

MEMOS\CAMILLA
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June 24 2011

Sister Camilla and the Anarchic Schoolyard

The basic logic of offensive realism is illustrated by an experience I had as a young boy attending Catholic school in New York City in the early 1950s. My second grade teacher, as I recall, was named Sister Camilla, and like most nuns of the day, she was a formidable, if not terrifying presence. She was quick to rap your knuckles with a ruler, or twist your ear ninety degrees, for the slightest transgression. Sister Camilla was mean-spirited and dictatorial. Fun had no place in her classroom.

Each day our class had a recess period, where we were allowed to play in the schoolyard. Sister Camilla would sometimes come outside with us and monitor our play. Other days she would remain inside the school and leave us to play by ourselves. When Sister Camilla was present on the playground, we had hierarchy; otherwise we had anarchy. Although I did not like Sister Camilla one bit, I nevertheless always hoped, and even prayed, that she would accompany us in the schoolyard. The reason was simple: I was a relatively weak and mild-mannered boy in a class that had a good number of strong boys who occasionally acted like bullies. To describe the situation in terms of the theory, there were boys in my class with considerable offensive capability and intentions that were hard to predict from day to day, but were not always benign. Those boys scared me.

Of course, there were no problems with the bullies when Sister Camilla was with us in the schoolyard, because she solved the 911 problem. She was the night watchman whose presence kept the troublemakers at bay. But when Sister Camilla was absent and the schoolyard was anarchic, recess was a frightening and dangerous period of the day for me. There was nobody to police the bullies. Consequently, when I walked home from school every day, all I thought about was boxing and particularly Floyd Patterson, who was then a great heavyweight fighter. I pictured myself as a formidable fighting force like Patterson, only my arena was the schoolyard, not the boxing ring. I imagined myself moving fearlessly among my classmates at recess and punching out anybody who crossed me. That delightful scenario constantly ran through my mind as I walked home after school, and often when I was at home or far away from school. Most other boys in my class probably shared similar thoughts.

I did not want to be the strongest and toughest kid in the schoolyard because I had a natural inclination to intimidate or beat up other boys. In fact, I never had much interest in that activity, save for sometimes picking on my brothers and sister when we were young. I wanted to be the most powerful force in the schoolyard because that was the best way to guarantee my survival in the dangerous world that existed when Sister Camilla was absent from the schoolyard. What I intuitively understood in second grade, long before I thought about great powers and world politics, is that the best way to maximize security in an anarchic system is to maximize relative power.