

# **Hunter-gatherers and the mythology of the market**

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2005

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An irony of modern life is that, in spite of spectacular increases in material abundance and centuries of technological progress, hunter-gatherers, people who have lived with almost no material possessions, have enjoyed lives in many ways as satisfying and rewarding as lives led in the industrial North. Many hunter-gatherer societies have been affluent in the sense of having everything they needed. Ethnographic accounts of the Ju/'hoansi of Southern Africa, for example, show that members of that society had adequate diets, access to the means of making a living, and abundant leisure time (Lee 1993). They spent their leisure time eating, drinking, playing, and socializing - in short, doing the very things associated with affluence. Many hunter-gatherer societies have also enjoyed a great amount of personal freedom. Among the !Kung, and the Hadza of Tanzania, for example, there were either no leaders at all, or temporary leaders whose authority was severely constrained. These societies had no social classes and arguably no discrimination based on gender. Their ways of living and ways of collective decision-making allowed them to survive and thrive for tens of thousands of years in equilibrium with their environment, without destroying the resources upon which their economies were based.

The more we learn about hunter-gatherers, the more we realize that the cultural beliefs surrounding modern market capitalism do not reflect universal "human nature." Assumptions about human behavior that members of market societies believe to be universal, that humans are naturally competitive and acquisitive, and that social stratification is natural, do not apply to many hunter-gatherer peoples. The dominant school of economic theory in the industrialized world, neoclassical economics, holds these attributes to be essential for economic advancement and affluence. It is true that hunter-gatherer societies show a wide variety of patterns of culture, some less egalitarian and some less "affluent" in Sahlin's (1972) use of the term. Yet the very existence of societies living adequately, even happily, with no industry, no agriculture, and few material possessions offers a challenge to the concept of human nature held by most economists.

## **THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE MARKET**

Economics is defined in most textbooks as "the study of the allocation of scarce resources among alternative ends." Humans, it is said, have unlimited wants and limited means to satisfy these wants, so the inevitable result is scarcity. We cannot have everything we want, so we must choose what we would have. Every act of consumption is thus also an act of denial. The more we consume, the more we are deprived. In this dismal state of affairs, our job as economic beings is to allocate our limited incomes so as to get the greatest enjoyment possible from the relatively few things we are able to buy.

The cultural beliefs supporting industrial capitalism serve to justify the peculiar relationship which has recently evolved among humans, and between humans and the rest of the world. Central to this belief system is the notion of "economic man." This "man" is naturally acquisitive, competitive, rational, calculating, and forever looking for ways to improve his material well-being. Today those of us in the industrial North hardly recognize the idea of economic man as a cultural belief, as opposed to a universal fact, because it accurately describes most of us. We ration our time from an early age to get the training we need to earn an income; we carefully allocate this income among the dizzying array of goods and services available in the marketplace. We may joke about the irrationality of our species but we all believe deep down that we personally are fairly rational and consistent in the choices we make. We believe that to want more and

more things is a natural human attribute. We value the individual above society. Competition and expansion, not cooperation and stability, describe the rules by which our economic world operates. We are all now economic persons. We have limited resources (incomes) and a very long list of things we would like to have.

Neoclassical economic theory contains more than a set of beliefs about human nature. It is also an ideology justifying the existing economic organization, resource use, and distribution of wealth (Gowdy and O'Hara 1995). This belief system sees class divisions as inevitable and sees nature as a collection of "natural resources" to be used to fuel the engine of economic growth and technological progress. The inequality of the distribution of goods among individuals in a capitalist economy is justified according to the "marginal productivity theory of distribution." Workers are rewarded according to their contribution to total economic output. For example, if a firm hires one more worker and the value of the output of the firm goes up by \$100 a day (including economic profit), the daily wage of that worker should be \$100. Those who add more to the total economic product of society should receive a greater share than those who add a smaller amount. Economists argue further that competition guarantees the outcome that wages are equal to the value of the marginal product of labor. The ideological implication of marginal productivity theory is that in a competitive economy all workers tend to be paid what they deserve.

