



“Summary of article by Marshall Sahlins: The Original Affluent Society” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 2: The Consumer Society. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. 18-21.

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### “Summary of article by Marshall Sahlins: The Original Affluent Society”

There are two possible courses to affluence. Wants may be "easily satisfied" either by producing much or desiring little. ... [There is] a Zen road to affluence, departing from premises somewhat different from our own: that human material wants are finite and few, and technical means unchanging but on the whole adequate. (1-2)

A longstanding tradition in economics, dating back at least to the time of Adam Smith, views preagricultural societies of hunters and gatherers as desperately poor populations engaged in a continual, exhausting struggle to survive. This dismal portrait provides the backdrop for the long narrative of historical progress, as first agriculture and then industry increased productivity and allowed the satisfaction of more and more individual desires. But in contrast to the traditional view, both historical and anthropological evidence show that many hunter-gatherer societies obtained an adequate diet with surprisingly little labor, and enjoyed substantial leisure time. This chapter presents the evidence for "Stone Age affluence," and discusses its significance for contemporary economics.

### Sources of the Misconception

Prejudice against hunting may be as old as agriculture, and is echoed in the biblical story of Jacob, the successful farmer, and Esau, the hunter who lost his birthright. But low opinions of the hunting-gathering economy involve more than "neolithic ethnocentrism." A newer, bourgeois ethnocentrism may be at work: modern capitalism views economic life as organized around scarcity, and takes it for granted that earlier, less technological societies suffered from even greater scarcity.

Having equipped the hunter with bourgeois impulses and paleolithic tools, we judge his situation hopeless in advance. Yet scarcity is not an intrinsic property of technical means. It is a relationship between means and ends. We should entertain the empirical possibility that hunters are in business for their health, a finite objective, and that bow and arrow are adequate to that end. (4-5)

Recent observation of existing hunters and gatherers has tended to distort our understanding in two ways. First, the remote and exotic environments of hunter-gatherer societies are inhospitable to agriculture or urban life, and the foods found there include items deemed repulsive and inedible by outsiders; the naive observer naturally wonders "how anyone could live in a place like this." Second, the surviving hunter-gatherer societies have been pushed into resource-poor environments by the expansion of more advanced economies, and do not enjoy the

richer opportunities that were available when their way of life was universal.

### **“A Kind of Material Plenty”**

In many accounts, however, hunters and gatherers are described as acting as if they felt affluent - working short hours, sharing everything they have freely with others, and showing no interest in storing or accumulating resources. They own few tools, utensils, or items of clothing, and pay little attention to preserving those they do have, as new ones can always be made from readily available materials when the need arises. In a nomadic society, mobility is a condition of success, and material wealth is a burden. The hunter appears to be an "uneconomic man," with scarce wants and plentiful resources, the reverse of the textbook model. "It is not that hunters and gatherers have curbed their materialistic 'impulses'; they simply never made an institution of them." (13-14)

But the crucial question is, how hard do they work at gathering food? Careful observation of two groups of native Australians in Arnhem Land in 1948 found that both men and women spent an average of only four to five hours a day on all food-related activities. Both groups enjoyed an adequate diet, and had plenty of opportunities for daytime resting, sleeping, visiting and talking, and other leisurely activities. Similar findings emerge from a study of !Kung Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert in Botswana. It must be noted that these are studies of people living in marginal environments; fragmentary historical accounts suggest that life was even easier for hunters and gatherers in resource-rich regions of Africa and Australia, before they were driven out by the European conquest of these areas. When the choice is available, some contemporary hunters and gatherers have rejected agriculture precisely in order to preserve their leisure. As a Bushman reportedly said, "Why should we plant, when there are so many mongomongo nuts in the world?" (27)

The assumption of ongoing abundance in food supplies, combined with the need for mobility, explains the failure of hunters and gatherers to store their occasional surpluses of food for future use. Although food storage was often technically feasible, it would tie the group to a fixed geographic area, in which they would likely exhaust the local food supplies. As such, they opted to eat the surplus when it was available, and thus remain free to move on to richer areas as the need arose; nature's food storage exceeds what humans could set aside in diversity as well as amount. Occasional periods of hunger are the price they pay for such freedom.

### **Rethinking Hunters and Gatherers**

The real handicap of hunting and gathering societies is not the low productivity of labor, but rather the imminence of diminishing returns. The food available within a convenient range of camp is always declining, and the need for mobility is unending. This not only limits the level of material culture to that which can easily be shouldered, but also imposes harsh demographic constraints. Individuals, as well as things, that inhibit movement must at times be shed; infanticide and euthanasia, are, as hunters tell it, sometimes sadly necessary. The larger a group grows, the more often it must move, so groups must remain small, especially in today's inferior hunting-gathering environments. In such societies, people spend most of the year in small, widely spaced groups, isolated from other human contact.

"But rather than the sign of underproduction, the wages of poverty, this demographic pattern is better understood as the cost of living well." (34) Hunters typically worked 20-35 hours per week; the rise of agriculture probably meant that people on average began to work much harder. Although hunters and gatherers sometimes experience a few days without food due to the whims of nature, dependence on agriculture has subjected people everywhere to famine in times of drought or crop failure. The proportion of the earth's population that goes to bed hungry every night is undoubtedly higher today than in the Old Stone Age.

This paradox reflects the two contradictory movements of economic evolution. On the one hand, technology has increased the availability of goods and services, and brought increased freedom from environmental constraints. The development of agriculture created enough of a food surplus in one place to allow stable social life, which in turn is the foundation of all later cultural development.

On the other hand, the same processes have created scarcity and poverty. Technological development has also allowed discrimination in the distribution of wealth and differentiation in styles of life.

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 civilization. It has grown with civilization, 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. (37-38, emphasis in original.)

Finally, it should be borne in mind that this discussion takes modern hunters and gatherers as historically typical, accepting them as an evolutionary base line. Yet in the days when their way of life held sway throughout the world's richer environments, who knows what greater heights of culture, now vanished without record, may have characterized the original affluent society?