1

Post-apocalyptic Anarchism in *Mad Max*

Aeon J. Skoble

In George Miller's 1979 film *Mad Max*, we are introduced to a post-apocalyptic dystopia in which official law enforcement is weak and predatory gangs are powerful. In three sequels, the breakdown of traditional social order is made even more explicit, and the protagonist's struggle, first for revenge and then later for justice, more difficult. Is this "anarchy"? Does anarchy entail violence, or is peaceful anarchism possible? What are the results of social breakdown? Is this portrayal of a lawless world realistic? This essay will explore the meanings of concepts such as *anarchy*, *government*, *society*, and *order* by looking at the social backdrop of this film franchise.

Anarchy and Apocalypse

Of course, a world of marauding biker gangs and violent warlords is exactly what people tend to imagine when they think of anarchy. Anarchy is associated with chaos and disorder, whereas words like *society* and *government* are associated with order. But just as the presence of a government is no guarantee of a functional and just social order, the absence of government shouldn't be taken to imply their lack.

To begin with, it's worth noting that the word *anarchy* doesn't even mean "no government" or "no order." It means "no rulers." The root word *archon*, for "ruler," is the same as in the word *monarchy*. So, modified by the *mono-* prefix, it means "one ruler" and modified by

Mad Max and Philosophy: Thinking Through the Wasteland, First Edition.
Edited by Matthew P. Meyer and David Koepsell.

the negating *a-/an-* prefix, it means "no rulers." To equate "no rulers" with "no government" or "no order" is to beg an important question about the nature of social order and the extent to which it can be achieved without coercive authority imposed from the top down. The world Mad Max lives in offers us some useful touchpoints for thinking about this, but also, as we'll see, some less-than-useful ones.

We're never told explicitly what apocalyptic events happened, but context clues and scattered bits of dialogue imply wars for scarce resources, which of course are now more scarce. It's never explained why this would lead to the complete collapse of the social order. In the first film, it hasn't completely vanished. Max Rockatansky (played by Mel Gibson in the first three films and Tom Hardy in the fourth) is a police officer, of course, so there's some organized law enforcement apparatus. But, as the film depicts, their authority is often flouted and the biker gang that drives the plot seems to act with impunity, terrorizing people at will. So the police department seems like a vestigial force, greatly attenuated but still trying to protect innocents from the gangs. The vestiges of the court system that we see in the film are similarly attenuated and essentially toothless. Part of the problem seems to be that the structures in place for rights-protection are so remote and vestigial as to be insufficient for deterring the biker gangs and other outlaws. In this respect, *Mad Max* resembles a "Western" film where, even though there's technically a legal authority, it is either physically remote or else too weak to adequately respond to criminality. For example, in the 1993 Western *Tombstone,* there's a sheriff and a marshal, but the criminal gang "the Cowboys" acts with impunity, as if they need not worry themselves about law enforcement. Similarly, the "Nightrider" gang can roam freely and act as predators. What little police enforcement still exists can't pose a significant threat to them. Once Max becomes a vigilante, he *is* able to dispatch the gang, as his willingness to match their level of savagery permits strategies that might previously have been unavailable. With his family having been murdered and his revenge taken, Max himself is no longer part of the vestigial law enforcement apparatus, taking to the road as a loner.

Roaming the Wasteland

In the sequel films, we see Max on his aimless roaming, and his encounters with other pockets of people show an even further detachment from the old civilization he left behind. In the first film, there are

towns and cities, people are still conducting commerce, and while there seem to be fewer people around, the ones who are there seem relatively healthy. Times are tough but recognizable. In each sequel film, this is less and less the case. Max is roaming not on the outskirts of a city, but through a literal Wasteland, and the few concentrations of people are exclusively either straggling bands of survivors or predatory gangs. There's evidence of environmental spoilage, but it's possible to grow food in some places, and while gasoline is scarce, there's obviously still enough to power all the cars, trucks, and motorcycles everyone uses. So it never becomes any more clear what exactly is the extent of the "apocalypse" or *why* it led to a breakdown of the social order. The explanation we might extract from Westerns, that in a frontier setting, authority structures are so removed as to be inefficacious, doesn't seem like it would explain what we see in these films.[1] In 1981's *The Road Warrior*, a small refinery has been converted to a tiny walled settlement and is besieged by a violent gang led by the mutant Humungus (Kjell Nilsson). The residents of the settlement hope to escape "to the coast" but we have no indication of whether that would be more hospitable—after all, the setting of the original film is near the coast. In 1985's *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*, Max encounters a town of sorts, governed by the despotic Aunty Entity (Tina Turner), but its governance is capricious and in some ways medieval, a regression from the Australia Max would have grown up in. He also encounters a colony of orphaned children, whom he helps find a way to Sydney, which we learn has been destroyed. In 2015's *Mad Max: Fury Road*, Max encounters a community ruled by mutant warlord Immortan Joe (Hugh Keays-Byrne). Neighboring "communities" are also ruled by warlords.

