

## IS ANARCHY A CAUSE OF WAR? SOME QUESTIONS FOR DAVID RAY GRIFFIN

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### UNEXAMINED PRESUPPOSITIONS

*[T]he state of anarchy, in being the permissive cause of the war system, is thereby the permissive cause of empires. – David Ray Griffin*

The site of this provocative assertion is an essay in *The American Empire and the Commonwealth of God: A Political, Economic, Religious Statement* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2006; hereinafter AECG), p. 107, co-authored by Griffin, John B. Cobb, Jr., Richard A. Falk, and Catherine Keller. All the world's peoples, they assume, must have a "say" in "running" the world. A democratic form of global governance, operating through the (no doubt well-intentioned) experts of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and religious councils ("progressive," of course) is the sole morally acceptable alternative to the current American imperial version of such governance.<sup>1</sup> The reader is also left to wonder what NGOs are supposed to do beyond registering approval or disapproval of the net result of billions of choices made daily on free markets.

Since Neo-Malthusian gloom-and-doom also haunts AECG, fear quickly displaces wonder.<sup>2</sup> The "war system," however, is much more of an imminent threat to humanity than any looming ecological disaster, Griffin argues. That millennia-old system has culminated in a historically unprecedented borderless empire headquartered in Washington. Armed with nuclear weapons, it is a "much greater threat to divine purposes" than the Roman Empire ever was. Since one cannot target nuclear weapons to hit military assets exclusively, one is morally forbidden to launch them even "defensively," let alone preventively or pre-emptively (the evil that the American Empire's sycophants brazenly rationalize). Given Christianity's birth in antagonism to empire, Griffin rightly finds irony and scandal in the spectacle of millions of Christians celebrating empire's most demonic instance, as one may witness in America today.<sup>3</sup>

### THE "WAR SYSTEM": CIVILIZATION'S FRANKENSTEIN MONSTER?

In making his case for global democracy, Griffin draws heavily upon Andrew Bard Schmookler's *The Parable of The Tribes: The Problem of Social Power in Social Evolution* (S.U.N.Y. Press, 1995).<sup>4</sup> The parable is supposed to shed light on the "war system" as a consequence of mankind's transition from hunting and gathering to civilization. According to Griffin's summary:

*The war system originated within the past ten to twelve thousand years. This origination was closely related to the rise of civilization, with its cities and agriculture. Prior to this, when people lived in small tribes that supported themselves by hunting and gathering, violence between tribes certainly occurred. Desires of revenge and other motives would have led tribes to carry out savage raids on each other from time to time. But the hunting-and-gather mode of existence would have provided no*

*motive for a war system as such. . . .*

*But the rise of civilization changed all this. Slaves could be assigned the drudge work involved in agriculture and the building of walls and water canals. Women captives, besides working in the homes and the fields, could bear children to build up the city's defensive and offensive capacity. The cities, with their cultivated lands and their domesticated herds, provided additional motives for attack. The rise of civilization brought the institution of war.*

*Once the war system began, every tribe was forced to participate. Even if one society wanted to be peaceful, any one society could force the rest to prepare for war or risk being subjugated or annihilated. (AECG 103-104)*

A dilemma arises for each tribe or state as soon as it feels it must arm itself against possible aggression by others. "The point is not that you actually fight against every one else," Griffin writes, "but that every other society is at least potentially your enemy" (105). Thus, intertribal or international anarchy is a condition of war that, unlike the human capacity for violence and propensity to live in societies, we can eliminate. How? By democratically appointing a supervenient governing body to fill the void that is anarchy. Griffin refers, however, not to "conditions" of the emergence of the "war system," but rather to the *causes* of its emergence, "permissive causes" to be precise. A permissive cause is "one that allows almost anything else to become an immediate cause of war" (105).