In the neoclassical economic theory of market exchange, the historical and social circumstances that enable one person to produce more than another are not considered. Inherited wealth, for example, gives a person access to more capital, and so his or her marginal product will generally be higher than that of a person born into less privileged circumstances. In general, a person with more education - again, usually because of family circumstances - will have a higher marginal product and thus a higher income than one who is less educated. Neoclassical theory sees individuals as isolated producers and isolated consumers of market goods, competing with one another for scarce resources. One's value as an individual is largely a function of economic success, of accumulating (and consuming) more wealth than does one's neighbor.

The view of human nature embedded in neoclassical economic theory is an anomaly among human cultures. In fact, the basic organizing principle of our market economy - that humans are driven by greed and the promise that more is always better than less - is only one way of approaching the economic problem of how to make a living. Many cultures have very different ways of organizing production and distribution. Among the Hadza, for example, there are elaborate rules to ensure that all meat is equally shared. Hoarding, or even having a greater share than others, is socially unacceptable. Apart from personal items, such as tools, weapons, or smoking pipes, there are sanctions against accumulating possessions. Furthermore, because of the constant mobility of hunter-gatherers, possessions are a nuisance. According to Woodburn (1982), among the !Kung and Hadza, hoarding food when another person is hungry would be unthinkable. The hunter-gatherer represents "uneconomic man" (Sahlins 1972:13).

Hunter-gatherers give us an opportunity to glimpse human nature in a much different form, before it was guided by market relationships and modern ideas of individualism. There may be socially constructed limits within the present framework of our industrial economy to cooperating, reducing consumption, and in general living sustainably; but knowing that for almost all of human history these limits did not exist, it is impossible to conclude that there is something "natural" about them. The mere existence, and in particular the success, of hunter-gatherer societies

proves that there are many highly successful ways of organizing production and distribution other than through competitive markets.

## **HUNTER-GATHERERS AS A CHALLENGE TO ECONOMIC ORTHODOXY**

The most important challenges to economic orthodoxy that come from the descriptions of life in hunter-gatherer societies are that (1) the economic notion of scarcity is a social construct, not an inherent property of human existence, (2) the separation of work from social life is not a necessary characteristic of economic production, (3) the linking of individual well-being to individual production is not a necessary characteristic of economic organization, (4) selfishness and acquisitiveness are aspects of human nature, but not necessarily the dominant ones, and (5) inequality based on class and gender is not a necessary characteristic of human society.

### **Scarcity**

The notion of scarcity is largely a social construct, not a necessary characteristic of human existence or human nature. Hunter-gatherers may be considered affluent because they achieve a balance between means and ends by having everything they need and wanting little more. Asked why he did not plant crops a !Kung man replied: "Why should we plant when there are so many mongongo nuts in the world?" (Lee 1968:33). As a JuPhoansi song goes, "Those who work for a living, that's their problem!" (Lee 1993:39). Hunter-gatherers have few material possessions but much leisure time and, arguably, a richer social life than the "affluent" of the industrialized North. In contrast to many hunter-gatherer economies, the modern industrial system generates scarcity by creating unlimited wants. Consumers are addicted to a continual flow of consumer goods and feel continually deprived because addiction can never be satiated. In Sahlins' (1972:4) words: "Consumption is a double tragedy: what begins in inadequacy will end in deprivation." The modern world-wide addiction to material wealth threatens our psychological well-being as well as the biological and geophysical foundations of our economic system.

### **Productive activity**

A second fact about hunter-gatherer life is that work is social and cooperative. Typically, "immediate return" hunter-gatherers (Barnard and Woodburn 1988, Testart 1982, Woodburn 1982), those with the simplest technology such as the Hadza and !Kung, spend only three or four hours per day occupied with what we would call economic activities. These activities include hunting a large number of animal species and gathering a large variety of plant material. Successful production depends on detailed knowledge about the characteristics and life histories of the plant and animal species upon which they depend for survival, not on capital equipment. Hunting and gathering is integrated with rituals, socialization, and artistic expression. The idea that earning a living is drudgery whose only purpose is to make it possible for us to live our "real" lives is not present in hunter-gatherer cultures.

