



## Romanticizing the Hunter-Gatherer

[William Buckner](#)

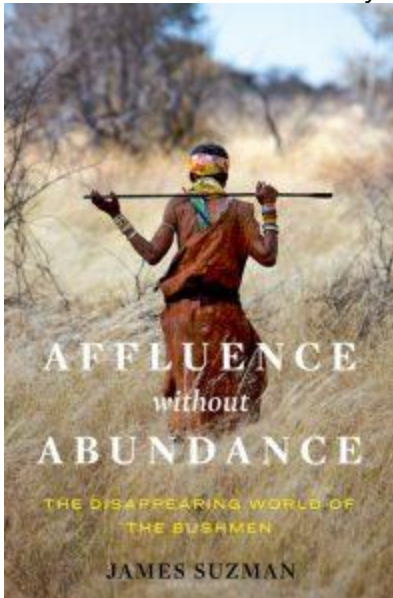
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*O Man, to whatever country you belong and whatever your opinions, listen: here is your history as I believe I have read it, not in the books of your fellow men who are liars but in Nature which never lies.*

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, [A Discourse on Inequality](#)

In 1966, at the 'Man the Hunter' symposium held at the University of Chicago, anthropologist Richard B. Lee presented a paper that would radically rewrite how academics and the public at large interpret life in hunter-gatherer societies. Questioning the notion that the hunter-gatherer way of life is a "precarious and arduous struggle for existence," Lee instead described a society of relative comfort and abundance. Lee studied the !Kung of the Dobe area in the Kalahari Desert (also known variously as Bushmen, the San people, or the Ju/'hoansi) and noted that they required only 12 to 19 hours a week to collect all the food they needed. Lee further criticized the notion that hunter-gatherers have a low life expectancy, arguing that the proportion of individuals older than 60 among the !Kung, "compares favorably to the percentage of elderly in industrialized populations."<sup>1</sup> On the basis of Lee's work, and other material presented at the symposium, anthropologist Marshall Sahlins coined the phrase "original affluent society" to describe the hunter-gatherer way of life.

Affluence without Abundance by James Suzman



It's not often that you see a 50-year-old paper repeatedly referenced in mainstream publications, but you can find mentions of Lee's work pretty much everywhere today. In the [Guardian](#), the [New York Times](#), the [London Review of Books](#), the [Financial Times](#), and [Salon](#), among others. Much of this attention has to do with two recently published books, [Against the Grain](#) by James C. Scott and [Affluence without Abundance](#) by James Suzman, both of which are informed by Lee and Sahlins's conception of hunter-gatherer affluence. [An article](#) in the September 18 issue of the [New Yorker](#) by John Lanchester heavily cites each of these books in order to make "The Case Against Civilization."

So, are Lee and Sahlins, and Scott and Suzman, and Lanchester correct? Is the hunter-gatherer lifestyle a more optimal way to live, and have the benefits of civilization been drastically overstated?

Let us first revisit the !Kung themselves. As Lee himself would later mention in his 1984 book on the Dobe !Kung, his original estimate of 12-19 hours worked per week did not include food processing, tool making, or general housework, and when such activities were included he estimated that the !Kung worked about 40-44 hours per week.<sup>2</sup> Lee noted that this number still compares quite favorably to the average North

American wage earner, who spends over 40 hours a week above their wage labor doing housework or shopping. Even with the revised figures, this seems to indeed point to a life of greater leisure among hunter-gatherers (or, at least, among the !Kung) than industrialized populations. However, it is important to note that this does not take into account the difficulty or danger involved in the types of tasks undertaken by hunter-gatherers. It is when you look into the data on mortality rates, and dig through diverse ethnographic accounts, that you realize how badly mistaken claims about an "original affluent society" really are.

