

Marshall Sahlins, "The Original Affluent Society"

Marshall Sahlins (b.1930 CE) is an American anthropologist who began his studies in Polynesia and Hawaii. Sahlins compares western and non-western thought in order to question so-called western rationalism. In *How 'Natives' Think: About Captain Cook, For Example* (1995), Sahlins triggered a debate on whether westerners can fully understand other cultures. His *Stone Age Economics* (1971) challenges assumptions of superiority of modern and rational agricultural societies over allegedly primitive hunter-gatherer societies.

Source: Sahlins, Marshall David. *Stone Age Economics*. Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1972.

Focus Questions:

1. What are the difference in mentalities and lifestyles between modern and Paleolithic societies?
 2. How do you think hunter-gatherers fared when in places other than deserts?
 3. Thinking of Meade's and Goodall's essays on war, how would they apply here?
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Hunter-gatherers consume less energy per capita per year than any other group of human beings. Yet when you come to examine it, the original affluent society was none other than the hunter's—in which all the people's material wants were easily satisfied. To accept that hunters are affluent is therefore to recognise that the present human condition of man slaving to bridge the gap between his unlimited wants and his insufficient means is a tragedy of modern times.

There are two possible courses to affluence. Wants may be "easily satisfied" either by producing much or desiring little. The familiar conception, the Galbraithian way—based on the concept of market economies—states that man's wants are great, not to say infinite, whereas his means are limited, although they can be improved. Thus, the gap between means and ends can be narrowed by industrial productivity, at least to the point that "urgent goods" become plentiful. But there is also a Zen road to affluence, which states that human material wants are finite and few, and technical means unchanging but on the whole adequate. Adopting the Zen strategy, a people can enjoy an unparalleled material plenty—with a low standard of living. That, I think, describes the hunters. And it helps explain some of their more curious economic behaviour: their "prodigality" for example—the inclination to consume at once all stocks on hand, as if they had it made. Free from market obsessions of scarcity, hunters' economic propensities may be more consistently predicated on abundance than our own.

Destutt de Tracy, "fish-blooded bourgeois doctrinaire" though he might have been, at least forced Marx to agree that "in poor nations the people are comfortable", whereas in rich nations, "they are generally poor".

"A Kind of Material Plenty"

Considering the poverty in which hunters and gatherers live in theory, it comes as a surprise that Bushmen who live in the Kalahari enjoy "a kind of material plenty," at least in the realm of everyday useful things, apart from food and water:

"As the !Kung come into more contact with Europeans and this is already happening - they will feel sharply the lack of our things and will need and want more. It makes them feel inferior to be without clothes when they stand among strangers who are clothed. But in their own life and with their own artifacts they were free from material pressures. Except for food and water (important exceptions!) of which the Nyae Nyae !Kung have a sufficiency - but barely so, judging from the fact that all are thin though not emaciated - they all had what they needed or could make what they needed, for every man can and does make the things that men make and every woman the things that women make...

"They lived in a kind of material plenty because they adapted the tools of their living to materials which lay in abundance around them and which were free for anyone to take (wood, reeds, bone for weapons and implements, fibres for cordage, grass for shelters), or to materials which were at least sufficient for the needs of the population. ... The !Kung could always use more ostrich egg shells for beads to wear or

trade with, but, as it is, enough are found for every woman to have a dozen or more shells for water containers all she can carry - and a goodly number of bead ornaments.

"In their nomadic hunting-gathering life, travelling from one source Of food to another through the seasons, always going back and forth between food and water, they carry their young children and their belongings. With plenty of most materials at hand to replace artifacts as required, the !Kung have not developed means of permanent storage and have not needed or wanted to encumber themselves with surpluses or duplicates. They do not even want to carry one of everything. They borrow what they do not own. With this ease, they have not hoarded, and the accumulation of objects has not become associated with status."⁹

In the non-subsistence sphere, the people's wants are generally easily satisfied. Such "material plenty" depends partly upon the simplicity of technology and democracy of property. Products are homespun: of stone, bone, wood, skin -materials such as "lay in abundance around them." As a rule, neither extraction of the raw material nor its working up take strenuous effort. Access to natural resources is typically direct - "free for anyone to take" - even as possession of the necessary tools is general and knowledge of the required skills common. The division of labour is likewise simple, predominantly a division of labour by sex. Add in the liberal customs of sharing, for which hunters are properly famous, and all the people can usually participate in the going prosperity, such as it is.