### A ROOT FALLACY

As someone who looks to Whitehead as well as Rothbard to organize his thoughts, I do not know how to ascribe causal power to a *state of absence*, which is then said to "allow" an event to occur or a system to emerge and evolve. To suggest that anarchy, a lack of centralized governance, could be a *cause* of any kind is, it seems to me, to commit the fallacy of misplaced concreteness.<sup>5</sup> I learned about that fallacy from Whitehead's writings. He defined it (I paraphrase) as the imputation to abstractions the causal efficacy that only actualities have. We may, for example, speak informally of an orchestra of crickets chirping but, strictly speaking, the chirping is in the individual crickets that comprise the orchestra. Libertarians often confront this fallacy in the form of methodological collectivism.<sup>6</sup>

More accurately, I learned about this fallacy from reading eminent expounders of Whitehead's philosophy, in the first place David Ray Griffin. "Anarchy" is an abstraction denoting an unrealized (even deliberately suppressed) potential that people have to be in a "relationship of State" to each other. A potential is a non-actuality. A non-actuality might be a negative *condition*, that is, the absence of obstacles to an actuality's action. A non-actuality cannot, however, be a causal agent. Therefore

anarchy could not be a cause, either of a particular war or of a “war system.” If in noting Griffin’s apparent lapse from his metaphysical principles I only demonstrated my ignorance, I beg his correction.<sup>7</sup>

### GRIFFIN’S ARBITRARY NEO-HOBBSIAN GAMBIT

We are not here reviewing Schmookler’s causal hypothesis about the rise of civilization and the “war system.” We confine our attention to Griffin’s raising anew of the classic problem of the defense of person and property, i.e., how to avoid “being subjugated or annihilated.” As he acknowledges, the problem is prior to the formation of states. Hobbes proposed one solution (in the “state of Nature” people assign their rights to an absolute sovereign who defends them against aggressors), libertarians another (property owners contract with competing police and insurance agencies to deter, apprehend, try, and punish aggressors). I found it odd that Griffin, at least in this book, uncritically subscribes to Schmookler’s Hobbesian description of the human situation as if critiques of Hobbes were not even worth a mention.

The increase in human productivity beyond the subsistence level issued in greater leisure and so made possible vastly more opportunities for good as well as evil, for trade as well as for aggression. Now, the moral imperative under all circumstances is to promote the good and oppose the evil. Griffin, however, seems to promote the evil of the State by globalizing it and dubbing it rather euphemistically “global democratic governance” (GDG). Should Griffin protest that by GDG he does not mean what Murray Rothbard meant by the State, namely, an enterprise that acquires its revenue by threatening violence, then in his next book he should explain just how (a) GDG would acquire its revenue and (b) its personnel would be restricted to *persuading* owners to use their property in allegedly more enlightened ways.

The use of force against, or to acquire control over, another’s person or property defines the genus *crime*. Wars of aggression are but a species of crime. The “war system”—like the “the welfare system,” like the “protectionist system,” like the “inflation system”—is the *state* system. Therefore, to eliminate imperialist war from humanity’s future, it will be necessary to eliminate states.

That is a bridge too far for Griffin. He wants to preserve states, but somehow also prevent them from starting wars. How GDG would avoid the poorer quality, higher costs, and moral hazards that attend every non-market monopoly is an issue he does not even hint at anywhere in his three chapters with their combined 190 substantial reference notes.

### ANARCHO-CAPITALISM: THE NEGLECTED ALTERNATIVE

An anarchist society will differ from a statist one, not in the absence of crime, but rather in the absence of *legal sanction* for it. The anarchist further believes, however, that legal sanction for taxation, conscription, regulation, and aggressive war contributes to the *magnitude* of crime that afflicts a statist society: there would be less of it without the sanction. For the State teaches by example that we may violate any and every one of our hard-core moral imperatives—e.g., “Do not murder,” “Do not enslave,” “Do not steal”—if the interests of the State require it.

In his otherwise effective synopsis of the history of the American Empire, Griffin shows no interest in the question of the legitimacy of power and of its morally corrosive effects. Perhaps it is only natural that he who holds implicitly that the *demos*, the people, have the moral right to rule is not inclined to denigrate political power as such.

### CORNERING THE POLITICAL QUESTION

Whether anyone would really *own* anything under GDG, Griffin does not say. He no doubt believes human beings have the right to have their bodies used only in ways of which they approve. Does he, however, also believe, as do anarchocapitalists, that moral self-ownership grounds the possibility of justly held property in all other classes of scarce resource? If self-ownership does that, then no scarce resource is morally available for “democratic global governance.” By first-use appropriation and trade, persons will acquire rights to scarce resources, global democrats and other politically meddling types permitting. As Griffin is opposed the use of violent means to achieve ends (even the end of self-defense, it seems), perhaps he is equally opposed to GDG’s possessing a monopoly of the use of legitimate force. The meaning of his rejection of violence will depend on how he understands, and affirms, the moral line of demarcation enshrined in property rights.

