

# Foreword to *Stone Age Economics*

David Graeber

2017

Back when I was an evolutionary anthropologist, I learned that the most successful species are those which remain the most generalized. If I hadn't learned that I would probably still be an evolutionary anthropologist. —*Marshall Sahlins*

I would like to use the occasion of this foreword to call for Marshall Sahlins to be nominated for a Nobel Prize in Economics.

Surely if Bob Dylan merits a Nobel in literature, the author of *Stone Age Economics*, and of so many other works that have fundamentally changed our conceptions of the very nature and purposes of economic life, would be a worthy candidate for the prize in economics. The essays assembled in this volume have had a profound impact on any number of academic disciplines—the notion of the three circles of reciprocity developed in “On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange” alone has been adopted by archaeologists, historians, classicists, literary theorists, political theorists, psychologists, art historians, sociologists, philosophers, and students of religion. Perhaps the only discipline that has never made significant use of the theoretical tools provided in this collection is economics itself. But then, economists have a long history of rejecting any terms other than their own, convinced they are engaged in something akin to natural science with unique insight into human rationality (that is, they have come to believe that, perhaps alone among the social sciences, they really are scientists, and simultaneously, that they study that domain of human life where people themselves behave most scientifically), they evince a notorious disinterest in theoretical tools developed by anybody else. Economics is perhaps the most insular, the most self-enclosing of disciplines. Which is why it is the most in need of a jolt from the outside.

Granted, history itself has recently dealt economics some jolts of its own. The crash of 2008 might, historically, come to be seen as something of a turning point. Economics had acquired such unprecedented prestige in the 1980s and 1990s that it was being treated like a kind of master discipline, to the point where anyone considered fit to run anything significant, even a university or charity, was expected to have at least some training in it. But this prestige was largely based on having convinced the world that economics, as a discipline, had itself been responsible for creating a genuinely efficient, rational, self-sustaining global system. Then of course, it all blew up. The fact that virtually every major economist was taken entirely by surprise when it did so (about the only exceptions were a few oddballs, Marxists, Minskyians, and the like, scoffed at by

the rest of the discipline), left many asking: What is it that economists are really good for? What is it they actually do? What purpose is really served by the existence of the discipline?

Surprisingly, perhaps, the most aggressive questions were raised by students in economics departments around the world, who began organizing a global movement to change the way the discipline was taught: as a field of competing paradigms and theories like any other social scientific discipline, rather than as a uniform body of received Truth.

\*\*\*

This is what makes the reissuing of this volume, and its recognition, so appropriate to the historical moment. I would like to see it considered as part of the core curriculum for the reformed discipline of economics.

Marshall Sahlins himself is a representative of one grand tradition in anthropology—perhaps the very grandest—that of the activist intellectual, engaged with social movements, but at the same time whose anthropological writings are if anything even more politically important, because they are aimed at having an impact on popular understandings of social, domestic, political, and economic possibilities. We might call this the anthropology of liberation, because the role of such anthropologists has always been to liberate their readers from some mind-forged manacles that they didn't even know were there. Each places a small chisel of reality to an otherwise impregnable-seeming wall of bogus economic common sense, one which causes us to believe, often in some very subtle way, that human beings have always been calculating bourgeois individuals, or else, have always wanted to be that, but just haven't fully worked out the technical means. Marcel Mauss, active in the cooperativist movement (for many years he actually helped manage a cooperative bakery in Paris), was the first to effectively challenge the myth that economic life “emerged from barter”: that is, that people invented money because they were already engaged in market behavior, but hadn't yet developed the appropriate technology. In the process, he ensured that words like “potlatch” and “gift economy” would become familiar terms to anyone involved in revolutionary or artistic movements ever since. Marshall Sahlins, who among his other claims to fame was the inventor of the 1960s campus teach-in, did one better than Mauss with “The Original Affluent Society”—an essay which, appropriately enough, first appeared in Sartre's journal *Temps Moderne* in Paris in 1968—taking on the very idea that there has ever been such a thing as “economic progress.”<sup>1</sup> Our assumption that humanity began, effectively, as slaves to their material conditions, locked in a desperate struggle for survival, and that science and resulting technological progress has been a gradual and inevitable process of liberation from material necessity, was itself based on ignoring the scientific evidence. Life in the Paleolithic—which, after all, is at least 90 percent of human history—was in no sense a struggle for existence. In fact, for most of our history, humans have lived a life of great material abundance. This is because “abundance” is not an absolute measure; it means when you have easy access to large amounts of the things that you want or think you need. In relation to their needs, most hunter-gatherers are rich. Most of all, their hours of labour would be the envy of any modern wage-slave of today.

