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*Chapter 4*

# "THE ORIGINAL AFFLUENT SOCIETY": FOUR DECADES ON

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## Introduction

At the 1966 "Man the Hunter" conference, Marshall Sahlins first advanced his provocative conception of hunter–gatherers[1] as "The Original Affluent Society." Eventually published in 1968 in extended form in *Les Temps Modernes* and as the lead essay in his important book, *Stone Age Economics* ([1972] 2004), Sahlins drew on recent hunter-gatherer ethnography, especially Lee's work on the !Kung San, to argue that hunters and gatherers experience reasonable material security and consequently are not perpetually on the edge of starvation. Taking the point further, and offering a clever twist on Galbraith's recently published book, *The Affluent Society*, he proposed that foragers might well be the original affluent society because of the relative ease with which they satisfy their wants.

The argument of original affluence was far more than empirical. Sahlins theorized the absence of scarcity and in doing so challenged a basic assumption of formalist anthropological economics—and of neoclassical economics upon which it is predicated. If the economy, as neoclassical economics assumes, is a relation between ends and means, Sahlins asks, must the ends always be unlimited and the means lim-

Notes for this section can be found on page 75.

ited? Are humans inexorably doomed to material deprivation, or is an alternative possible in which scarcity is not ubiquitous? Neoclassical economics takes unlimited ends for granted. But Sahlins proposes the Zen possibility that hunters and gatherers could have both limited means and limited ends. Therefore wants can be satisfied; and data emerging at the time from foraging societies indicated that they could be satisfied with modest work effort. While Sahlins challenges the very basis of neoclassical economics in subsequent chapters of *Stone Age Economics*, in "The Original Affluent Society" he accepts its depiction of the economy as a means-end relationship but contests the universal applicability of the assumption that ends are infinite. Sahlins states that "economic man" is a "bourgeois construction," and not a "natural construction"; the possibility exists that people have no need to "suppress desires that were never broached" (13). In following chapters he revives the formalist-substantivist debate in anthropological economics, arguing in support of the substantivist position that the economy constitutes a category of culture. The economy represents the "material life process of society" (Sahlins, 1972: xii) and not a means-end calculation predicated upon omnipresent scarcity (as the formalist position maintains).

## "The Original Affluent Society" In and Outside the Academy

The significance of Sahlins's piece lies not only in its inventiveness and analytic power, but also in its ability to stimulate critical reflection and scholarship, spawn controversy, and attract attention in academia and beyond. Ranking in status with concepts such G. Hardin's "Tragedy of the Commons," B. Anderson's "Imagined Communities," and E.P. Thompson's "Moral Economy,"[2] Sahlins's "The Original Affluent Society" has become part of academic thought and popular imagination. It has proven a remarkably malleable term, enabling its users to read it selectively and to impart meanings to it not necessarily intended by its author.[3] Academic debates have tended to remain truer to Sahlins's argument, especially its empirical component, than have the nonacademic. Some of the academic debates, especially within the cultural anthropology of hunter-gatherer or forager studies, will be reviewed below.

"The Original Affluent Society," although born of academic discourse, has had an interesting life outside the ivory tower. Common popular readings (and some academic) offer a romantic view of hunter gatherers that take Sahlins's term literally to indicate that foragers lived, and live, in a carefree state untroubled by any material



want, a point that Sahlins was careful not to make. Rather, he proposed that foragers are free of the constant menace of market scarcity in spite of the fact that forager economies operate under serious constraints (1972: 2). Nonetheless, some nonacademic groups have elevated "The Original Affluent Society" to something approaching cult status, the anthropological equivalent of an "urban legend." Organizations promoting ecological sustainability and advocating a return to nature, antimaterialism, and communalism find in the "The Original Affluent Society" a rationale and a vision for their utopic dreams and positions.[4]

Amongst the strongest endorsements of Sahlins's theoretical argument within the academy but outside of anthropology is that of John Gowdy, an environmental economist whose book *Limited Wants, Unlimited Means* (1998) accepts Sahlins's proposal on ideological principle and brings together a number of articles to provide elaboration. For Gowdy, foragers offer a "blueprint for survival" (1999: 397); they not only demonstrate the absence of economic scarcity but also illustrate that people can live in egalitarian (gender and socioeconomic) societies with high levels of social and ecological harmony. In general, however, academic debate has centered more around the purported empirical basis of "The Original Affluent Society" than its theoretical foundation, which is harder to prove or disprove. As Sahlins himself stated, "The decisive differences between formalism and substantivism, as far as their acceptance is at issue, if not so far as their truth, are ideological" (1972: xiii).

