

Hunter-gatherers

Insights from a golden affluent age

Hunter-gatherers have few possessions and are the lowest energy consumers, reports **MARSHALL SAHLINS**, yet they are the original affluent society with material needs easily met in a few short hours a week. Paradoxically, in the 21st century's market economy, an era of the greatest technical power, a billion people are starving and people struggle to bridge the gap between unlimited wants and insufficient means. Scarcity and anxiety define our economy, while the hunters' confident trust in nature's abundance signals their success.

Hunter-gatherers consume less energy per person yearly than any other group of human beings. Yet the original affluent society was none other than the hunter's, where all people's material wants were easily satisfied. To accept hunters as affluent is also to recognise the tragedy of modern times in the current human condition with people slaving to bridge the gap between unlimited wants and insufficient means.

There are two possible courses to affluence. Wants may be "easily satisfied" either by producing much or desiring little. The familiar concept, the Galbraithian way, based on market economies, states man's wants are great, not to say infinite, whereas his means are limited, though they can be improved. Thus, the gap between means and ends can be narrowed by industrial productivity, at least to the point where "urgent goods" become plentiful.

But there is also a Zen road to affluence, which states human material wants are finite and few, and technical means unchanging but on the whole adequate. Adopting the Zen strategy, people can enjoy unparalleled material plenty, with a low standard of living. This describes the hunters and 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, the hunters' economic propensities may be more consistently predicated on abundance than our own.

Misconceptions about hunters

Average anthropological opinion on hunting and gathering runs like this: "Mere subsistence economy," "limited leisure except in exceptional circumstances," incessant quest for food, "meagre and relatively unreliable" natural resources, "absence of an economic surplus," "maximum energy from a maximum number of people." The low opinion of the hunting-gathering economy is not just neolithic ethnocentrism, it is

also bourgeois ethnocentrism. The existing business economy will also promote the same dim conclusions about the hunting life.

Is it so paradoxical to contend hunters have affluent economies? Modern capitalist societies, however richly endowed, dedicate themselves to the proposition of scarcity. Inadequacy of economic means is the first principle of the world's wealthiest peoples. The market-industrial system institutes scarcity, in a manner without parallel. Where production and distribution are arranged through market prices and all livelihoods depend on getting and spending, insufficiency of material means is the explicit, calculable starting point of all economic activity.

The entrepreneur is confronted with alternative investments of finite capital, the worker (hopefully) with alternative choices of remunerative employ. Consumption is a

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double tragedy: what begins in inadequacy will end in deprivation. Bringing together an international division of labour, the market makes available a dazzling array of products: all these Good Things within a man's reach, but never all within his grasp. Worse, in this game of consumer free choice, every acquisition is simultaneously a deprivation of something else only marginally less desirable or perhaps more desirable. This sentence of "life at hard labour" was passed uniquely on us. Scarcity is the judgment decreed by our economy. From our anxious vantage point we look back on hunters. Having equipped the hunter with bourgeois impulses and palaeolithic tools, we judge his situation hopeless in advance.

But scarcity is not an intrinsic property of technical means. It is a relation 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 this end.

The anthropological disposition to exaggerate the economic inefficiency of hunters appears in an invidious comparison with neolithic economies. Hunters, as Lowie¹ put it blankly, "must work much harder in order to live than tillers and breeders." An earlier comment was: "A man who spends his whole life following animals just to kill them to eat, or moving from one berry patch to another, is really living just like an animal himself."² With the hunters thus downgraded, anthropology was freer to extol the Neolithic Great Leap Forward: a main technological advance bringing about a "general availability of leisure through release from purely food-getting pursuits."³

Australian hunters "lived well"

Marginal as the Australian or Kalahari desert is to agriculture, or to everyday European experience, it is a source of wonder to the untutored observer, "how anybody could live in a place like this." The inference natives manage only to eke out a bare existence is apt to be reinforced by their marvellously varied diets. The local cuisine, including objects deemed repulsive and inedible by Europeans, lends itself to the idea the people are starving to death.

But it is a mistake, Sir George Grey⁴ wrote, to suppose native Australians "have small means of subsistence, or are at times greatly pressed for want of food." Many and "almost ludicrous" are the errors travellers have fallen into in this regard: "They lament in their journals that the unfortunate Aborigines should be

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reduced by famine to the miserable necessity of subsisting on certain sorts of food, which they found near their huts; whereas, in many instances, the articles quoted by them are those the natives most prize, and are really neither deficient in flavour nor nutritious qualities."

