

# The Darkness of Power

## THE PARABLE OF THE TRIBES

The Problem of Power in Social Evolution.  
By Andrew Bard Schmookler.  
400 pp. Berkeley:  
University of California. \$19.95.

By Melvin Konner

SINCE the middle of the 19th century, a majority of social scientists and a substantial minority of historians have believed that a search for laws of history would be fruitful. The most impressive efforts along these lines (whether or not one agrees with them) have been those that have been broadly comparative. Karl Marx and Arnold Toynbee, otherwise unlikely bedfellows, belong together, at least in this regard. Such efforts are implicitly or explicitly anthropological; they recognize that the theorist who relentlessly focuses on a few cultural forms will never see the forest for the trees. At their best, the more comparative efforts give us a view of the sweep of social forces in history that seems as obedient to laws as, say, most of biology. They offer at least the prospect of a view of human nature that is more orderly and meaningful than the picture of endless foibles that emerges from more typical works of history.

"The Parable of the Tribes: The Problem of Power in Social Evolution," by Andrew Bard Schmookler, who has a doctoral degree from the Graduate Theological Union at the University of California and is now working at the Public Agenda Foundation in New York, is in the grand comparative tradition. As such, it runs the risk of seeming pretentious and silly, but — despite a recurrent romanticism and an unfortunate hint of mysticism in the conclusion — it narrowly escapes that risk. It also runs the risk of seeming obvious, because it formulates some very clear generalizations about a subject for which we all have theories.

The subject is power. And the author's thesis is obvious only in the sense that Newton's law of gravity seems obvious to those who think it states that "what goes up must come down" or Mendel's laws to those who construe them as stating that "blood will out." Mr. Schmookler's "parable" certainly does not have the far-reaching and marvelous precision of Newton's law or the originality of either Newton's or Mendel's laws, but it goes far beyond our common folk knowledge about power. Standing on the shoulders of some giants of social and political theory and enlisting the aid of leading modern figures in political anthropology, Mr. Schmookler surveys a vast landscape of history and ethnology that has been molded by power in something like the way the physical landscape has been molded by gravity — sometimes obscurely or indirectly but nonetheless lawfully. What he describes, if not nice, for the most part has a logic that is satisfying.

Simply put, we are asked to imagine a group of tribes living peacefully in an unspecified region and to visualize a decision by people in one of them to embark on a career of conquest. This tribe will rapidly impose the necessity for power (that is, preparedness for war) on all the others, none of whom are any longer free to choose peace. They can choose withdrawal (but only up to a point), destruction, transformation following conquest or imitation in the service of resistance. These choices — there are no others — lead relentlessly to the spread of power and its concerns throughout the region.

The best part of the book — which relies heavily on the work of anthropologists such as Julian Steward, Morton Fried and Elman Service — is devoted to showing that the parable is a reasonable summary of what has happened during human social evolution since the hunting-gathering period. Although the time period in question is 10,000 years, that is brief to an anthropologist and Mr. Schmookler is correct in saying that

Melvin Konner, chairman of the Department of Anthropology at Emory University, is the author of "The Tangled Wing: Biological Constraints on the Human Spirit."



"power is a sudden new phenomenon in the living systems of the earth."

He wisely recognizes that hunting-gathering peoples have the full human capability for power and its exercise and that they occasionally have a small-scale version of war. But, also wisely, he insists that something qualitatively different occurs when population density and group size are permitted (by ecological conditions) to rise to the point at which power is exercised by and through true hierarchies. These hierarchies are overwhelmingly male and oriented to military exploits. Society becomes more complex as, and in part because, these exploits lead to larger and more stratified populations made up of the original tribe and the conquered peoples. Military cooperation may play a role as well, but the emphasis is always on structures of power. Mr. Schmookler correctly identifies the underlying continuities in the history of these processes. He is properly skeptical of theories that overemphasize the transformation that occurred with the rise of what we like to call civilization or the differences in the way power is exercised between and among different types of civilizations, such as those involving slavery, capitalism, Communism or democracy. Thus the early civilizations of Mesopotamia, for example, serve as a quite adequate mirror for a world on the brink of nuclear self-destruction.

This line of argument occupies most of the book, and if it is very similar to what can be found in several modern anthropology textbooks, it is no less true for

that. In this book it is also engagingly and clearly presented and well integrated with historical examples and theories — from the Mongols and Clausewitz to Central America and Ronald Reagan. A weaker aspect of the book is its account of human psychology and human nature. In addition to being quite naïve in terms of current theory and research, it is invested with a romanticism that fortunately does not mar the parts of the book that are really about power. In Mr. Schmookler's view, "civilized" or modern society becomes both the cause and the result of defects in the spiritual life of the individual. Catch phrases such as "the adrenalin society" and "the loss of wholeness" express an attitude that has become familiar in what might be called the literature of sociological longing. Unfortunately, it is clear that this part of the book is in some sense closest to the author's heart. It rests on naïve speculations about the relationship between individual psychology and social life and on a naïve judgment against modern life and its individual values. It encourages weak thinking about what might be done to prevent the functional laws of power from bringing an end to life on earth.

The best part of the book is a clear tragic vision. It is not necessarily a despairing one, since clarity can lead the way forward. As Mr. Schmookler puts it, "a work preoccupied with the dark side of civilized life can be dedicated to overcoming the powers of darkness." Perhaps in his next book he will be able to give us some idea how. Meanwhile, it is good to have this readable account of the shape and size of what we are up against. □

## The Search for New Cages



Andrew Schmookler.

Culture opened a gap in the rigid regime of the living order. Gradually, over the last one or several million years, our ancestors widened the range within which human creativity, rather than genetics, determined the way human life was lived.

... Then came a major cultural innovation in the technology of subsistence. ... The rise of agriculture made possible a more settled life with far larger populations living in the same territory under a single social organization. ... The breakthrough in food production cleared the way for the rise of civilization. From the narrowly circumscribed conditions of primitive social life, suddenly all things seem to become possible for the cultural animal. ...

It is disturbing to see what actually developed. In the five thousand years following the first steps out of the hunter-gatherer way of life, full-scale civilization arose and showed a frightening face. The social equality of primitives gave way to rigid

stratification, with the many compelled to serve the few. Warfare became far more important, more chronic, and more bloody and destructive. And the new dominion of man over nature had already begun to turn the green mantle that covered the birthplace of civilization into a rough and rocky desert. ...

With the coming of civilization, with the sudden explosion of possibilities, animals bursting out of nature's grasp were sure to get into trouble, like rampant sailors in port on leave. Animals ill-equipped for sudden freedom were bound to seek the protection of new cages, like the human herds the Grand Inquisitor served. ... As man became freer of the controls of nature, he became subject to new, perhaps harsher necessities. Paradoxically, the very open-endedness of human possibilities created forces that drove human destiny in a direction that people did not and would not choose. Civilization represented not the old cultural process coming to fuller fruit but a new phenomenon governed by a wholly new evolutionary principle. The emergence of this new principle marks the vital point of discontinuity in the history of life and explains civilization's problematic course.

— From "The Parable of the Tribes"