

**Some Thoughts on Hunter-Gatherers, Economics and Anthropology  
for the opening of  
*Hadza: The Roots of Equality* exhibit, Atlas Studios, Newburgh, NY, 2017  
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**Why study hunter-gatherer cultures?**

Why is it important to study hunter-gatherers like the Hadza? Why did we organize this exhibit around the social mechanisms that maintain equality in tribes like the Hadza? Because if we want to think deeply about what it means to be human, what is innate to our species, it makes sense to study people living in the environment and culture in which human evolution occurred, who retain the hunter-gatherer lifestyle we all lived until the last twelve thousand years, and who also happen to live with the greatest level of equality on earth.

Until the birth of agriculture 12,000 years ago, the Hadza lifestyle was the norm for all humans. If the genus *Homo* evolved almost 3 million years ago, then for 99 per cent of our time on earth, this is how we lived, as nomadic hunters and gatherers. So rather than just studying another culture as a kind of trivia – looking at their customs as just some window dressing that’s interestingly different from ours, like a cultural form of butterfly collecting – it makes sense to actually draw out the principles common to egalitarian tribes, which the Hadza so fully embody.

An irony of modern life is that, in spite of spectacular increases in material abundance and centuries of technological progress, hunter-gatherers, people who live with almost no material possessions, enjoy lives as satisfying or more so as lives led in the industrialized world. These societies are affluent in the sense of having everything they need. They spend their leisure time eating, drinking, playing, and socializing – in short, doing the very things associated with affluence. We work our whole lives to try and attain the leisure time hunter-gatherers take as a given.

Many hunter-gatherer societies also enjoy a great amount of personal freedom. Often there are either no leaders at all, or temporary leaders whose authority is severely constrained; no social classes and often no discrimination based on gender. Their ways of living and ways of collective decision-making have 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 are based.

### **An alternative vision of human nature**

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. 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. Also informative is the relationship between social egalitarianism and environmental sustainability: the same features that promote an egalitarian social structure also promote environmental stasis and vice versa. Hunter-gatherers do not deliberately cultivate a higher ethical consciousness; their patterns of behavior arise from the material reality of their lives.

The more we learn about hunter-gatherers, the more we see that the cultural beliefs surrounding modern market capitalism do not reflect universal "human nature". Assumptions about human behavior that market societies believe to be universal – that humans are naturally competitive and acquisitive, and that social stratification and hierarchy is a perhaps unfortunate reality – do not apply to many hunter-gatherers. The dominant school of economic theory in the industrialized world, neoclassical economics, holds these attributes to be essential for a functioning society. Yet the very existence of societies living happily with no industry, no agriculture, and few material possessions offers a challenge to the concept of human nature held by most economists.

The cultural beliefs supporting capitalism serve to justify the current relationship between humans, and between humans and the rest of the world. Central to this belief system is the notion of "economic man" – naturally acquisitive, competitive, rational, calculating, and forever looking for ways to improve his material well-being. Today those of us in the industrial world 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 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.

But neoclassical economic theory is more than a set of beliefs about human nature. It's also an ideology justifying the existing economic organization, resource use, and distribution of wealth. 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 constant expansion. The inequality of the distribution of goods among individuals in a capitalist economy is justified by the assumption that in a competitive economy workers are paid what they deserve. The historical and social circumstances that enable one person to produce more than another are not considered – inherited wealth, for example, or more education. Neoclassical theory sees individuals as isolated producers and isolated consumers of market goods, competing with one another for scarce resources.

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 that more is always better than less – is only one way of approaching the question of how to live. 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 food when another person is hungry would be unthinkable; as would throwing away 40% of food as we do in western cultures.

We cannot return to a hunting and gathering way of life. We can, however, work to incorporate some of the features of hunter-gatherer societies which work to promote ecological and social harmony. The present is increasingly characterized by despair. We seem out of control and on the brink of numerous irretrievable disasters. The interrelated issues of global climate change, biodiversity loss, and social unrest threaten the very existence of the civilization which most in the industrialized world consider superior to cultures with simpler technologies. It is helpful to realize that a blueprint for survival is contained within our common cultural history. Our minds and cultures evolved under egalitarian conditions. Understanding how hunter-gatherer societies solve 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.

The purpose of this exhibit is not to portray some interesting relic of the past but point to a valuable source of 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. In spite of the onslaught of homogenous world culture, many indigenous people are maintaining alternatives to “economic man”. We need to make visible the assumptions underlying our current world. If we see them, we can change them. If we understand there are alternatives, we have options.

A rigorous examination of human society has to include the study of human origins – how we became social, trusting animals, unlike other primates. If we only study modern, recent societies it's like looking at an inch of a map and expecting to get where you're going. Trying to figure out where we've gone wrong is a huge project, and should draw from different disciplines. But certainly the origins of what it means to be human – and this exhibit doesn't have room to touch on the human cultural revolution, the development of language and symbolic culture and how we first came to cooperate like no other primate – are a cornerstone of that search. Notably, humans are the only primate with whites in our eyes, allowing them to be ‘read’ by others. While still jostling for power, stuck partly in the primate world, what differentiates us is that we *want* intersubjectivity; to be understood, to communicate. In a time when we've been reduced to fighting over ‘identity politics’ because we feel there is no real alternative to our current system, anthropology reminds us that another way is possible.