It's never explained how any of these situations might have emerged. As far as post-apocalyptic action films are concerned, that's not necessarily a bad thing. Cinematically, it can be sufficient that the protagonist find themself in an outlandish and barbarous world because the drama derives from the protagonist's reactions to the situation. We don't need to know the origins of the founding of Bartertown, for instance; we just need to see how it operates and what dilemmas and challenges it poses for Max. However, what is acceptable or even advantageous to leave out of a movie is not acceptable for drawing philosophical conclusions. If I made a movie about a peaceful and prosperous society with a wise and benevolent monarch King Bob, it might be an excellent movie, but it would be a mistake to infer from it that "monarchy must be a desirable political system, because look

how great King Bob is." Similarly, one can be a fan of the *Mad Max* series without concluding that "anarchism must be bad because it would be terrible if we had violent mutant warlords." While the question of how Immortan Joe's Citadel came to be is unimportant cinematically, it's worth thinking about how realistic it is *if* we're trying to think about political philosophy.

Not All Government Is Good Government

One reason not to take these scenarios as examples of anarchism is that they seem less like examples of "no rulers" than they are examples of "bad rulers." Immortan Joe and Aunty Entity are in fact rulers. They have power over their territories and the people in them. The people they rule acquiesce to (even if not always enthusiastically endorse) this control. That makes them rulers. Noting that they're not the sorts of rulers we would expect to see in liberal democracies doesn't make them not rulers. While it seems true that the Australia Mad Max is roaming around in no longer has central, continent-wide governance, it's also true that small, localized pockets of governance have emerged, such as Bartertown and the Citadel and Bullet Farm. That's importantly *not* the same thing as anarchism. To define *anarchism* as "the lack of the kind of government I like and am familiar with" won't do. We can disapprove of Immortan Joe's rule while noting that he is in fact the ruler of the Citadel. That's not any different from disapproving of Hitler while noting that he was in fact the ruler of Nazi Germany.

Anarchism and Voluntarism

What would it actually look like to have no rulers? It would have to mean that organized systems of production and trade would be voluntary. People can work together for their mutual benefit and common interest. They can even adopt rules for adjudicating disputes and establishing boundaries for both conduct and physical space allocation. None of these features of social living *require* their imposition by coercive authority, though of course that's the manner in which we're most familiar with them. The seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes argued, however, that we wouldn't be able to sustain such a system of voluntary cooperative order because each person is

a potential predator, and our fear and distrust leads us to regard each other as enemies, rendering social cooperation impossible.[2] This was why he argued for absolute monarchy as a "solution" to this problem, and this has been the underlying justification for coercive authority—if sometimes only tacitly—ever since.[3] On Hobbes's view, it makes perfect sense that Lord Humungus would attract and lead vicious predatory thugs to live by raiding others. Everyone in the gang is in sufficient fear of the Humungus's power as to motivate them to cooperate with gang activity and focus on common goals. That's exactly how Hobbes understood the sovereign: if everyone is in sufficient fear of the sovereign's power, only then can they be trusted to refrain from predatory behavior toward one another. For Hobbes, then, anarchism is bad not because we might get rulers like Immortan Joe, but because having no rulers at all is *worse* than having rulers like Immortan Joe.

There's not really good evidence for this, it turns out. The history of rulers offers far more examples of tyranny and enslavement than it does of egalitarian democracy. In contrast, there's abundant evidence of organically emerging orders based on mutual gain and benefit. It's just that we don't tend to classify those as "governance." We tend to conflate "governance" with "ruling," since the most obvious examples (good and bad) of the former come from the latter. But they're conceptually distinct. The evolution of international merchant law in the Middle Ages and the evolution of the common law in English villages are but two of the many examples of social order that arises from and is based on mutual benefit. This sort of "governance" is created by people's voluntary compliance.[4] Voluntary and mutually beneficial social orders are, contrary to Hobbes's assertion, more stable than oppressive orders, which invite both rebellion and invasion precisely because people are less likely to acquiesce to such orders when alternatives are available. That's not to say a tyrant may not have an iron grip on power for some particular timespan. Immortan Joe seems to be pretty secure in his reign, though of course it's a rebellion by some of his subjects that precipitates the plot of the movie, and when Imperator Furiosa (Charlize Theron) returns triumphant, the folks in the Citadel are perfectly happy to have her be in charge of the water. On the other hand, there's no cause for rebellion against an institution that provides mutual benefit.

The classic contrast between the worldview of Hobbes and that of seventeenth-century philosopher John Locke is based on (among other things) the idea that people can recognize the mutually advantageous nature of treating others as equals and cooperating with them

for shared goals, though even for Locke, there is a reason for having *some* kind of ruler.[5] If we didn't have one, he argued, we might find it "inconvenient" to not have things like an impartial forum for dispute resolution. So—by consent—we authorize rulers who can provide things like this. This is far closer to an ideal of voluntary social order than what we see in Hobbes, and includes a right of rebellion against abusive sovereigns.

