Transcript: Equal Time for Freethought's Interview with Harold Barclay August 20, 2006

Barry F. Seidman: Today we will be speaking with anthropologist Harold Barclay, as a special epilogue to my "Science of Peace" trilogy, which just wrapped up last week. Barclay combines his studies of human nature and humanity's hunter-gatherer past and present with the political philosophy of anarchism.

Harold Barclay was a professor of anthropology at the University of Alberta in Canada until 1988. Prior to that, he taught at the American university in Cairo and at the University of Oregon. His anthropological research has included studies of Egyptian and Arab Sudanese villages. His books include *Culture and Anarchism*, *The State*, and *People Without Government: An Anthropology of Anarchy*.

Welcome, Harold Barclay, to Equal Time for Freethought.

Harold Barclay: Yes.

Seidman: Over the last few weeks, *Equal Time for Freethought* has asked one anthropologist and one biologist some basic questions about human nature. Questions like: is war inevitable because humans have a natural tendency towards inter-societal violence? Or is there something unique in modern culture which brings out the soldier in many of us? And, what if peace was closer to the natural state of human nature, and we have lived through an aberration of violence over the last few centuries? So I should say up-front to our listeners that the main reason I wanted to bring Professor Harold Barclay onto this program to talk about these issues [for] one more week was because he seems to go one step further than our two previous guests.

So, Professor Barclay: Both guests, while offering a rather optimistic vision of the human potential for peace, stressed the egalitarianism of hunter-gatherer groups, both in our past and living today. The concluded that although violence and war may not be the natural state of humanity, *hierarchy* is. What are your thoughts on the genetically built-in notion of human hierarchy, and where do your conclusions lead us, by way of a future of peace for our species?

Barclay: Well, first I would say that I don't know that human nature leads us into being peaceful individuals. I think that ever since humanity has existed, you can note that there is a strong tendency towards violence and the use of violence amongst *Homo Sapiens*. And this is true in general of the primate order. As far as hierarchy is concerned, I have a problem in that hierarchy is a system in which there is a differentiation of people, and some people are subordinate to others, may exist. On the other hand, what I would be

concerned about is the problem of **domination**. In other words, the use of the superior -- dominating -- and inferior, is what I would be concerned about.

Seidman: So are you saying that hierarchy **is** a natural part of the human species, but it's how it's utilized or not utilized that makes a difference?

Barclay: I think that some kind of hierarchy may be noted, in the sense that there's a difference between parents and child, immediately establishes a hierarchical relationship. And so, from that point of view, even a hunter-gatherer society has a form of hierarchy. On the other hand, what we have done in the last five thousand years or so is to create more elaborate forms of hierarchy, and to particularly emphasize the idea of domination. There's a difference.

Erich Fromm once pointed out that there's a difference between different kinds of authority. There's rational authority and irrational authority. Irrational authority involves hierarchy, domination and so on; whereas rational authority is something like a teacher who attempts to raise his subordinate -- so-called "student" -- up to his own level of intelligence and knowledge. Right?

Seidman: OK, the former kind of hierarchy, the irrational, what are some examples of that, so people know? Policemen?

Barclay: Yeah. They're just individuals who are appointed. There's no rational reason why you should accept them as your superior, or the right of them to tell you what to do. Or, the fact that a parent, for example, you might say has a rational authority in relationship to a child. But this can oftentimes become quite **irrational** in the form of domination, in attempting to force children to do things that would not be acceptable generally.

Seidman: What our speakers spoke about, our social scientists [during the] last few weeks -- by the way, just to go back to the idea of violence that you mentioned -- they didn't deny that aggression was a basic part of human nature, and they didn't deny that we're sometimes led to violence. I think what they were saying is that, in hunter-gatherer cultures at least, more egalitarian cultures, violence and particularly the kind of violence that we call "war", very organized violence, are far less likely than when we have a deeply centralized, or State, kind of society.