As noted above, Sahlins's theoretical proposition that societies can have limited ends does not readily lend itself to testing; this and the fact that "The Original Affluent Society" is written in such a complex, clever, and persuasive manner led Nurit Bird-David to observe that the work has been resistant to conventional critical scrutiny. It rapidly became part of anthropological oral tradition, which put it further outside the zone of questioning. Its appeal also lay in the fact that it accorded with the zeitgeist of the era—the 1960s—a time of social unrest, dissent, and utopic yearnings. Foragers resonated with prevalent countercultural sentiments that sought an alternative and gentler way of being in the world than the "military-industrial" complex that was then the target of so much protest. It became, in Bird-David's words, virtually a "sacred text," especially in cultural anthropology, and thus largely unquestioned by cultural anthropologists for two decades (1992: 26).

Ecological anthropologists, especially more biologically oriented evolutionary ecologists, were amongst the first to critically scrutinize "The Original Affluent Society." Researchers employed optimal foraging theory to test aspects of the empirical basis of Sahlins's hypothesis.

In particular, by adopting a more inclusive definition of work than did Sahlins and Lee, upon whose data Sahlins's argument relies heavily, they challenged the notion of underutilized labor amongst foragers. They broadened the category of work to include not just food procurement but also food processing (Hawkes and O'Connell, 1981). New data from foraging societies analyzed in light of the expanded definition of work suggested that foragers enjoyed less leisure and were thus less "affluent" than Sahlins proposed. Optimal foraging strategy analysts raised important questions, provided valuable data, and offered a means by which data from different societies (or "populations" in their terms) could be compared.

But there are definite limits on the extent to which optimal foraging theory advances or offers a critique of the argument and substance of "The Original Affluent Society," as it is based on fundamentally different premises. Sahlins's analysis is not only explicitly culturalist but it also problematizes the economists' basic assumption of maximization. Optimal foraging theory, however, assumes economic maximization as a given, not in the market choices that actors make, but in the labor saving "strategies" that individual members of species or "populations" take to gain the most valuable food (generally of highest caloric content) for the least effort (Hawkes and O'Connell, 1981). Therefore the argument for decreased affluence based on greater labor expenditure only addresses part of Sahlins's hypothesis. The more important theoretical question arguably relates to the nature of ends and their cultural construction. In addition, as Eric Alden Smith emphasizes, the theory is predicated upon methodological individualism in which "social and ecological processes at the level of groups and populations can be analyzed most fruitfully as the result of actions and motives of the component individuals..." (1991: 225). In this view, the role of culture is likened to that of genes; both are categorized as "inherited instructions" (Smith, 1991: 225) that influence but are not profoundly formative of behavior (as a culturalist analysis would assert). Therefore, in its fundamental assumption of scarcity and maximization, its demotion/reduction of culture from social fact to inherited instructions and its utilitarianism, optimal foraging theory veers far from Sahlins's analysis and intention. Optimal foraging theorists attempted to "prove" original affluence through positivist methods; Sahlins was skeptical of the possibilities of proving or disproving "The Original Affluent Society"; the best he hoped for was that his analysis might "explain matters better than the competing theoretical model" (1972: xiii). However, his combination of culturalist and ecological quantitative analyses opened a door and allowed evolutionary ecologists to go where others had yet feared to tread.