---

<sup>1</sup> For purposes of full disclosure, I consider myself, in my own modest way, continuing this tradition, combining activist engagements with a very self-conscious effort to pursue Mauss' and Sahlins' tradition of publicly engaged economic anthropology.

Coming from a former evolutionary anthropologist and well-known political progressive, this apparent rejection of the very idea of social progress was a startling revelation indeed. It shattered, with a single blow, a dozen assumptions at once about what had actually happened over the course of human history, and by extension, the very purpose of technological advances. As a result, that one essay has probably had more impact on the popular imagination than any single work of anthropology before or since. It was embraced by everyone from hippies and socialists to an endless variety of modern-day luddites. Whole schools of political thought (Primitivism, Degrowth. . .) would never have come into existence were it not for Sahlins' intervention. The essay has been debated in reading groups in squats in Croatia and alternative academies in Korea and Japan. The Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski, has devoted a good deal of his time in prison to writing an extensive critique.

It's an essay that has genuinely changed the course of human history— if only, mainly, so far, history that has already taken place.

\*\*\*

It's important to understand "The Original Affluent Society" and the other essays collected in *Stone Age Economics*—generally considered to mark Sahlins' "Substantivist phase"—in the larger intellectual context from which they emerged. Sahlins had studied at Columbia University in the 1950s, and as a second and third year graduate student sat in on the famous seminars by exiled Viennese-Hungarian economic historian Karl Polanyi, held in his New York apartment and attended by such brilliant figures as the Classicist Moses Finley and Assyriologist Leo Oppenheim. Polanyi at the time was leading a direct challenge to the economic orthodoxy of the day, arguing that the very notion that there is something called "the economy" is a relatively recent historical development, and even more radically, that rather than emerging as some sort of spontaneous process from below, European markets had actually been nurtured and fostered by self-conscious government policy. Rather than there being a natural opposition, even war, between state and market—as all liberal thought had assumed since at least the time of the French Revolution, and certainly, since the Russian one—the market in its contemporary sense was largely the creation of the state. Much of Polanyi's work at Columbia was aimed at mapping out historical alternatives, understanding how sharing, gift, and redistributive economies had operated in the past. Sahlins himself contributed to this effort with an unpublished paper on Polynesia, which apparently was left aside when the editors decided to focus the resultant book on "Trade and Market in the Early Empires."

It's important to remember that at the time, such ideas, and the people who espoused them, were considered genuinely dangerous. Polanyi himself was at the time forced to commute back and forth weekly from Montreal to New York, since his wife, a former member of the Hungarian Communist Youth League, had been denied entrance to the United States. Finley was eventually blacklisted, fired from his job at Rutgers for refusing to testify against his students, and driven into exile. Other student participants in the seminar met similar fates.

Writing in retrospect, one might say that Polanyi was one of the few thinkers active in his day who had a full sense of just how grandiose the intellectual and political ambitions of the economic discipline might turn out to be—and what a catastrophe it would be if they succeeded. Hence his primary target was always what he called "economism"— the assumption that the particular *form* that economic activity tends to take in contemporary societies (market calculation) is always

identical to its *substance*, that is, the means by which human societies organize their material provisioning, supply themselves with what they need, and organize the distribution of luxuries. Confusing form and substance could only lead to “identifying market and society” and, ultimately, the assumption that all human behavior could be explained in market terms. The result Polanyi predicted would be deeply perverse and politically disastrous: since it would imply that cold, calculating greed was the only “rational” (hence, acceptable) human motive. In this Polanyi was indeed a prophet. This is exactly what has happened since.

But his attempt to nip the danger in the bud met sharp resistance. Mainstream economic anthropologists of the time largely rejected his conclusions, taking up the title “Formalist” as a badge of honor and insisting that markets do indeed simply expose the workings of a universal form of rational calculation. Homo they argued, is always, to some extent at least, *Oeconomicus*. He has to be. (In this context it’s legitimate to say “he.” They really didn’t have women in mind here.) This is because humans everywhere are always confronted with scarce resources of some sort, and always therefore have to decide on the most efficient ways to deploy those resources in order to get what they want. Extreme formalists like Harold Schneider even took Polanyi’s more dire predictions to heart, suggesting economic logic could be applied to all human action (presumably, up to and including academic debate, where Schneider’s own decision whether or not to falsify his data or simply shoot those who disagreed with him would simply be one of calculated expedience), likening Formalism to Edmund Leach’s then-fashionable structuralism: the Formalists were the trend-setting engineers in search of the deep principles that lay behind social systems, and the Substantivists the equivalent of old fuddy-duddy “butterfly collectors” of the Radcliffe-Brownian variety, content to simply sort societies into types (Tribal Economy, Redistributive Economy, Market Economy, etc.).