While you'll read much about Lee's work in the popular press, you'll find little on his critics. Anthropologists Henry Harpending and LuAnn Wandsnider wrote, "Lee's (1968, 1969, 1979) studies of !Kung diet and caloric intake have generated a misleading belief among anthropologists and others that !Kung are well fed and under little or no nutritional stress."<sup>3</sup> They note that "1964 may have been an unusually productive year for bush food," and compare it with work describing the severe effects of the 1973 environment, "...people were starving, and weight loss and widespread social disruption occurred." In 1986, Nancy Howell wrote that "...the !Kung are very thin and complain often of hunger, at all times of the year."<sup>4</sup> In [Hunter and Habitat in the Central Kalahari Desert](#), George B. Silberbauer states that, "Undoubtedly Bushmen do succumb in years of very serious drought," and describes how 37 individuals of another San population, the G/wi, died of dehydration during the drought of 1939.<sup>5</sup> And in a 1986 article entitled "Ethnographic Romanticism and the Idea of Human Nature," Melvin Konner & Marjorie Shostak summed it up well, stating that, "Data on morbidity and mortality, though not necessarily relevant to abundance, certainly made use of the term "affluent" seem inappropriate."<sup>6</sup>



Two Hadzabe men in Tanzania returning from a hunt.

In his later work, Lee would acknowledge that, "Historically, the Ju/'hoansi have had a high infant mortality rate..."<sup>7</sup> In a study on the life histories of the !Kung Nancy Howell found that the number of infants who died before the age of 1 was roughly 20 percent.<sup>8</sup> (As high as this number is, it compares favorably with estimates from some other hunter-gatherer societies, such as among the Casiguran Agta of the Phillipines, where the rate is 34 percent.)<sup>9</sup> Life expectancy for the !Kung is 36 years of age.<sup>10</sup> Again, while this number is only about half the average life expectancy found among contemporary nation states, this number still compares favorably with several other hunter-gatherer populations, such as the Hiwi (27 years) and the Agta (21 years). Life expectancy across pygmy hunter-gatherer societies is even lower, ranging from about 16-24 years, although this may have as much to do with pygmy physiology as with the hunter-gatherer lifestyle.<sup>11</sup>

Much is made of the increased risk of infectious disease in large, concentrated, sedentary populations, but comparatively little attention has been given to the risk of 'traveler's diarrhea' common among hunter-gatherers. For mobile groups, infants, the elderly, and other vulnerable individuals have little opportunity to develop resistance to local pathogens. This may help explain why infant and child mortality among hunter-gatherers tends to be so high. Across hunter-gatherer societies, only about 57% of children born survive to the age of 15. Sedentary populations of forager-horticulturalists, and acculturated hunter-gatherers, have a greater number of children surviving into adulthood, with 64% and 67%, respectively, surviving to the age of 15.

But what about egalitarianism? In a 2004 study, Michael Gurven marshals an impressive amount of cross-cultural data and notes that hunters tend to keep more of their kill for themselves and their families than they share with others.<sup>12</sup> While there is undeniably a great deal of sharing across hunter-gatherer societies, common notions of generalized equality are greatly overstated. Even in circumstances where hunters give away more of their meat than they end up receiving from others in return, good hunters tend to be accorded high status, and rewarded with more opportunities to reproduce everywhere the relationship has been studied.<sup>13</sup> When taking into account 'embodied wealth' such as hunting returns and reproductive success, and 'relational wealth' such as the number of exchange and sharing partners, Alden Smith *et al.* calculated that hunter-gatherer societies have a 'moderate' level of inequality, roughly comparable to that of Denmark.<sup>14</sup> While this is less inequality than most agricultural societies and nation states, it's not quite the level of egalitarianism many have come to expect from hunter-gatherers.

In the realm of reproductive success, hunter-gatherers are even more unequal than modern industrialized populations, exhibiting what is called "greater reproductive skew," with males having significantly larger variance in reproductive success than females.<sup>15</sup> Among the Ache of Paraguay, males have over 4 times the variance in reproductive success that females do, which is one of the highest ratios recorded. This means some males end up having lots of children with different women, while a significant number of males end up having none at all. This is reflected in the fact that polygynous marriage is practiced in the majority of hunter-gatherer societies for which there are data. Across these societies, the average age at marriage for females is only 13.8, while the average age at marriage for males is 20.7.<sup>16</sup> Rather than defending what would be considered child marriage in contemporary Western societies, anthropologists often omit mentioning this information entirely.