## **Distribution**

A third fact about hunter-gatherer economies also runs counter to the notion of economic man central to modern economic theory: no necessary connection exists between production by individuals and distribution to individuals. Economists argue that sharing has an economically rational basis (Frank 1994). The person we share our catch with today may feed us tomorrow when our luck or skill fails. In this view, sharing is a kind of insurance policy that rationally spreads the risk of not having anything to eat. Sharing in hunter-gatherer cultures, however, is much more profound than this. In many cultures at least, there is no connection between who produces and who receives the economic output. According to Woodburn (1982), for example, some members of the Hadza do virtually no work their entire lives. Many Hadza men gamble with spear points, and many are reluctant to hunt for fear of damaging their gambling "chips," yet these men continue to get their full share of the game animals killed. Although "freeloading" is always a potential problem in all cultures, disdain for those not engaged in productive activity is evidently a culturally specific emotion.

Distribution of meat among the Ju/'hoansi is a serious social event. Great care must be taken that the distribution is done exactly right. Lee (1993:50) writes: "Distribution is done with great care, according to a set of rules, arranging and rearranging the pieces for up to an hour so that each recipient will get the right proportion. Successful distributions are remembered with pleasure for weeks afterwards, while improper meat distributions can be the cause of bitter wrangling among close relatives." By contrast, the market system, by basing distribution on the isolated productivity of each individual, denies the social nature of production and at the same time fragments the social bonds that help hold other societies together.

## **Ownership and capital**

Accounts by early European explorers and anthropologists indicate that sharing and a lack of concern with ownership of personal possessions are common characteristics of hunter-gatherers. Among the Hadza, the lack of private ownership of things also applies to the ownership of resources (Woodburn 1968). Attempts to characterize the relationship of some hunter-gatherers to the land as "ownership" may be a case of imposing Western concepts on people who have very different beliefs about the relationships between people and between humans and nature. Riches (1995) argues that the term "ownership" should be used only in cases where people are observed denying others the right to use particular resources. The mere act of asking permission may only be a social convention expressing friendly intent and may not be an indication of "legal" control over a resource.

Many immediate return hunter-gatherers depend only, on their bodies and intelligence to produce their daily sustenance. Mobility is paramount and physical capital is necessarily simple. Capital in a hunter-gatherer world is not a physical thing that can be manipulated and controlled, but rather knowledge that is shared and accessible to all (see the discussion in Veblen 1907). With this knowledge, hunter-gatherers can quickly construct their material culture. Turnbull (1965:19) writes of Pygmies of central Africa: "The materials for the making of shelter, clothing, and all other necessary items of material culture are all at hand at a moment's notice." Unlike the manufactured capital of industrial society, hunter-gatherer capital stock is knowledge that is freely given and impossible to control for individual advantage. Furthermore, the lack of preoccupation

with acquiring material goods gives hunter-gatherers the freedom to enjoy life. Most of the lives of hunter-gatherers are not spent at a workplace away from friends and family but in talking, resting, sharing, and celebrating; in short, in being human. This is an ideal of Modern Western society, expressed in the major religions and in popular culture, but it is largely unrealized.

## **Inequality**

Finally, inequality is not a natural feature of human societies. Immediate-return hunter-gatherer societies were "aggressively egalitarian" (Woodburn 1982). These societies worked because of, not in spite of, the fact that power and authority were kept in check. Inequality as a result of human nature is another side of the cultural myth of economic man. The logic of economic rationality justifies as inevitable income differences based on class, race, or gender. Sometimes this justification is overt but usually (and more insidiously) it acts through appeals to economic efficiency. A trade-off between economic growth and equity is a feature of most introductory textbooks. If our society errs on the side of too much equity (so the story goes) the incentive to work is lost, production falls, and even the temporary beneficiaries of more income equality end up worse off than before.

The hunter-gatherer literature shows that "economic rationality" is peculiar to market capitalism and is an embedded set of cultural beliefs, not an objective universal law of nature. There are many other, equally rational, ways of behaving which do not conform to the laws of market exchange. The myth of economic man explains the organizing principle of contemporary capitalism, nothing more or less (Heilbroner 1993). It is no more rational than the myths which drive Hadza, Aborigine, or !Kung society. In industrial societies, however, the myth of economic man justifies the appropriation by a few of the human material culture which has evolved over millennia, and also the appropriation and destruction of the world's physical and biological resources (Gowdy 1997).