Sahlins has never been one to shirk from intellectual combat and most of the essays assembled in this volume were written, in one way or another, in response to such Formalist positions. The “Original Affluent Society” was, of course, a direct challenge to the very notion of “scarce resources.” Scarcity, after all, exists only in relation to felt need. It is hard to find a snow-plow in Brazil, but you can’t really speak of a scarcity of them, any more than you can say public spaces in California suffer from a scarcity of spittoons or the International Space Station is lacking in fishing equipment. This might seem self-evident, but it’s the kind of self-evident truth whose implications most people never seriously consider. Sahlins has spent much of his intellectual life working out the implications. How, he has effectively asked, is it we come to define our world around what we think it lacks, around the degree to which we find it inadequate to the fulfillment of our material desires? Once framed that way there is only one possible answer: there is something wrong with our desires, or at least what we believe our desires to be. (This is actually a further complicating factor: in much of history, even when most people were convinced humans were incorrigible creatures, very few actually acted that way.) Why did we come to abandon Paleolithic affluence and actually create a world in which most of us actually do live lives of scarcity?

In his long two-part essay on “The Domestic Mode of Production”—the closest Sahlins ever came to an experiment with Marxist models—he offers one tentative solution. Perhaps the answer lies in the social organization of production. For most of human history, the primary unit of production has been the household. And as Soviet economist Alexander Chayanov had elaborately demonstrated, a peasant household will tend to deploy its labor in such a way as to guarantee what its members consider to be a decent standard of life for all their members (e.g., sufficient

food, enough left over for feasts and weddings, perhaps support for the occasional wandering holy man or entertainer. . .); in doing so they will tend to distribute tasks within the household more by a sense of equity than efficiency, but, crucially, once they had attained that minimally decent level, they would mainly stop working and spend their time enjoying themselves. Sahlins assembled a great deal of evidence to demonstrate that what Chayanov found to be true of pre-revolutionary Russian peasants was largely true of any society in which labor was organized by household needs: there was thus a direct line between hunter-gatherer affluence, the behavior of Medieval serfs, and, for instance, the fact that it's so difficult to get a taxi in the rain (since drivers, who are generally working for a daily target income, tend to work until they reach it and then go home.)

This meant that the human proclivity to prefer leisure to greater wealth lasted a very long time. What then led us (or so many of us) to change our minds? Within the domestic mode of production, the only pressures to increase output were, typically, political: big men, chiefs, and would-be potentates invariably wanted more, since unlike the householders, they *were* competitive individuals, constantly vying to outdo each other in magnificence or war. Still, in the absence of state power, there was a decided limit on how much such men could extract. Householders quickly developed standards for what was a reasonable level of depredation as well. Sahlins ends by noting that in Hawaii, if rulers were considered to have gone beyond such reasonable levels of depredation, they would simply be killed. It was only with the rise of the state that this became impossible.

All of this was, of course, being argued and debated at the height of the Vietnam War, during which a guerrilla army of peasant householders, moved largely by such moral outrage, appeared to be fighting the greatest state military machine in human history to a standstill. But the fate of Chayanov—who was ultimately purged and shot under Stalin for unorthodox views on farm collectivization—threw Sahlins' view of the state as villain into a more ambivalent light. If it is a human inclination, under ordinary circumstances, to prefer leisure over increased production, and if history was a battle between those who wished to maximize production and those who wished to enjoy less ostentatious luxuries, what side was the Left actually on?

It is a testament to the power of Sahlins' work that he managed to raise these questions, not as abstract questions of philosophy, not from the inside, as it were, but from the outside, starting from the concrete variety of actual human material experience. As a result, his interventions were generally the most enduring. Few remember "The Domestic Mode of Production" nowadays, but everyone still argues about the issues that it raised.

"On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange," which first appeared in 1965, might be said to be Sahlins' riposte to the charge that Substantivists were butterfly-collectors, as well as being his first attempt to grapple with Structuralism. Both Karl Polanyi and Claude Levi-Strauss had proposed tripartite divisions of types of exchange. Polanyi's distinction was between societies based on reciprocity, redistribution, and market; Levi-Strauss made the argument that all societies were, in their essence, made up of three levels of exchange: of goods (economics); of women (kinship); and words (language)—this being his own variation of the then-popular Marxist distinction of economic infrastructure, intermediary social structure, and ideological superstructure.

