

“The Political Economy of the Hunter and Gatherer”

The political economy of hunters and gatherers is repeatedly viewed as a tough and constant struggle against nature. While these people were living on a level of subsistence without a surplus, this struggle is a common misconception made by much of the general population as well as many historians. In fact, hunters and gatherers, through continuous movement, had a fairly easy-going lifestyle, more free time and less political oppression than the political economies of early Neolithic agriculture and feudalism. Yet because of practices of population control, a lack of stability and technological advancement, the system of hunting and gathering was less than perfect.

The most important factor to the success of the hunter and gatherer political economy was ease of movement. In order for survival, these people had to be able follow their food quickly and easily. Hunters and gatherers had in their possession very few items; they took only what they needed to survive. People of modern times often viewed this constant movement as an enslavement to a quest for food, but according to Marshall Sahlins, author of Stone Age Economics, “their food quest was so successful that half the time the people seem not to know what to do with themselves”(Pg.11). Hunter and gatherer tribes like the Hemple Bay Group in Australia worked on average four to five hours a day, significantly less than the average work day in modern times.

Food was rarely or never carried and most of these people used prodigality-- “the inclination to consume at once all stocks on hand, as if they had it made”(Pg.2). They consumed everything in these “food binges” because it was not economically viable for them to have a surplus. According to Sahlins, “the people’s expectations of greener pastures elsewhere are not usually disappointed”(Sahlins Pg.30). These tribes seemed to have a lack of foresight and thoughts as to what the future might bring; as far as they were concerned the days to come would have been just like the present: an abundance of food. That would give them no reason to collect

food and create a surplus. The burden of having to carry it around would lower their overall total output (food). Also, another cause of much of the hunter and gatherer's movement was simply because they wanted a change of diet and the only way to do that would have been to move to a new location.

Another important component of the hunter and gatherer system was this idea proposed by researchers in the 1960s deemed a "kind of material plenty." What this meant was that these people "adapted the tools of their living to the materials which lay in abundance around them and which were free for anyone to take (wood, reeds, bone for weapons etc.)"(Marshall Pg.9). Since the idea of private ownership had yet to be put into action, there was a "democracy of property" in which everyone owns everything. This policy of "usufruct" gave everyone the option to employ a given economic resource like wood for example. It was because of this democracy of property and lack of a food surplus that there were not any hierarchies in society unlike those of early Neolithic Agriculture and Feudalism. While there were tribal leaders to a certain extent, these leaders did not inherit their authority nor did they forcefully take it from someone. Their authority was based upon a talent or knowledge like hunting or medicine that would gain them the respect of the tribe. But even this limited authority was weak; members of a tribe did not have to necessarily listen to this "leader" and could leave the tribe if they so desired.

However, the system of hunting and gathering was not without its disadvantages. A major drawback was the stagnant developmental nature of the system. While it was man's longest lasting political economy, it was also the system with the least growth. Because nothing was ever kept and there was constant movement, there was never chance for technology to improve or for real societal changes. Sahlins' says of the tribes of Australia had a "trained disinterest in material accumulation: some hunters, at least, display a notable tendency to be sloppy about their possessions" (Pg.12). The success of the system was based solely on survival at subsistence level which left no room for unnecessary improvements. All of this, of course, was not a problem for them because success stemmed from the simplicity of their existence.

Another disadvantage was the harsh realities of population control used by these tribes. They could not afford a dramatic increase in population because it would be too taxing on the land and on the ability for the tribe to move quickly and efficiently. Sahlins best expressed the situation saying “the terms are, cold-bloodedly: diminishing returns at the margin of portability, minimum necessary equipment, elimination of duplicates, and so forth -- that is to say, infanticide, senilicide, sexual continence for the duration of the nursing period etc.”(Pg.34). These tribes were killing babies and women for no reason other than to keep the tribe at a manageable size. People in a tribe were treated much like goods, if they were not needed for survival they would be discarded. While one must realize that these actions were a necessity for the success of the hunter and gatherer system and are currently being viewed through modern eyes, they are nonetheless a barbaric event one would not see during modern or feudal time periods.

Regardless, the hunter and gatherer system proved to be stable, sustainable, and efficient for thousands and thousands of years. This system is the only one that goes against the modern belief that man’s wants are infinite and insatiable. The hunter is in a way, according to Sahlins, an “uneconomic man.” The hunter has few wants and only a few basic needs that were easily attained through living at subsistence. These needs were reached through constant movement, which in turn provided plentiful food, a relaxed lifestyle, and a democratic political atmosphere. Despite these facts, people did eventually grow tired of the constant movement and wanted a more stable food source. This would lead not only to the downfall of the hunter and gatherer system but to the rise of the Agricultural Revolution.