## Original Affluence under the Lens of Cultural Anthropology

Alan Barnard and James Woodburn were amongst the first cultural anthropologists to critically examine Sahlins's thesis. In their introduction to the second volume emerging from the 1986 "Hunter-Gatherer Conference," they maintain that the argument for original affluence has "stood up well to twenty years of additional research" (1991:11) if two provisos are taken into account. First, original affluence more appropriately characterizes foragers with "immediate-return" systems than those with "delayed-return"; and second, the definition of material wants must be given sharper delineation. The distinction between delayed and immediate-return, developed by Woodburn in a series of essays (in particular 1982, 1991), presents an important refinement to "The Original Affluent Society." Briefly put, in economies of immediate-return systems "people usually obtain an immediate yield for their labor, use this yield with minimal delay and place minimal emphasis on property relations" in contrast to delayed-return systems, "in which people place more emphasis on property rights, rights which are usually but not always linked with delayed return on labor" (1991: 11). Foragers with delayed return systems are infrastructurally similar to 'Neolithic' societies and can easily assimilate agricultural and pastoral subsistence strategies, which are based upon delayed-return. Property relations are more stringent in delayed-return societies than in immediate-return. In delayed-return societies property relations bind people in committed, future-oriented relations that connect people to specific others via the mediation of things. Although not absent amongst immediate-return foragers, property relations are relatively unelaborated and connect people to numerous others with less specific material obligations. Not all foragers have immediate-return systems. The Australian Aborigines, owing to their elaborate ritual life and social organization, which is built upon a complex system of binding and dependent relationships with attendant obligatory material exchange, have a delayed-return system.

According to Barnard and Woodburn (1991:12), foraging societies with immediate-return systems such as the San and Hazda of East Africa and others in sub-Saharan Africa are "almost always able to meet their nutritional needs very adequately without working long hours." Low production targets and widespread sharing ensure the health and welfare of all, even the weak and vulnerable. Gowdy takes the point a step further in asserting that affluence lies "in the absence of a link between individual production and economic security" (1998: xxii). As a generalization, this may be an overstatement, but it

does capture the intense pressure to share that is so widely reported for many foraging societies (Lee, 1991; c.f. Wilmsen, 1989). Woodburn and Barnard are careful to distinguish the intense sharing practiced by immediate-return foragers from gift giving. The latter entails greater calculation of reciprocal obligation.

Immediate-return societies exhibit many of the qualities that Sahlins identifies as typifying original affluence. They tend to be nomadic with flexible group composition, they have few material possessions and tools, and what they have can be readily acquired or manufactured with resources that are widely available. In addition to the intense sharing discussed above, societies with immediate-return are noted (and are "notorious") for their marked prodigality, what Sahlins refers to as a "peculiarity" that renders hunter-gatherers "uneconomic man" (1972: 12–13). Immediate-return hunter-gatherers tend to be disparaged by their nonforaging neighbors for consuming what they have at the moment with "no thought for the morrow."[5] To these qualities Woodburn would add a certain lack of fixity in social relations in the sense that, while people have wide ranging kinship relations, they are not bound or dependent upon "specific other people for their access to basic requirements" (1991: 34). They can easily satisfy their needs and, more importantly, do so without indebting themselves in any fundamental way to specific others.

Both Sahlins and Woodburn observe that foragers today do not live in a world of foragers, and those remaining are often relegated to the most marginal environments. Sahlins (1972: 38) suggests further that most contemporary foragers, save for a few examples such as the Australian Aborigines, appear to lack a layer of superstructure, of ritual and exchange cycles, that may have been eroded in the early phases of colonialism. Woodburn notes the fact that immediate-return contemporary foraging societies are encapsulated and stigmatized by their neighbors. This leads him to speculate on the nature and origins of immediate-return: is it a response or possibly a defensive strategy in light of encapsulation or a sui generis phenomenon? However, Woodburn is hesitant to draw any conclusion given the incomplete nature of the historical evidence.

In their second proviso, Barnard and Woodburn query the definition of material wants. It is too simple to suggest that foragers merely have limited material wants. As the authors have observed and have experienced in the field, foragers often desire more than what they have, for example, of special foods such as honey or of gifts from anthropologists. But the point is that they do not work longer hours to obtain them (unless one considers beseeching anthropologists work—perhaps an argument could be made). More to the point, forager production targets are set low; desire may exist, but fulfilling it is not tied



to production. Individuals are under little or no pressure to exert additional effort to produce goods beyond what they deem necessary for the satisfaction of their culturally-defined basic needs (Barnard and Woodburn, 1991: 12). Satisfying desire is sought through an almost coercive requirement to share—what the authors refer to as "demand sharing" (12) rather than through increased subsistence labor.