Barclay: Right. And this is an issue that I have often taken individuals who are supposedly specialists on war to task, because I think they misuse the word "war". Many anthropologists that I have read think that, or refer to the kind of violence that goes on, say, in a !Kung Bushman community, that that is warfare. Or that various American Indian groups engaging in disputes. They confuse, I think, **warfare**, which is highly

organized and demands a considerable amount of specialization and also of expenditure of money and funds. They confuse warfare with ordinary things like feuds, and so forth, which are aspects of humanity which can go back as far as we can know. And therefore, I have always argued that **warfare** -- this organized system of mass violence -- is something that's a creation of the kind of social organization that developed about 5500 years ago, in Egypt first and in Mesopotamia, mainly the organization of the State. Because the State is a centralized organization that has the facilities and the finances, and so forth, to carry on massive aggression. And states also exist to expand, and to maintain **dominance** over territories and people.

Seidman: Well I have other questions that will be about the State in a few minutes. I just wanted to come back to hierarchy for a minute. The reason why I brought it up at all, is because while many others who have similar conclusions, or come to similar conclusions about human nature as you have, and have documented their rather anarchy-friendly results, like with the hunter-gatherer cultures and the like, most tend to still favor for modern society a traditionally liberal or socialistic direction for humanity, even while they recognize the problems with States and centralized governments.

First: What are the main reasons you decided to connect your work in anthropology to the political philosophy of anarchism? And, why might others whom are indeed politically progressive, steer clear from anarchy?

Barclay: Well, the latter question is because the name "anarchy" itself has acquired a bad reputation over the years; and also because certain branches of the anarchist movement, individuals have themselves acted as what would today, I suppose, be called "terrorists". The notion of engaging in violence to attempt to destroy certain figures of dominance, such as kings, queens, and what have you.

Seidman: The chaos theory of anarchy.

Barclay: Yes. The identification of anarchy with chaos, which we get all the time. And of course, this is something that anarchists **always** had to fight against. And it is also the reason why some anarchists prefer to call themselves "libertarians". But on the other hand, then you get mixed up with the libertarian movement in the United States especially, which anarchists don't particularly agree with either.

Seidman: Milton Friedman or Ayn Rand.

Barclay: Yeah. Because of course, in general anarchists are not very pleased with the capitalist system. And this is something that is encouraged and supported by the libertarians.

Seidman: Well the term Noam Chomsky uses, I believe, is "libertarian socialism".

Barclay: That's one of the terms that's used, yeah. Because there used to be a large anarchist movement amongst Italians in the United States, which usually died out by now because these were early immigrants who have all died away. But many times, you find they have what they would call a *circolo libertario*, you know, a libertarian circle. And they were the first, probably, to use this kind of terminology, at least before the libertarians got ahold of the word.

Seidman: So the connection, then, between anthropology and anarchism. Is it that you've seen the connection because of your work with hunter-gatherer cultures and other cultures?

Barclay: Well, no, because I became sympathetic to anarchism before I became an anthropologist. In becoming an anthropologist, I learned of a great variety of different alternatives to State organization, and types of organization which were not domineering. And I therefore concluded that there was some reason, or some proper rationale for accepting an anarchist alternative in organization.

Seidman: Because your work in anthropology validated, so to speak, the political mindset?

Barclay: Well, it gave support to it. I don't know whether it gives absolute anything. But certainly it helps to sustain [it]. It sustains the view, at least, that anarchy is **not** an impossibility.

Seidman: Would you say, then -- and you might not be saying this -- but would you consider even thinking that maybe anarchism, more than capitalism or socialism or communism and certainly fascism, best fits our basic human nature? Or is that like going off on a limb?

Barclay: It might be. This has been a problem with many anarchists who have had rosy notions about mankind and how good and great they were.

Seidman: Utopianism.

Barclay: They were essentially good people, and all this sort of thing. But I think you have to recognize that humans are neither good nor bad. And in many ways anarchists take a social relationship may sustain this.