Both formulations had their problems. Polanyi's was crude, and opened itself to charges of taking differences of emphasis between cultures and essentializing them as differences in kind. (After Immanuel Wallerstein adopted a variation of Polanyi's tripartite division for his world-systems theory, Andre Gunder-Frank objected that all he was really doing was talking about

family, government, and trade. Any moderately complex society should be expected to combine all three. So we were back to levels once again.) Levi-Strauss' division had a different problem: it was self-evidently absurd. The idea that marriage is always necessarily an exchange between women and men is based on an argument that matrilineal systems don't really exist, which is clearly not the case, and there is almost no sense in which the "exchange" of words in speech resembles the trading of goods. It was metaphor run amok, disguised as science. The fact that this argument was taken seriously, and even used as the basis of analysis, by so many French thinkers of the time, is more a reflection of the intellectual awe in which Levi-Strauss was then held, not to mention his enormous institutional power (and secondarily, too, the rival power of very simplistic forms of Marxism then being inflicted on the intellectual Left by the French Communist Party, against whom Levi-Strauss was the great standard-bearer).

In a remarkable feat of synthesis, Sahlins took these jangly and conflicted notions and fused them together into something that actually made sense. Yes, he agreed, Marcel Mauss had been right to argue that all possibilities always coexist inside any society, and yes Levi-Strauss was right to criticize Mauss for not acknowledging that reciprocity was the basis of all social relations. But Levi-Strauss was mistaken in trying to solve the problem by appealing to a quasi-Marxist notion of levels. Really what we need to examine is how the social universe looks from any particular individual perspective within it. Everything depends on social distance, hence the famous division between: Generalized Reciprocity (basically, what Mauss called "communism") between close kin, or people who one treats as if they were close kin; a kind of middle zone of Balanced Reciprocity governed by fairness, whether in the exchange of sisters or the tit-for-tat murders of the blood-feud; and finally, Negative Reciprocity, which actually means those so beyond the pale that rules of reciprocity simply do not apply.<sup>2</sup> While certainly imperfect (Sahlins has since partly abandoned it), this idea of concentric moral circles of sociability has been endlessly productive, having been cited and deployed by scholars working in almost every discipline (again, except mainstream economics), and surely represents one of the most powerful new forms of economic analysis to emerge from the middle third of the twentieth century. (And in the last third, there was very little new.)

\*\*\*

Sahlins spent the years 1967–8 in Paris as a guest of Levi-Strauss, and his essay on the *hau* could be seen as marking his first confrontation with the (at first quite alien) concerns and issues of French intellectual life. Witness to the events at the Sorbonne during the uprising of May 1968, Sahlins' subsequent work, especially his denunciation of Marx as simply another embodiment of bourgeois economism in *Culture and Practical Reason* (1976), might be seen as, as much as anything, a reflection of the widespread revulsion in radical circles about the cynically calculating behavior of the French Communist Party at the time. And while his subsequent, cosmological turn is often seen as representing a fundamental break with the kind of concerns which dominate the essays in this volume, it really isn't. Sahlins continues to ask the same fundamental questions. Why do we see the world as inadequate to what we want out of it? If it's not just the effect of

---

<sup>2</sup> I note in passing that, in a remarkable example of intellectual convergence, the three concentric circles model is almost exactly the same as the one produced by Edmund Leach himself in "Animal Categories and Verbal Abuse" to describe the relation of marriage patterns and attitudes towards animals. The two pieces appeared at almost exactly the same time, 1964, and 1965, respectively, and neither author seems to have been aware of the other beforehand.

self-aggrandizing state elites, might it not be something deeper, a fundamental flaw in Western conceptions of what humans are and their relations to the rest of the cosmos? In “The Sadness of Sweetness” (1996), he traced the problem back to Augustine’s conception of original sin. Human beings are cursed with disobedient and insatiable desires in punishment for their own disobedience to God. In *The Western Illusion of Human Nature* (2008) he pushes it back further, to the Sophists. Needless to say, most of these interventions have set off furious debates. This is exactly how they were intended. And we have every reason to expect more unexpected revelations in the future.

\*\*\*

To a large degree, mainstream economics is still trying to solve nineteenth century problems: how to increase overall productivity and assure an efficient distribution of necessities under conditions of overall scarcity. It’s clear that, if our species is to survive, we’re going to have to come up with a new economic discipline which starts from very different questions (for instance, how to assure access to the means of life under conditions of rapidly growing productivity and decreasing demand for labor, without also destroying Earth). Everything must be re-imagined. These are exactly the conditions under which it’s important to turn to the past—not just our intellectual history but, above all, human history, the endless treasury of human creativity and experiment that only anthropology can unlock—to liberate us from preconceptions, and set us on the road to truly new ideas. There is perhaps no single work of anthropology that so lends itself to this task as *Stone Age Economics*. It is certainly one of the books that made me decide to become an anthropologist. I hope the reader finds it as inspirational as I did.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



David Graeber  
Foreword to *Stone Age Economics*  
2017

*Stone Age Economics* by Marshall Sahlins (Routledge Classics Edition, 2017), pp. ix-xviii

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**