Bird-David (1992: 25–47) tackled "The Original Affluent Society" head on. As noted earlier, she attributes an almost "sacred text" quality to the manner in which it has been treated in cultural anthropology. Apart from the awe inspired by its clever prose, she maintains that it deflected conventional academic scrutiny largely as a result of three features. First, it advanced quantitative data to support its case, thereby shrouding its argument in the authority of hard science. However, in contradiction to its purportedly scientific approach, and this is her second point, it tried to make its case by relying upon markedly "unscientific" concepts such as "Zen" that even stretched the bounds of humanist discourse. Critics and commentators were put off. How could one count and compare a "Zen" way to affluence? Third, she argues that Sahlins finessed his potential critics by acknowledging the problems of generalizing broadly through time and space from scant data, but nonetheless proceeded to do so despite his own cautionary stance. Combined, these gave the work a certain authority and resilience that Bird-David claims was ill-gotten.

Perhaps her most serious accusation is that Sahlins violates his own anthropological precepts by substituting "practical reason" for cultural analysis. In doing so, Bird-David argues, he sloppily blurs cultural and ecological-rationalist argumentation by lapsing into the latter when he lacked the material or discipline to sustain the former. Thus by attributing foragers' leisure to their trust in the bounty of the environment—an ecological, not a cultural, proposition in her view—he fails to heed his own advice laid out in *Culture and Practical Reason* (1976).[6]

Despite Bird-David's criticisms, she is quick to concede that Sahlins "had a point" (25), especially with reference to immediate-return foragers, a distinction she retains from Woodburn. She endeavors to rehabilitate the argument for original affluence by proposing a culturalist basis for it. Instead of crediting affluence to confidence in environmental abundance, she offers a cultural metaphor through which she argues hunter-gatherers perceive not just each other but their environment as a whole, including its "social," "natural," and "spiritual" components. These are part of an animate and seamless "cosmic economy of sharing" in which all participants are morally bound to share (28). Therefore, hunter-gatherers achieve abundance not through simple trust or confidence in the environmental bounty that is "out

there" and ontologically distinct from themselves, but rather the environment is assimilated into a larger world of "giving and taking" in which foragers themselves are amongst its many members. Foragers' confidence resides in that "world" and the fact that their needs will be met through its networks of sharing, in which they are enmeshed.

Bird-David, like Sahlins, "has a point," and there are ways in which her notion of a "cosmic economy of sharing" constitutes an advance by offering a more thorough cultural basis to affluence. But when she extends the point further and offers a new metaphor, her case weakens. She attempts to find another metaphor or "cognitive model" to "evoke the way in which these hunter-gatherers relate to their environment" (32). She proposes the concept of a bank not only to capture the bounty "out there" but the capacity for this wealth to increase. The bank metaphor, or cognitive model, to follow Bird-David's usage, also highlights or captures the complex coexistence of seemingly contradictory or paradoxical regimes of ownership, use, and benefit of both banks and most immediate return hunter-gatherer systems. In both entities there exists a complex mix of collective and private principles of ownership, access, and use with regard to the unit's assets or resources. However, the bank metaphor introduces distortions as well. Banks imply deposits, investments, and a highly individuated economy (Endicott, 1992: 38). Moreover, adopting the bank metaphor entails the imposition of not only a Western model (Grinker, 1992: 39) but one that has little or no cultural resonance for the societies for whom it is meant to provide an aid in cultural translation (Gudeman, 1992: 39).