Grey provides a remarkable example of the prevailing ignorance about indigenous societies in a citation from his fellow explorer, Captain Stuart, who, on encountering a group of Aboriginals engaged in gathering large quantities of mimoso gum, deduced the "unfortunate creatures were reduced to the last extremity in collecting this mucilaginous." But, Sir George observes, the gum in question is a favourite article of food in the area, and when in season it affords the opportunity for large numbers of people to assemble and camp together, which otherwise they are unable to do. He concludes:

Generally speaking, the natives live well; in some districts there may be at particular seasons of the year a deficiency of food, but if such is the case, these tracts are, at those times deserted. It is, however, utterly impossible for a traveller or even for a strange native to judge, whether a district affords an abundance of food, or the contrary... But in his own district a native is very differently situated; he knows exactly what it produces, the proper time the several articles are in season, and the readiest means of procuring them. According to these circumstances he regulates his visits to different portions of his hunting ground; and I can only say I have always found the greatest abundance in their huts.⁵

In making this happy assessment, Sir George took special care to exclude the aboriginals living in and about European towns.

Material Plenty of African hunters

As for the African Bushmen, economically likened to Australian Aboriginal hunters, two excellent reports by Richard Lee show their condition to be indeed the same.^{6,7} Lee's research concerns Bushmen, specifically the Dobe section of Kung Bushmen, who occupy an area of Botswana where !Kung Bushmen have been living for at least a hundred years, but have only just begun to suffer dislocation pressures.

Despite low annual rainfall (6 to 10 inches), Lee found the Dobe area had a "surprising abundance of vegetation." Food resources were "both varied and abundant," particularly the energy-rich mangetti nut "so abundant millions of the nuts rotted on the ground each year for want of picking."⁸ Bushman figures imply one man's labour in hunting and gathering will support four or five people. At face value, Bush-

man food collecting is more efficient than French farming in the period up to World War II, when more than 20 percent of the population were engaged in feeding the rest. In the total population of free-ranging Bushmen contacted by Lee, 61.3 percent (152 of 248) were effective food producers; the remainder were too young or too old to contribute importantly. In the particular camp under scrutiny, 65 percent were “effectives.” Thus the ratio of food producers to the general population is actually 3 :5 or 2:3. But these 65 percent of people “worked 36 percent of the time, and 35 percent of the people did not work at all!”⁸

This means each adult worker, worked about two and a half days weekly, meaning each productive individual supported herself or himself and dependents and still had 3 to 5 days available for other activities. A “day’s work” was about six hours; hence the Dobe work week is approximately 15 hours, or an average of 2 hours 9 minutes daily. All things considered, Bushmen subsistence labours are probably very close to those of native Australians.

Like the Aboriginal Australians, when not working in subsistence, they pass the time in leisure or leisurely activity. One detects again the characteristic palaeolithic rhythm of a day or two on, a day or two off. Although food collecting is the primary productive activity, Lee writes, “the majority of the people’s time (four to five days weekly) is spent in other pursuits, such as resting in camp or visiting other camps.”⁸

The daily per-capita subsistence yield for the Dobe Bushmen was 2,140 calories. Taking into account body weight, normal activities, and the age-sex composition of the Dobe population, Lee estimates the people require only 1,975 calories per capita. Surplus food probably went to the dogs. “The conclusion can be drawn is that Bushmen do not lead a substandard existence on the edge of starvation as was commonly supposed.”⁸

In Africa the Hadza have long enjoyed a comparable ease, with a burden of subsistence occupations no more strenuous in hours a day than the Bushmen or the Australian Aboriginals.⁶ Living in an area of “exceptional abundance” of animals and regular supplies of vegetables (the vicinity of Lake Eyasi), Hadza men seem much more concerned with games of chance than with chances of game. During the long dry season especially, they pass the greater part of days on end in gambling, perhaps only to lose the metal-tipped arrows they need for big game hunting



at other times. In any case, many men are “quite unprepared or unable to hunt big game even when they possess the necessary arrows.” Only a small minority, Woodburn writes, are active hunters of large animals, and if women are generally more assiduous at their vegetable collecting, still it is at a leisurely pace and without prolonged labour.⁹ Despite this nonchalance, and only limited economic cooperation, the Hadza “nonetheless obtain sufficient food without undue effort.”