Seidman: Because I know the conservative or capitalist notion is that we're Hobbesian. We're born bad and we have to become good. And the communist or socialist idea is that we're infinitely malleable. And none of these things seem to be true scientifically. What

of our work in evolutionary biology? Does the findings of this somewhat "harder" science match your findings in anthropology? The reason why I'm asking is because some evolutionary biologists, or what they call now "evolutionary psychologists", would say it doesn't, that what you're talking about is giving too much credit to nurture over nature.

Barclay: Yes, I know. Anthropologists in general have been accused of doing this. But I think that people like Wilson and Pinker and so forth, who have this evolutionary emphasis, are overlooking the significance of human culture.

Seidman: You're talking about E. O. Wilson, the sociobiologist, and Steven Pinker, the evolutionary psychologist.

Barclay: Yeah. Because they don't place a sufficient amount of emphasis upon culture. That is, it may be, and I would agree with this thoroughly, that there are genetic bases for human behavior, like violence, and so forth. On the other hand, what these people overlook is culture, that gives us in this world five thousand different cultures, with different ways of dealing with this whole issue. You see what I mean?

Seidman: Yeah. In fact, the people we spoke to last week -- I've been referring to them as "the people" because I didn't want to talk about them without having them be able to defend themselves, but I don't think there's a need for them to defend themselves -- I don't know if you've read the book called *The Human Potential for Peace* by Douglas Fry, or any work by Judith Hand, but they were on our show the last few weeks. In fact, Douglas Fry has said that he has documented over 180 cultures/societies living **today** that are sort of more like the nomadic hunter-gatherer, who are egalitarian, and not very domination-oriented, not like with a State. So that would indicate that we might have a predisposition genetically towards certain kinds of behavior. It doesn't mean that our culture could[n't] either bring that out or subdue it, or we could find ways for conflict management.

Barclay: To deal with that problem more specifically: Noam Chomsky argues that there is an innate, biologically inherited, predisposition for humans to speak a language. At the same time, he would never claim that it gives you a predisposition to speak a specific language. I mean, if I had a child and he was born and raised in China, he would be raised speaking Chinese. And the fact is, there are four or five thousand different languages we know of, and they're all different. But there's a basic tendency, or a predisposition, to speak a language, which is genetically created.

Seidman: Yeah, within our brains.

As Doug Fry and Judith Hand on the previous show said, 99% of humanity's past and some of its present consists of these cultures which are not inherently warlike. War seems to be a recent phenomenon, as we talked about, since societies have become larger and

more centralized. Outside of what you said already about having the finances and the structure to be more militaristic, what is it about larger human societies that lead[s] to more war? Are humans just no good in large groups?

Barclay: Well, it's the introduction of hierarchy and the use of the hierarchy to dominate people. After all, you have in ancient Mesopotamia, one of the earliest hierarchs were the priests of the religion. And they were able, therefore, by the use of their office and position, to manipulate populations, to incite them to warfare, and so forth. And this is what goes on over the last several thousand years: the appearance of a group of people who are the top of the pile, and are able, then, to control by various kinds of uses. Not just by force, but by "conning" them, if you will, into believing. Just like so many Americans or Canadians today believe that, after all, there absolutely has to be a president who's got the power, and Bush for example today, should have the power to do whatever he wants to, to prevent or to get rid of the problem of so-called "terrorism" in the world.

Incidentally, if I could go back a moment and mention: these people who talk about egalitarian societies. This is used to refer to hunter-gatherers, but I want to emphasize that it isn't a totally equal society, because children, even in a hunter-gatherer society, are not equal to their parents. And even in a hunter-gatherer society women are not equal to men. Maybe some societies in which women are much more equal than in other societies. The egalitarian aspect of this business, that these people talk about, is an egalitarian situation or relationship between **adult males**.