For no obvious reason Griffin decides to quote, as though from authority, the eminent historian William H. McNeill:

*To halt the arms race, political change appears to be necessary. Nothing less radical than [a global sovereign power] seems in the least likely to suffice... The alternative appears to be sudden and total annihilation of the human species.<sup>8</sup>*

Here are the words obscured by Griffin’s ellipsis:

*Even in such a world [with a global sovereign power], the clash of arms would not cease as long as human beings hate, love, and fear one another and form into groups whose cohesion and survival is expressed in and supported by mutual rivalry. But an empire of the earth could be expected to limit violence by preventing other groups from arming themselves so elaborately as to endanger the sovereign’s easy superiority. War in such a world would therefore sink back to proportions familiar in the preindustrial past. Outbreaks of terrorism, guerrilla action and banditry would continue to give expression to human frustration and anger. But organized war as the twentieth century has known it would disappear.*

We may ask the perennial question of politics precisely in terms of the optimal arrangement for human beings who “hate, love, and fear one another.” Just how shall the putatively peace-loving “empire of the earth” prevent other groups from endangering that “easy superiority” without monopolizing the means of the very violence it claims to forswear? How will it maintain “preindustrial” levels for weapons, but for nothing else? More questions unanswered because unasked.

### THE GLOBAL LOGIC OF STATISM ... AND OF LIBERTY

Rothbard once challenged inconsistent libertarians to choose

between (a) a single worldwide state and (b) a world without states. The argument applies to all peoples or to none: if North and South Dakotans ought not to exist in a state of anarchy, to use Rothbard's example, then neither ought North Dakotans and the residents of Satchkatchewan:

*Although it is true that the separate nation-States have warred interminably against each other, the private citizens of the various countries, despite widely differing legal systems, have managed to live together in harmony without having a single government over them... It is all more curious... that while laissez-faire theorists should by the logic of their position, be ardent believers in a single, unified world government, so that no one will live in a state of "anarchy" in relation to anyone else, they almost never are.<sup>9</sup>*

If anarchy is rejected, there is no non-arbitrary stopping point short of One World Government. Rothbard's logic can cut the other way, however, and dissolve the mythical ties that bind individuals to less-than-global states.

Griffin might shine a klieg light on Rothbard's *en passant* clause, "nation-States have warred interminably against each other." They have done so, Griffin claims, because no super-State prevents them. But if heretofore human rulers have not been good and faithful over a few things, why ought one expect their global democratic editions be good and faithful over many things, and thereby enter into the joy of the commonwealth of God?

A fatal defect in Griffin's plea for peace lies in his failure to distinguish defensive military action from military aggression. Just as we may analyze the former without remainder into an individual's right of self-defense, so we may also analyze the latter into individual aggression. Neither type of military action is rooted in any failure of people to relate "governmentally" to each other. Again, it is not war in general that is a species of crime, but rather military *aggression*, to which the just response may be military defense or liberation.

### CONCLUSION: WHAT IS TO BE DONE AWAY WITH?

The coherent goal of politics, then, is not the elimination of "the war system," but rather reduction of crime of *all* types. The "total war" of our unfortunate era is only crime's morally worst type. To eliminate states requires an understanding of crime, not as whatever happens to transgress some edict or statute, but as whatever deprives persons of their justly owned property.

What distinguishes the crime of military aggression from garden-variety gang warfare is that *states* commit them and bask in the legitimacy of states. To suffocate empires and their wars of aggression requires demystifying and delegitimizing the State as such.

### NOTES

(1) None of the authors defines "democracy" in this book, let alone acknowledges that its referent has critics. Griffin is working on a book that will at least do those two things. Before finishing that project, according to my e-mail exchange with him in 2007, he intends to read Hans-Hermann Hoppe's *Democracy: The God That Failed* (Transaction Publishers, 2001), the contemporary classic which I had brought to his attention.