Confidence in nature’s abundance

Tutored by life, not anthropology, the Hadza interestingly reject the neolithic revolution in order to keep their leisure. Surrounded by cultivators, they have until recently refused to take up agriculture themselves, “mainly on the grounds it would involve too much hard work.” They are like the Bushmen, who respond to the neolithic question with another: “Why should we plant, when there are so many mongomongo nuts in the world?”⁶

To change continents but not contents, the fitful economic commitment of the South American hunter, too, could seem to European outsiders an incurable “natural disposition.”

... the Yamana are not capable of continuous, daily hard labour, much to the chagrin of European farmers and employers for whom they often work. Their work is more a matter of fits and starts, and in these occasional efforts they can develop considerable energy for a certain time. After that, however, they show a desire for an incalculably long rest period during which they lie about doing nothing, without showing great fatigue.... repeated irregularities of this kind make the European employer despair, but the Indian cannot help it. It is his natural disposition.¹⁰

The hunter’s attitude towards farming shows specific ways they relate to the food quest, though they seem deliberately inclined to overtax our comprehension by customs so odd as to invite the interpretation that either these people are fools or they really have nothing to worry about. But if a livelihood is usually easily procured then the people’s seeming imprudence no longer appears as such. Karl Polanyi,¹¹ speaking on the institutionalisation of scarcity in development of the market economy said:

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Our animal dependence on food has been bared and the naked fear of starvation permitted to run loose. Our humiliating enslavement to the material, which all human culture is designed to mitigate, was deliberately made more rigorous.

But our problems are not the hunter gatherers.

Instead, a pristine affluence colours their economic arrangements, a trust in the abundance of nature's resources rather than despair at the inadequacy of human means. Their confidence is the reasonable human attribute of a generally successful economy.

In the non-subsistence sphere, the people's wants are generally easily satisfied. This "material plenty" depends partly on simplicity of technology and democracy of property. Products are homespun: of stone, bone, wood, skin-materials such as "lay in abundance around them." 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.

The decisive contingency of hunting-gathering is it requires movement to maintain production on advantageous terms. This movement, more or less frequent in different circumstances, transposes to other production spheres the same diminishing returns of which it's born. Manufacturing tools, clothing, utensils, or ornaments, however easily done, becomes senseless when these become more a burden than a comfort. Utility falls quickly at the margin of portability.

Constructing substantial houses likewise becomes absurd if they must soon be abandoned. Hence the hunter's very ascetic concept of material welfare: an interest only in minimal equipment, if any, a valuation of smaller things over bigger, disinterest in acquiring two or more of most goods, etc. Ecological pressure assumes a rare form of concreteness when it has to be shouldered. If the gross product is trimmed down in comparison with other economies, it's not the hunter's productivity that's at fault, but his mobility.

An interesting question is why they are content with so few possessions for it is a policy with them, a "matter of principle," says Gusinde, not a misfortune.¹⁰ Are hunters so undemanding of material goods because they are enslaved by a food quest, "demanding maximum energy from a maximum number of people," so no time remains for provision of other comforts? Some ethnographers testify to the contrary, 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. For the hunter his wealth is truly a burden. In his condition of life, goods can become "grievously oppressive," as Gusinde observes, and more so the longer they are carried around. Certain food collectors have canoes and a few have dog sleds, but most must themselves carry all the comforts they possess, and so only possess what they can comfortably carry. Or perhaps only what the women can carry: the men are often left free to reach for the sudden opportunity of the chase or the sudden necessity of defence.

Mobility and property are in contradiction. Wealth quickly becomes more of an encumbrance than a good thing as outsiders have observed. Laurens van der Post¹² 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

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had practically no possessions: a loin strap, a skin blanket and a leather satchel. There was nothing 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.

Careless of possessions

Another economic “peculiarity,” some hunters at least, display is a notable tendency to be sloppy with their possessions. They have the kind of nonchalance appropriate to a people who have mastered production problems. No one dreams of putting their belonging 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, piled up in a heap in the hut are dragged hither and thither with no concern about damaging them.

The European observer has the impression these (Yahgan) Indians place no value whatever on their utensils and have completely forgotten the effort it took to make them. 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 swift destruction by children and dogs.... The less they own, the more comfortable they can travel, and what is ruined they occasionally replace. So they are completely indifferent to any material possessions.¹⁰

It is tempting to say the hunter is “uneconomic man.” Regarding non-subsistence goods, he is the reverse of the standard caricature 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 pressure,” has “no sense of possession,” shows “an undeveloped sense of property,” is “completely indifferent to any material pressures,” and manifests a “lack of interest” in developing his technological equipment.