## **HUNTER-GATHERERS AND THE MODERN WORLD**

Hunter-gatherers were subject to the same foibles as all humans: aggression, jealousy, and avarice. Likewise, many groups of hunter-gatherers have had a profound impact on the natural environment, as any large species does (Flannery 1994, Gamble 1993). Such societies, however, were in ecological and social harmony to a degree unmatched in industrial societies. This is informative in itself, since humans have lived as hunter-gatherers for almost all of the time our species has been on this planet. Also informative is the relationship between social egalitarianism and environmental sustainability. The same features that promoted an egalitarian social structure - sharing, collective decision-making, and a knowledge-based economy - also promoted environmental harmony. Hunter-gatherers did not deliberately cultivate a higher ethical consciousness; their patterns of behavior were embedded in the material characteristics of their economies.

With the current population of the Earth approaching 6 billion, we cannot return to a hunting and gathering way of life, barring a catastrophic collapse of the human population. We can, however, work to incorporate some of the features of hunter-gatherer societies which worked to promote ecological and social harmony. These features include the following:

## **Social security**

In immediate-return societies every individual has a share of the social product, regardless of how much he or she has contributed to it. Social security can also play an important role in the sustainability of modern societies. Lappe and Schurman argue that social insurance in modern China has as much to do with the decline in the birth rate as does the one-child policy (Gordon and Suzuki 1990:104). Caldwell (1984) points to social security programs and old age pensions as playing a decisive, role in the reduction in population growth in Kerala (India) and Sri Lanka. He argues that when life is perceived to be secure, people do not need large families to ensure that they will be taken care of in old age.

## **Environmental sustainability**

Because immediate-return hunter-gatherers lived, for the most part, off the direct flows from nature, it was immediately apparent when the flow of nature's services was disturbed. sustainability meant sustaining the ability of nature to provide the necessities of life. Hunter-gatherers have displayed the ability to substitute certain natural resources for many others, but care was taken to maintain the flow of nature's bounty (Woodburn 1980:101).

Substitution is also one of the basic driving forces behind market economies, but it takes a much different, and virulent, form. In economic markets, no matter what the resource, a substitute for it will always appear if the price is right. However, since the ultimate measure of market value is monetary, all things are reduced to a single common denominator, money. Substitution is based on monetary values which may ignore essential characteristics not related to immediate market functions. According to economic criteria, an economy is sustainable, then, if its ability to generate income is maintained, that is, if the monetary value of its means of production is non-decreasing (Pearce and Atkinson 1993). By this criterion, it is "sustainable," for example, to cut down a rainforest (a form of what economists call "natural capital") if the net monetary gain from cutting the rainforest is invested for future generations. The type of investment does not matter. It could be another forest, an automobile factory, or even a financial investment. Natural capital and manufactured capital are substitutes, and thus everything is convertible, capable of being substituted for something else. This way of looking at the world masks the fact that we are sacrificing for ephemeral economic gains the viability of resources upon which our ultimate existence as a species depends.

Ecological economists have suggested sustainability policies that recognize the essential difference between natural resources and manufactured capital. Goodland, Daly, and El Serafy (1993) suggest two broad criteria for what they call "strong sustainability": (1) maintaining the ability of the environment to assimilate the waste of industrial society, and (2) maintaining the stock of natural resources, such as topsoil, clean water, and clean air, necessary for economic activity.

## **Gender equality and sustainability**

Although the woman-as-gatherer, man-as-hunter distinction is evidently not as clear as once believed (see K. L. Endicott, this volume), women in many if not most tropical and temperate hunter-gatherer societies supplied the bulk of the food through gathering, although exceptions to this pattern occurred, especially in cultures adapted to higher latitudes where plant foods are



relatively scarce. The dependence on gathering certainly contributed to the gender equality generally present in most hunter-gatherer societies. In many instances in the recent past, the status of women was sharply reduced. The low social status of women in many countries is frequently cited as a major contributor to explosive population growth (Jacobson 1987). Even in agricultural societies women have played the dominant role in nurturing diversity and sustainability in ecological systems. Some of the most important ecopolitical movements such as the Chipko movement in the Garhwal Himalaya are led by women (Norberg-Hodge 1991; Shiva 1993).