(2) Developing a variation of the "public goods" argument against the free market, its authors (especially philosopher-theologian Cobb: see also his *For the Common Good* (Beacon Press, 1989, with economist Herman Daly; 2<sup>nd</sup> updated edition, 1994) maintain that the global economy is sawing off the branch of the ecological tree on which it is allegedly perched precariously. Why? It lacks the wise and benevolent superintendence of experts inspired by the vision of the common good promoted by Cobb *et al.* Left to themselves, free markets cannot allocate scarce resources optimally, if optimality includes an ecologically secure future for humanity. Now, sawing off the branch one is sitting on is certainly an unsustainable activity, and one is grateful to whoever sounds such an alarm. But even if the whistle-blowers were right about the danger, it would not follow that they have earned the privilege of regulating one's life. For all that our neo-Malthusians have shown to the contrary, "democratic governance" may only make things worse. A study of George Reisman's "Natural Resources and the Environment," comprising the third chapter of his *magnum opus*, *Capitalism* (Jameson Books, 1996), however, to mention no other work, drove me to the conclusion that their command of relevant fact is as weak as their grasp of theory.

(3) By "demonic" Griffin means "diametrically opposed to divine values and powerful enough to threaten divine purposes" (154). That human action can threaten as well as carry out divine purposes is a tenet of Griffin's panentheistic philosophy. Those interested in this dimension of his thought may wish to explore links found here: <http://www.anthoniflood.com/griffin.htm>.

(4) One reviewer of Schmookler's *The Illusion of Choice: How the Market Economy Shapes Our Destiny* [S.U.N.Y. Press, 1993] pegged it "a perfect example of post-socialist scribbling." *The Quarterly Journal of Austrian Economics*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Summer 1999, p. 79, [http://www.mises.org/journals/qjae/pdf/qjae2\\_2\\_8.pdf](http://www.mises.org/journals/qjae/pdf/qjae2_2_8.pdf).

(5) See the *Wikipedia* entry: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fallacy\\_of\\_misplaced\\_concreteness](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fallacy_of_misplaced_concreteness)

(6) See Ludwig von Mises' authoritative discussion, "On the Rejection of Methodological Individualism," from the fifth chapter of his *The Ultimate Foundation of Economic Science*, Van Nostrand: 1962, <http://www.mises.org/books/ufofes/ch5~5.aspx>

(7) In an email, a learned libertarian reviewer of an ancestor of this essay wrote: "Suppose someone's car stops suddenly and his head goes through the windshield. He wasn't wearing a seatbelt. Does it make sense to say that (part of) the cause of his going through the windshield is that he wasn't wearing it? You might say it doesn't, since the absence of something—his failure to do something—has no causal power. But I think that there is an ordinary language sense of 'cause' that this misses. Someone who makes the claim about the seatbelt means, 'If he had been wearing the seatbelt, he would not have gone through the windshield,' and this counterfactual claim doesn't imply that an absence has positive causal power. In like fashion, Griffin's claim can be read, 'If we had a world government, wars would be averted, and unless we do have one, we will continue to have wars.' This claim seems to me mistaken, but it doesn't fall into the logical fallacy that you attribute to it." In reply I wrote (I'm paraphrasing) that I would not be willing to give Griffin the "out" of ordinary language were he to ask for it, because he was not engaged in ordinary conversation. In proffering a *theoretical* remedy to the gravest of political woes (total war), he employed a term, "cause," with which, as a philosophical theologian, he has been professionally concerned for over forty years. The unbuckled seatbelt of my critic's example is a *condition*, not a "permissive cause," of the driver's propulsion. In reading Griffin, I had at first hastily interpreted him as holding international anarchy to be a *condition* of war, but then realized that "condition" was not his term. Aggressors cause wars, and the notion that international anarchy is like an unfastened seatbelt, which locutions like "permissive cause" encourage, obscures that agency.

(8) William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society since A.D. 1000*, The University of Chicago Press, 1984, pp. 383-84.

(9) Murray N. Rothbard, *Power and Market*, Institute for Humane Studies, 1977, p. 4, <http://www.mises.org/rothbard/mes/chap13.asp>.