We can also see historical evidence of institutions for impartial dispute resolution that are *not* based on a ruler's prerogative, but rather emerge from people's voluntary agreement.[6] Consider firms like the American Arbitration Association. Parties in conflict agree to have their dispute settled by this firm rather than go to court. How would a firm such as this thrive? If it were known to be biased, people wouldn't agree to go there. But if they have a reputation for fair processes, people will be attracted to them. Impartial dispute resolution is one of the things Locke argues would be lacking in anarchism, thus necessitating some kind of sovereign power. But note that courts run by the sovereign need not be unbiased. For one thing, they're likely to be biased in the sovereign's favor, but beyond that, we have ample evidence of state-run courts being tainted with racism, or gender or class bias. A private arbitration firm with a reputation like that would not stay in business long. Also, the procedures can be unfair in other ways than overt bias. The titular Thunderdome of the third film isn't "biased" in the ways we normally think of bias, but at the same time, trial by combat doesn't seem like a particularly *fair* dispute resolution procedure. The American Arbitration Association, on the other hand, like similar firms, offers a much more reasonable mediation system. This is an example from the twentieth century, but similar institutions can be found as far back as the Middle Ages.

Is This Anarchy?

When people think of *Mad Max*–type scenarios as "why anarchism would be bad," it seems to be a matter of conflating "government" and "good government." The liberal democracy of Australia had effective policing, equality among citizens, a prosperous economy, rights protection, and courts of law. So if all of that gets replaced by War Boy raids rather than commerce, biker gangs who don't fear the police, and "two men enter, one man leaves" dispute resolution, we can all agree that *that's* bad. But it's unclear why we should think

that's what anarchism is.[7] Anarchism isn't what you have when *this particular government* goes away; it's what you have when the *idea of rulers* goes away. In post-apocalyptic Australia, a reasonably decent government has degenerated into the worst-case scenario of bad government: small pockets of tyrannical warlords who wield power for the sake of their own advantage, without regard for any conception of equality or rights or consent. While we're not shown this explicitly, one can see how gangs like the Nightrider's from the first film could evolve into something like the army of the Humungus or the War Boys of the Citadel. That's the social evolution of a *political* arrangement: a very primitive one, to be sure, based on power and fear rather than a conception of the common good, but a political one nonetheless. That's in contrast with, not an example of, voluntary communities of consent-based social order. People think that the world of Mad Max is one of anarchy because the social order has broken down, but the lack of social order isn't what produces anarchy; it's what produces tyrannical warlords. The inefficacy of the police in the first film seems like it's the reason for predatory gangs, but of course the real world has many examples of predatory gangs. And the thinning of the police department shouldn't entail "now the Nightrider gang can take over"—there'd be nothing stopping anyone else from challenging that gang's authority. In the movie, that only describes a handful of individuals, though in later films we see it's gang versus gang. That's how we get the political evolution of the Citadel, the Bullet Farm, and Gas Town.

It Doesn't Have to Be Humungus

Taking Locke's conception of "inconveniences" as a model, anarchism would be undesirable if it meant we had no way of protecting ourselves from predators or adjudicating disputes. But interestingly, two things are observable empirically. First, even when we have a sovereign power, we are still liable to be preyed upon, sometimes because the ruler's protection is remote and inefficient (as in the 1979 film) and other times because the ruling power is itself predatory (as in the 2015 film); and we likewise can fail to have fair and unbiased dispute resolution (as in the 1985 film, or, say, more realistic situations such as depicted in *To Kill a Mockingbird*[8]). Second, mechanisms for protecting ourselves against predators, and institutions of reasonable dispute resolution, can arise and have arisen outside of political

authorities, as people voluntarily cooperate for mutual advantage. So the post-apocalyptic world of Mad Max is not really an instructive example of "why anarchism would be bad" after all, despite it making for exciting and interesting filmmaking.

Notes

1 For an analysis of social order in Westerns and in perhaps surprisingly similar Samurai films, see my "Order Without Law: The Magnificent Seven, East and West," in McMahon and Csaki eds., *The Philosophy of the Western* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010).
2 See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: Penguin 1951 [1651]).
3 For an analysis of this, see my *Deleting the State: An Argument About Government* (New York: Open Court, 2008). See also Michael Huemer, *The Problem of Political Authority* (Chicago: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
4 Classic sources for analyzing these phenomena include Harold Berman, *Law and Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), and Friedrich Hayek, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973). More recently, see Gary Chartier, *Anarchy and Legal Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), and Edward Stringham, ed., *Anarchy and the Law* (Oakland, CA: Independent Institute, 2007).
5 See John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967 [1690]).
6 See Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).
7 Sources as varied as *Christianity Today* (https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/may-web-only/mad-max-fury-road.html) and *Jacobin Magazine* (https://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/02/mad-max-capitalism) make this inference. The columnist for *Inquisitr* makes explicit these common assumptions(https://www.inquisitr.com/2382225/five-ways-mad-max-movie-franchise-destroys-anarchy-bliss/).
8 The 1960 novel by Harper Lee and the 1962 film by Robert Mulligan, in which an all-white jury in the Jim Crow South convicts a black man, despite compelling evidence that he could not have committed the crime, due to racial bias.