Edwin Wilmsen (1989) offers amongst the most stinging critiques of original affluence. Taking the Zhu (San) as his primary example (one of the two key case studies upon which Sahlins based his article), he argues that the notion of primitive affluence, like so many other tropes for foraging societies, is not only a misguided, overly romantic projection upon so-called simpler societies, but through rhetorical sleight of hand, it stands to harm those it describes by obfuscating the real nature of their contemporary poverty and disempowerment. Further, by representing foragers as innocent, happy-go-lucky individuals oblivious to their exploitation, it does additional damage by portraying them as lacking the wherewithal (sophistication, political savvy) to recognize, negotiate, and take their place in the contemporary world. He challenges original affluence on many fronts. For instance, he claims that the Zhu do not simply reap "natural abundance" without thought, planning, and social organization. But this is a somewhat spurious argument that entails a convenient misreading of original affluence, a concept that was never meant to imply that foragers produce in the absence of social and cultural rules and organization.



Wilmsen questions one of the key material components of affluence by attributing the Zhu's small stature to nutritional deprivation (1989: 304). His conclusions are in contrast to those of Lee, who prefers to see the San's small size as a positive or, at minimum, a neutral adaptation to a hunting and gathering way of life in a hot climate (1979: 289). Lee asks, is bigger necessarily better (290)? Both Wilmsen and Lee agree that the San experience seasonal weight loss, but so do many rural peoples; and the San's is moderate compared to many others. In addition, both acknowledge that San grow taller when they switch to an agro-pastoral diet, but their respective interpretations of the evidence are at variance. A clear resolution is difficult to establish and implies a value judgment. However, despite one's favored interpretation, relative stature does not undermine the argument for original affluence in the sense of the San being able to meet their self-defined nutritional needs and in the more important sense of addressing the theoretical possibility of limited ends.

With his 2000 article "The Darker Side of 'The Original Affluent Society,'" David Kaplan became one of the most recent scholars to cast a critical gaze towards Sahlins's piece. To his great surprise, he finds that despite some serious reservations, the anthropological world has largely endorsed Sahlins's point. Further, he notes that the "lesson" of original affluence has enjoyed such unquestioned success that it is virtually de rigueur for introductory texts to portray hunter-gatherers as leading idyllic lives.

Kaplan calls into question the data upon which Sahlins based his argument. Citing specialists in the field, he asserts that the Australian Fish Creek study, one of Sahlins's two central examples, was based upon a contrived study. The study consisted of a small group of missionary station residents, adults only, who were persuaded by the anthropologist to participate in an experiment of living on bush resources. In addition, the study was of extremely short duration—too short to prove any case for abundance. It is interesting to note in this regard that Jon Altman (1992), a specialist in the Australian case who has specifically addressed Sahlins's use of the Fish Creek data, arrives at a different conclusion. Despite the study's limitations, he accepts Sahlins's notion of abundance but qualifies it to argue that, while Australian foragers may not have experienced the leisure in the precontact period that Sahlins suggests, it is likely that they worked no harder or longer than people in modern industrial societies (36). Kaplan grants more authority to Lee's ethnographic study of the San but nonetheless combs through wider San ethnography to find evidence to contradict Lee's conclusions of ready and adequate subsistence.

Kaplan's questioning of both the methodological basis, especially the definition of and distinction between "wants" and "needs," and

his skepticism regarding the legitimacy of the argument's empirical evidence raise valid concerns. However, the vehemence with which Kaplan pursues his objective of overturning original affluence renders him guilty of the same ideological crimes that he attributes to those he wishes to contradict. Like most ethnography, data on foraging societies is necessarily limited by the restricted duration of the ethnographer's fieldwork, by the fact that hunter-gatherer societies no longer live in a "world of hunters," and by the fact that many forager ethnographies attempt to reconstruct a previous mode of subsistence. All ethnographic data is refracted through the interpretative lens of the ethnographer and bears a subjective imprint; forager ethnography is no exception. Some emphasize complaint and longing, while others take the same as the banter of everyday life (see Rosenberg, 1997). Moreover, when Kaplan asserts that foragers experience "nagging hunger" (how does he know this, when even experts in the field disagree?), high infant mortality rates, and periodic shortages, his point loses its thunder when one realizes that the same is true, if not worse, for many rural societies, especially those in the world's poorer countries. As noted above, even Wilmsen and Lee who quarrel about the general well-being of the San, agree that their seasonal weight loss is less than that of many rural peoples.[7]

There are additional issues of interpretation. Do hunter-gatherers set production targets low because they are satisfied with their lot, at least the lot that can be acquired through local production (not through access to anthropologists' "stuff"), or because they are reconciled to the fact that any increased product will be lost due to the pressure to share—Woodburn's demand sharing? Surely these are questions of philosophic conjecture, not of time-motion studies, input-output analysis, cost-benefit calculations, or other utilitarian and behaviorist-oriented analyses. Kaplan argues that hunter-gatherer studies "provide an illustration of how ideological yearnings can exert a powerful influence on how we handle ethnographic data" (302). But cannot the same be said of many anthropological interpretations, including his own?