According to anthropologists Douglas Fry and Geneviève Souillac, "Nomadic forager data suggest a human predilection toward equality, including gender equality, in ethos and action,"<sup>17</sup> yet the available data do not support this notion in the slightest. On the contrary, in 1978 Robert Tonkinson had found that, among the Mardu hunter-gatherers of Australia, "Mardu men accord themselves greater ritual responsibility, higher status, more power, and more rights than women. It is a society in which male interests generally prevail when rights are contested and in the centrally important arena of religious life."<sup>18</sup> Among the Hiwi of Venezuela, and the Ache of Paraguay, female infants and children are disproportionately victims of infanticide, neglect, and child homicide.<sup>19 20</sup> It is in fact quite common in hunter-gatherer societies that are at war, or heavily reliant on male hunting for subsistence, for female infants to be habitually neglected or killed.<sup>21 22</sup> In 1931, Knud Rasmussen recorded that, among the Netsilik Inuit, who were almost wholly reliant on male hunting and fishing, out of 96 births from parents he interviewed, 38 girls were killed (nearly 40 percent).<sup>23</sup>

It is also instructive to compare the homicide rates of hunter-gatherer societies with those of contemporary nation states. In a 2013 paper entitled "From the Peaceful to the Warlike," anthropologist Robert Kelly [provides homicide data](#) for 15 hunter-gatherer societies.<sup>24</sup>

TABLE 9.1 Homicide Rates Among Hunter-Gatherers with Data to Calculate Population Pressure

Group	NAGP <sup>a</sup>	Ratio <sup>b</sup>	Population Density (persons/100km <sup>2</sup> )	Population Pressure (ln) <sup>c</sup>	Homicide rate <sup>d</sup>	Reference
Hadza	1246	3.8	24	5.284641	6.6	Marlowe, 2010, p. 141
Andamanese	4400	0.5	40	4.007333	20	Keeley, 1996, Table 6.1
Ju/'hoansi <sup>e</sup>	570	3.8	6.6	5.793568	42	Lee, 1979
San Ildefonso Agta	3856	0.4	38	3.703509	129	Early & Headland, 1998, p. 103
Gidjingali	1904	0.4	72.7	2.34908	148	Hiatt, 1965
Tiwif <sup>f</sup>	2273	0.4	37.5	3.188224	160	Keeley, 1996, Table 6.1
Yaghan	484	0.2	4.8	3.004031	169	Cooper, 1917, in Wrangham et al., 2005
Yurok	685	0.8	131	1.431078	240	Keeley, 1996, Table 6.1
Casiguran Agta	4512	0.4	87	3.032297	326	Headland, 1989
Murugin	1969	0.4	11.7	4.209402	330	Keeley, 1996, Table 6.1
Modoc	195	0.8	22.9	1.918719	450	Keeley, 1996, Table 6.1
Ache	2480	0.4	14	4.260666	500	Hill et al., 2007
Hiwi	2895	0.3	4.3	5.308153	1018	Hill et al., 2007
Piegan	348	0.2	4.3	2.78415	1000	Keeley 1996, Table 6.1
Batek <sup>g</sup>	3315	0.4	13	4.624973	1	Endicott & Endicott, 2008

Kelly's

table is published in 'War, Peace and Human Nature: The Convergence of Evolutionary and Cultural Views' edited by Douglas P. Fry, p 153.

11 of these 15 societies have homicide rates higher than that of the most violent [modern nation](#), and 14 out of the 15 have homicide rates higher than that of the United States in 2016. The one exception, the Batek of Malaysia, have a long history of being violently attacked and enslaved by neighboring groups, and developed a survival tactic of running away and studiously avoiding conflict. Yet even they recount tales of wars in the past, where their shamans would shoot enemies with blowpipes.<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, Ivan Tacey & Diana Riboli have noted that "...the Batek frequently recount their nostalgic memories of British doctors, administrators and army personnel visiting their communities in helicopters to deliver medicines and other supplies," which conflicts with the idea that hunter-gatherer societies would have no want or need of anything nation states have to offer. From 1920-1955 the !Kung had a homicide rate of 42/100,000 (about 8 times that of the US rate in 2016), however Kelly mentions that, "murders ceased after 1955 due to the presence of an outside police force."