For most hunters, such affluence without abundance in the non-subsistence sphere need not be long debated. A more interesting question is why they are content with so few possessions, for it is with them a policy, a "matter of principle" as Gusinde¹⁰ says, and not a misfortune.

But are hunters so undemanding of material goods because they are themselves enslaved by a food quest "demanding maximum energy from a maximum number of people," so that no time or effort remains for the provision of other comforts? Some ethnographers testify to the contrary that the food quest is so successful that half the time the people seem not to know what to do with themselves. On the other hand, movement is a condition of this success, more movement in some cases than others, but always enough to rapidly depreciate the satisfactions of property. Of the hunter it is truly said that his wealth is a burden. In his condition of life, goods can become "grievously oppressive," as Gusinde observes, and the more so the longer they are carried around. Certain food collectors do have canoes and a few have dog sleds, but most must carry themselves all the comforts they possess, and so only possess what they can comfortably carry themselves. Or perhaps only what the women can carry: the men are often left free to reach to the sudden opportunity of the chase or the sudden necessity of defence. As Owen Lattimore wrote in a not too different context, "the pure nomad is the poor nomad." Mobility and property are in contradiction. That wealth quickly becomes more of an encumbrance than a good thing is apparent even to the outsider. Laurens van der Post¹¹ was caught in the contradiction as he prepared to make farewells to his wild Bushmen friends:

"This matter of presents gave us many an anxious moment. We were humiliated by the realisation of how little there was we could give to the Bushmen. Almost everything seemed likely to make life more difficult for them by adding to the litter and weight of their daily round. They themselves had practically no possessions: a loin strap, a skin blanket and a leather satchel. There was nothing that they could not assemble in one minute, wrap up in their blankets and carry on their shoulders for a journey of a thousand miles. They had no sense of possession."

Here then is another economic "peculiarity" - some hunters at least, display a notable tendency to be sloppy about their possessions. They have the kind of nonchalance that would be appropriate to a people who have mastered the problems of production.

"They do not know how to take care of their belongings. No one dreams of putting them in order, folding them, drying or cleaning them, hanging them up, or putting them in a neat pile. If they are looking for some particular thing, they rummage carelessly through the hodgepodge of trifles in the

little baskets. Larger objects that are piled up in a heap in the hut are dragged hither and thither with no regard for the damage that might be done them.

"The European observer has the impression that these (Yahgan) Indians place no value whatever on their utensils and that they have completely forgotten the effort it took to make them. Actually, no one clings to his few goods and chattels which, as it is, are often and easily lost, but just as easily replaced... The Indian does not even exercise care when he could conveniently do so. A European is likely to shake his head at the boundless indifference of these people who drag brand-new objects, precious clothing, fresh provisions and valuable items through thick mud, or abandon them to their swift destruction by children and dogs. ... Expensive things that are given them are treasured for a few hours, out of curiosity; after that they thoughtlessly let everything deteriorate in the mud and wet. The less they own, the more comfortable they can travel, and what is ruined they occasionally replace. Hence, they are completely indifferent to any material possessions."

The hunter, one is tempted to say, is "uneconomic man". At least as concerns non-subsistence goods, he is the reverse of that standard caricature immortalised in any General Principles of Economics, page one. His wants are scarce and his means (in relation) plentiful. Consequently he is "comparatively free of material pressures," has "no sense of possession," shows "an undeveloped sense of property," is "completely indifferent to any material pressures," manifests a "lack of interest" in developing his technological equipment.

In this relation of hunters to worldly goods there is a neat and important point. From the internal perspective of the economy, it seems wrong to say that wants are "restricted," desires "restrained," or even that the notion of wealth is "limited." Such phrasings imply in advance an Economic Man and a struggle of the hunter against his own worse nature, which is finally then subdued by a cultural vow of poverty. The words imply the renunciation of an acquisitiveness that in reality was never developed, a suppression of desires that were never broached. Economic Man is a bourgeois construction - as Marcel Mauss said, "not behind us, but before, like the moral man."

