remains of their ancestors' ugly world are still evident. They have what government can never give and only wilderness can: freedom.

Now imagine a neighboring community begins to centralize its power, to take the first skulking steps that will bring the world back to that ugliness. Wouldn't the first community, *knowing what it knows*, do everything possible to stop them? And wouldn't similar communities feel obliged to help? And wouldn't they all do so without imitating their enemy — whatever the risk — because they know to do so amounts to suicide? Isn't it possible they could succeed in cutting out the cancer (and let's face it, that means bloodshed)?

People in the past have won temporary victories over centralized power. The Vikings of Iceland, without a king or general or standing army, held off feudal Europe for five centuries. The American Indians did the same against capitalist Europe. The Vikings lost because their metaphysics went bad — they accepted Christianity and eventually gave up the struggle. The Indians never gave up, but faced an enemy too militarily developed to be stopped. Our anarchistic tribe would face neither of these problems. It would only be at a slight disadvantage organizationally, and metaphysically it would have full knowledge of the alternative to its way of life. Schmookler has universalized a historical pattern, but once that pattern is articulated, isn't it possible to make it part of our present reality as something we act upon and *overcome*?

I suppose what I'm talking about here is wisdom, which one can never guarantee. We are passing through the nightmare of urban civilization, and we can bequeath to our children the knowledge that this path led to physical and spiritual impoverishment. We can tell them stories of the Old Earth, its crystalline beauty, and how we shattered it until only brilliant splinters remained to be pieced back together. We can tell them only a commitment to the Land can keep them free. No guarantees. Just hope.

“. . . and the rest  
is prayer, observation, discipline,  
thought and action.”  
(T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*)

Christoph Manes has returned to Iceland as a Fulbright scholar after a brief stay with us at the Rendezvous.