### **Cultural and ecological diversity based on bioregionalism**

Hunters and gatherers occupied all the area of the earth occupied by modern humans and, for the most part, they did it with sustainable technologies. The Inuit of northern North America and the Aborigines of the Australian deserts were able to live sustainably in climates where industrial-society humans could not survive without a steady subsidy of resources from the outside. The hunting and gathering lifestyle represented a remarkable and varied response to different environmental conditions. For most of the 2 million plus years of human existence a wide range of lifestyles and economic bases could be found in ecosystems from desert to tundra to rainforest. Such diversity is critical to the protection of natural systems. Vandana Shiva (1993:65) writes:

*Diversity is the characteristic of nature and the basis of ecological stability. Diverse ecosystems give rise to diverse life forms, and to diverse cultures. The co-evolution of cultures, life forms and habitats has conserved the biological diversity on this planet. Cultural diversity and biological diversity go hand in hand.*

With a diversity of lifestyles, there is also a better chance for the human species to withstand shocks, climatic and otherwise. Dasgupta (1995), Hern (1990), Homer-Dixon et al. (1993), and many others have pointed out that the modern homogeneous world economy is particularly vulnerable to environmental and social disruption.

### **Communal decision-making**

Accounts of hunter-gatherer societies indicate the importance of consensus and collective decision-making as opposed to the individualism of market society (Lee 1979, Marshall 1976, Turnbull 1965, Woodburn 1982). These societies have had mechanisms for social choice that allowed them to make the best choices for the longterm good of the group.

By contrast, public policy in industrial societies is increasingly based on market approaches or pseudo-market approaches such as cost benefit analysis. Market outcomes are based on decisions made by individuals isolated from the rest of society. What is good for an isolated individual in an impersonal market may not be the best for society as a whole. In terms of the social or biological value of ecosystems, for example, it makes little sense for society as a whole to discount them as an individual acting alone would, that is, to claim that they are worth less in the future. From society's point of view it makes little sense to assume that the value of breathable air, drinkable water, or a stable climate continually and sharply declines as we go further into the future. Market decisions reflect the interests of individual humans, not necessarily the community, and certainly not the well-being of the rest of the natural world. We make very different choices as individuals than we do as members of families, communities, or nations, or even as world citizens.

Here again, there is much to learn from indigenous people. The institution of private property is not the only mechanism to promote efficient resource use. In fact, there is evidence that common property regimes may be more effective in managing resources such as fisheries, even in contemporary capitalist economies, than policies based on the sanctity of individual property rights. Acheson and Wilson (1996), for example, argue that peasant and tribal societies practice management policies which are much more consistent with the biological patterns and inherent unpredictability of fish stocks. Even among academic economists, theories of common property management are beginning to be taken seriously (Berkes 1989, Hanna et al. 1996).

## CONCLUSION

The modern age is increasingly characterized by despair. Modern society seems out of control and on the brink of numerous irretrievable disasters. The interrelated issues of global climate change, biodiversity loss, overpopulation, and social unrest threaten the very existence of the civilization which most in the industrialized North consider so superior to cultures with simpler technologies.

It is somewhat comforting to realize that the blueprint for survival is contained within our cultural history. Judging from historical accounts of hunter-gatherers, for most of the time humans have been on the planet we have lived in relative harmony with the natural world and with each other. Our minds and cultures evolved under these conditions. Understanding how hunter-gatherer societies solved basic economic problems, while living within environmental constraints and with a maximum of human freedom, may give us a key to ensuring the long-term survival of our species.

But hunter-gatherers are more than interesting relics of the past whose history can give us valuable information about other ways to live. Hunter-gatherers and other indigenous people still exist and still offer alternatives to the possessive individualism of world capitalism. Indigenous people in many parts of the world are at the forefront of the struggle for human dignity and environmental protection (Nash 1994). In spite of the onslaught of world culture, many indigenous people are maintaining, even expanding, alternatives to economic man (Lee 1993, Sahlins 1993). These alternatives may one day lead us to a new, environmentally sustainable, and socially just economy.

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