Yet it seems wrong to say wants are “restricted,” desires “restrained,” or even the notion of wealth is “limited.” The words imply renunciation of an acquisitiveness that in reality was never developed, a suppression of desires never broached. Economic Man is a bourgeois construction, as Marcel Mauss said, “not behind us, but before, like the moral man.” Hunters and gatherers have not curbed their materialistic “impulses,” they simply never made an institution of

them. “Moreover, it’s a great blessing to be free from a great evil, our (Montagnais) Savages are happy; for the two tyrants providing 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.”¹³

Subsistence

It was common anthropological practice to assume the Bushmen of Africa or the Australian Aboriginal were people whose economic resources were so precarious: “only the most intense application makes survival possible.”¹⁴ But today evidence largely from these two groups reverses this understanding. A good case can be made for hunters and gatherers work being less than we do; and instead of a continuous travail, the food quest is intermittent, leisure abundant, and there’s a greater amount of sleep in the daytime per person yearly than in any other society.

The average length of time daily a person put into acquiring and preparing food was four or five hours but they do not work continuously. The subsistence quest was highly intermittent, stopping when people procured enough for the time being, leaving them plenty of time to spare. Clearly in subsistence as in other production sectors, it is an economy of specific, limited objectives. In hunting and gathering these objectives are apt to be irregularly accomplished, so the work pattern is correspondingly erratic.

Three to five-hour work day

Reports on hunters and gatherers of today, specifically on those in marginal environments suggest a mean of three to five hours per adult worker daily 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.

Finally, there is nothing in the assumption that hunters and gatherers enjoy little leisure from tasks of sheer survival. The amount of work (per person) 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 tend to employ their time off in such activities as daytime sleep. In tropical habitats occupied by many existing hunters, plant collecting is more reliable than hunting itself. Therefore, women, who do the collecting, work more regularly than men,

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providing the greater part of the food supply.

In claiming this is an affluent economy, I do not deny 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.⁷ 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 but perhaps only partly, the shortage affecting particular immobilised families not the society as a whole.¹⁰

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

What of 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. Today is an era of unprecedented hunger. In the time of the greatest technical power, people are starving. Reverse another venerable formula: hunger increases relatively and absolutely with the evolution of culture. This is the paradox. Hunters and gatherers have by force of circumstances an objectively low standard of living. Yet 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 pos-

sessions 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, the invention of civilisation and has grown with civilisation. ■PE

■ Abridged extract from *Stone-Age Economics* by Marshall Sahlins. Originally published in 1972, *Stone Age Economics*, republished in 2003, is a classic of economic anthropology, tackling the nature of economic life and how to study it comparatively. This collection of six influential essays is one of Marshall Sahlins’ most enduring works, claiming Stone-Age economies formed the original affluent society. The book examines notions of production, distribution and exchange in early communities and examines the link between economics and cultural and social factors. The new edition includes a new foreword by the author. (Abridged by editor Kay Weir.)

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VANISHING HUNTER GATHERERS

Australian Aboriginal descendants of hunter Gathers understand their ancestors had in place systems of education, cultural practice and maintenance, spirituality and social cohesion, which sustained them for 40,000 years. After 208 years of colonization they are left with a legacy of grief, dispossession, and struggle for survival. They believe it is time they empowered themselves to take back their education so they can move with pride into their next 40,000 years (Brady 2007).

The Hadza or Hadzabe lifestyle is increasingly threatened as their traditional lands have been taken by commercial plantations and farms. This has had the effect of creating barriers along seasonal migration routes of the animals on which the Hadzabe depend for hunting. In the 1970s the then socialist government of Tanzania attempted to resettle them in a newly constructed settlement with schools, a clinic and brick houses, but within ten years the Hadzabe had abandoned the settlement, going back to their traditional way of life in the bush. The pressures on them are immense, however, as the area of land they inhabit becomes increasingly constrained, and despite their resistance to formal education, a monetary economy and religious indoctrination by missionaries, they have increasingly come into contact with foreign tourists, which has brought problems of its own. Despite bringing in revenue for the Hadzabe community, this has proved to be a huge culture shock.