It is not that hunters and gatherers have curbed their materialistic "impulses"; they simply never made an institution of them. "Moreover, if it is a great blessing to be free from a great evil, our (Montagnais) Savages are happy; for the two tyrants who provide hell and torture for many of our Europeans, do not reign in their great forests, I mean ambition and avarice... as they are contented with a mere living, not one of them gives himself to the Devil to acquire wealth."¹²

Three to Five Hour Working Day

Reports on hunters and gatherers of the ethnological present - specifically on those in marginal environments - suggest a mean of three to five hours per adult worker per day in food production. Hunters keep banker's hours, notably less than modern industrial workers (unionised), who would surely settle for a 21-35 hour week. An interesting comparison is also posed by recent studies of labour costs among agriculturalists of neolithic type. For example, the average adult Hanunoo, man or woman, spends 1,200 hours per year in swidden cultivation;²¹ which is to say, a mean of three hours twenty minutes per day. Yet this figure does not include food gathering, animal raising, cooking and other direct subsistence efforts of these Philippine tribesmen. Comparable data are beginning to appear in reports on other primitive agriculturalists from many parts of the world.

There is nothing either to the convention that hunters and gatherers can enjoy little leisure from tasks of sheer survival. By this, the evolutionary inadequacies of the palaeolithic are customarily explained, while for the provision of leisure the neolithic is roundly congratulated. But the traditional formulas might be truer if reversed: the amount of work (per capita) increases with the evolution of culture, and the amount of leisure decreases. Hunter's subsistence labours are characteristically intermittent, a day on and a day off, and modern hunters at least tend to employ their time off in such activities as daytime sleep. In the tropical habitats occupied by many of these existing hunters, plant collecting is more reliable than hunting itself. Therefore, the women, who do the collecting, work rather more regularly than the men, and provide the greater part of the food supply.

In alleging this is an affluent economy, therefore, I do not deny that certain hunters have moments of difficulty. Some do find it "almost inconceivable" for a man to die of hunger, or even to fail to satisfy his hunger for more than a day or two.¹⁶ But others, especially certain very peripheral hunters spread out in small groups across an environment of extremes, are exposed periodically to the kind of inclemency that interdicts travel or access to game. They suffer, although perhaps only fractionally, the shortage affecting particular immobilised families rather than the society as a whole.¹⁰

Still, granting this vulnerability, and allowing the most poorly situated modern hunters into comparison. It would be difficult to prove that privation is distinctly characteristic of the hunter-gatherers. Food shortage is not the indicative property of this mode of production as opposed to others; it does not mark off hunters and gatherers as a class or a general evolutionary stage. Lowie²² asks:

"But what of the herders on a simple plane whose maintenance is periodically jeopardised by plagues - who, like some Lapp bands of the nineteenth century were obliged to fall back on fishing? What of the primitive peasants who clear and till without compensation of the soil, exhaust one plot and pass on to the next, and are threatened with famine at every drought? Are they any more in control of misfortune caused by natural conditions than the hunter-gatherer?"

Above all, what about the world today? One-third to one-half of humanity are said to go to bed hungry every night. In the Old Stone Age the fraction must have been much smaller. This is the era of hunger unprecedented. Now, in the time of the greatest technical power, is starvation an increasing situation. Reverse another venerable formula: the amount of hunger increases relatively and absolutely with the evolution of culture. This paradox is my whole point. Hunters and gatherers have by force of circumstances an objectively low standard of living. But taken as their objective, and given their adequate means of production, all the people's material wants usually can be easily satisfied.

The world's most primitive people have few possessions, but they are not poor. Poverty is not a certain small amount of goods, nor is it just a relation between means and ends; above all it is a relation between people. Poverty is a social status. As such it is the invention of civilisation. It has grown with civilisation, at once as an invidious distinction between classes and more importantly as a tributary relation that can render agrarian peasants more susceptible to natural catastrophes than any winter camp of Alaskan Eskimo.

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