Many of the recent articles in the popular media on hunter-gatherer societies have failed to represent these societies accurately. The picture you get from reading articles in publications like the *New Yorker* and the *Guardian*, or from anthropologists like Douglas Fry and James Suzman, is often quite different from what a deep dive into the ethnographic record reveals. The excessive reliance on a single paper published 50 years ago has contributed to some severe misconceptions about hunter-gatherer 'affluence,' and their relative freedom from scarcity and disease. There is a tendency to downplay the benefits of modern medicine, institutions, and infrastructure – as well as the very real costs of not having

access to them – in these discussions. And, despite what some may wish to believe, the hunter-gatherer way of life is not a solution to the social problems found in modern nation states.

So, what explains the popularity of this notion of an “original affluent society”? Why do people in societies with substantially greater life expectancy, reduced infant mortality, greater equality in reproductive success, and reduced rates of violence,<sup>26 27</sup> romanticize a way of life filled with hardships they have never experienced? In wealthy, industrialized populations oriented around consumerism and occupational status, the idea that there are people out there living free of greed, in natural equality and harmony, provides an attractive alternative way of life. To quote anthropologist David Kaplan, “The original affluent society thesis then may be as much a commentary on our own society as it is a depiction of the life of hunter-gatherers. And that may be its powerful draw and lasting appeal.”<sup>28</sup> One might think that if avarice, status hierarchies, and inequality are peculiarly modern phenomena, then maybe they aren’t part of human nature, and with the right kind of activism, and enough forward-thinking individuals, such problems can be readily solved by changing the culture.

Conversely, to look across human cultures and notice that even the smallest and most ‘egalitarian’ societies are still plagued by problems of violence, sexism, xenophobia, and inequality may be disheartening for many political progressives and anthropologists dedicated to social justice. These problems are not new—in fact they are very old indeed—and they cannot simply be wished away or made to disappear with misleading commentary. But there is a concern that acknowledging the deep roots of many human social ills is to excuse them, or to concede that they can never be mitigated or overcome. This is not only defeatist, it is completely misguided. Recent human history is undeniably a story of enormous progress. If global declines in [child mortality](#), [hunger](#), [violence](#), and [poverty](#), and increases in [life expectancy](#) do not represent progress, then the word simply has no meaning.

Additionally, progressives and many anthropologists understandably do not wish to denigrate other cultures, or to give the appearance of doing so. In his book [Sick Societies](#), anthropologist Robert Edgerton writes, “...certain practices, all anthropologists know, are sometimes not reported because doing so would offend the people being described or discredit them in the eyes of others.”<sup>29</sup> Anthropologists often show an admirable concern for the well-being of people in the societies they study, and exercise great care in considering how their work will be interpreted by outsiders. But academics and media figures have a responsibility to report the truth as accurately as possible, and when their values prevent them from doing so they do a disservice to the public, and risk damaging their own credibility.

At this year’s annual meeting of the [American Anthropological Association](#), President Alisse Waterston [said that](#) the “responsibility now for anthropologists is to participate in envisioning an alternative world.” Wanting to help shape a better world is a worthy goal. I do not doubt the good intentions of President Waterston or many of the other anthropologists who see flaws in their own societies and feel a deep responsibility to help make the world a better place. But envisioning a better world cannot come at the expense of accurately describing the existing one. If academics and journalists are unwilling to report uncomfortable facts, then they have no one but themselves to blame if they suffer a consequent loss of public trust.

For as long as humans have been around, people the world over have faced similar struggles: getting enough to eat, navigating social relationships, dealing with parasites and disease, raising their young. It’s a

nice idea to believe that somewhere deep in the past, or still today in a more remote part of the world, there existed or exists a society that has figured it all out; where everyone is healthy and happy and equal, untouched by the difficulties of modern living. But even if violence, inequality, discrimination, and other social problems are universal and part of human nature, that doesn't mean their prevalence can't be reduced. They can and recent [trends](#) make this abundantly clear. Denying the scope of the problem, pretending that these social issues are uniquely modern or uniquely Western, or the product of agriculture or capitalism, does not help to fix our contemporary social ills. Instead it leaves us more confused about the causes of these problems, and, consequently, less equipped to solve them.

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