Seidman: Well actually, Judith Hand was talking about some of these cultures that are egalitarian between adult males and females in sort of a division of labor where the women would do certain things and the men would do certain things, but it would be more of a participatory situation going on. She did mention some of that as well.

Barclay: Oh yeah. I mean, the Pygmies of central Africa are noted for the relative equality of men and women in the community. And of course, one of the universal aspects of human society is the sexual division of labor, in which men are normally thought of as having certain kinds of jobs and women other kinds of jobs.

In many hunting and gathering societies, one of the old myths that used to be talked about is that men were the great producers of food: that is, meat, and so on. Well, in a large number, the majority, probably, of hunter-gatherer societies, women produce or contribute as much or more of the food than men, because the women are gatherers of nuts, roots, leaves, small animals, insects, and so forth, and this is the larger part of a food source of most of these people.

Seidman: I wanted to move just quickly because we're gonna run out of time soon. I wanted to talk about the fact that there are some states or State-like cultures today, like

Norway, for instance, was mentioned by Doug Fry, and Judith Hand was talking about a culture that's no longer with us, the Keftians, as being more peaceful, less violent, less warlike cultures today. Do you think those are cultures we can emulate if we're gonna keep a statist society, or do you think ultimately those are rare cultures in the society that includes states and the kind of domination that comes from states?

Barclay: You see, I think that the State has built within it a desire to expand, to maintain a dominance over a certain area, and that there are some states -- Norway would be one of them -- which have given up, more or less, the notion of becoming the big rulers and shakers in the universe. Whereas other states carry on more of what I would think as the traditional characteristic of the State. The United States would be one of them, the primary example today, who want to maintain -- or want to achieve, actually -- world domination. And so I would certainly say that it would be nicer if all the world's states were more like Norway, that's darn sure.

Seidman: Well, anarchy is the thing that we're talking about a little bit here. And you have a chapter in *People Without Government* called "Anarchy in the Modern World". What do you see as successful anarchies in existence today, if there are any? And in a world dominated by state capitalism and, not so very long ago, state socialism or communism, how do we bring about planetary anarchism, if you forgive the term?

Barclay: I don't know. My own conclusion, to those kinds of questions, is that we must just assume that we are not going to get out of this problem. There is no way, at least in the near future, or even the distant future, that an anarchist society is going to be created. It's just too overwhelming [a] process. But other people have suggested, though, that there are many situations or conditions which can allow us to live in a more anarchistically oriented situation.

Seidman: I don't know if you have read Michael Albert's work, but I think that his notion of participatory economics might be something like this. Do you have any comments on that?

Barclay: I think that's true. This is what an anarchist society would seek to achieve: the participation of a total community. Not just the election of people to do jobs for us, but we should all be willing to participate together. And indeed, this is one of the problems I see with anarchy, or the attempt to introduce an anarchist society, is that anarchy lays an **immense** amount of responsibility upon each individual's shoulders. And today, we have a situation in which most people would just as soon abdicate their responsibilities, and let George do it or something.

Seidman: And look where that's led us.

Barclay: Yes, I know. And this is the problem. And [when we] attempt to establish an anarchist society, we always find that one of the major problems is that people are not willing to assume the kinds of responsibilities and jobs that they would have to assume.

Seidman: Well I think that people ought to pick up your work, Harold Barclay, *People Without Government*, or your work *The State*, or maybe even as well, Noam Chomsky's work or Michael Albert's work, and maybe we could educate ourselves to the kinds of possibilities we have. Thank you, Harold, for joining us on *Equal Time for Freethought* today.

Barclay: *Education* is the thing.

Seidman: Yes, that's what we say all the time at *Equal Time for Freethought*. I'm sorry this interview was so short, but we're out of time. Thank you and have a good day.

Barclay: Yeah, bye.

Seidman: Bye-bye. And you've been listening to an interview with Harold Barclay, author of *People Without Government: An Anthropology of Anarchy*.

- Transcribed for Equal Time for Freethought by Joel Schlosberg