"The Original Affluent Society" is a brilliant idea, perhaps all the more brilliant for the fact that its propositions do not lend themselves to ready proof or disproof. Those who have tried to dismiss Sahlins's argument as romantic illusion or as empirical hoax have been unsuccessful in removing it from our imagination. Put forward to provoke and challenge some of the most basic assumptions of modern thought—that "primitive" wo/man worked long and hard to provide a meager existence, that affluence is achieved through greater consumption, and concomitantly, that humans are, by their nature and by the nature of society, doomed to suffer deprivation and scarcity—"The Original



Affluent Society" continues to engage anthropologists and the wider public; it is good to think about. What more could we ask from a great idea?

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## Notes

1. "Hunter-gatherer" is a contested term. At the "Man the Hunter" conference, it became abundantly clear that gathering supplied proportionately more food in most hunter-gathering societies than did hunting. New appellations, such as gatherer-hunter and forager, emerged. In this essay, the term "forager" is used interchangeably with "hunter-gatherer."
2. E. P. Thompson, in reflecting on "moral economy," wrote: "In any case, if I did father the term 'moral economy' upon current academic discourse, the term has long forgotten its paternity. I will not disown it, but it has come of age and I am no longer answerable for its actions." (1991: 351).
3. As evidence of the widespread currency of "The Original Affluent Economy," a search on the website Amazon.com (12 September 2004) revealed that over 2000 books include the term in their text.
4. Consider, for example, the catchphrase "Earth Crash Earth Spirit: Healing ourselves and a dying planet" (available at: http://eces.org/articles/000790.php). Many websites include abridged and editorialized versions of "The Original Affluent Society." See for example: http://www.primitivism.com/original-affluent.htm; http://www.ecoaction.org/dt/affluent.html; http://www.insurgentdesire.org.uk/sahlins.htm; and http://www.animana.org/tab1/11originalaffluentsociety.shtml
5. See Day, Papataxiarchis, and Stewart (1999) for a fascinating attempt to generalize the concept of immediate-return beyond hunting and gathering societies (and outside the constraints imposed by the evolutionary and technological associations that are part and parcel of our imagination of hunter gatherers) to others such as Hungarian Rom, London prostitutes, and wage-hunters in urban Japan. In a book entitled *Lilies of the Field*, they open with a quotation from Matthew 6:28–29, 34 "Consider the Lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: ... Take no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take for the things of itself..." (1). Lilies maintain a present orientation and like the "affluent hunter-gatherers" who depend upon an unconditional if not mystical "confidence" in their environment's bounty, take a "natural" abundance for granted (1).
6. In all fairness to Sahlins, he published *Culture and Practical Reason* a decade after the "Man the Hunter" conference where he first proposed his ideas on original

affluence and four years after *Stone Age Economics*, which contained the final version. If Sahlins conflated ecological and cultural discourse as Bird-David contends, he certainly was in step with much of American anthropology at the time, which was heavily influenced by Steward's and White's neoevolutionism. Furthermore, it is problematic to fault someone for violating a precept that they had yet to articulate. In retrospect, he might have offered the same criticism of his former work.

7. Similarly Kaplan exposes his argument to logical fallacy with spurious propositions. For example, to "prove" that the !Kung actually work very long hours, he quotes Wiessner to say that "if the hours spent in the business of social relations are added to these [hours spent in the food quest], a 14-hour work week can quickly become a 40-hour one" (319). Of course, the same is true of all societies. Surely if "keeping one's social relationships in good working order" (319) was added to our official work day, we would appear more beleaguered than we already are.

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