

*Bob Black*

**Primitive Affluence: A  
Postscript to Sahlins**

1992

“The Original Affluent Society” by Marshall Sahlins is an essay of wide-ranging erudition whose persuasive power largely derives from two extended examples: the Australian Aborigines and the !Kung Bushmen. The Australian instance, omitted here, is developed from a variety of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century written sources. The data on the Bushmen — or San, as they call themselves — were the result of fieldwork in the early 1960’s by Richard Borshay Lee, an anthropologist. Lee has subsequently published a full monograph on work in a !Kung San band in which he augments, recalculates and further explains the statistics relied on by Sahlins. As finally marshalled the evidence supports the affluence thesis more strongly than ever — and includes a couple of surprises.

“Why should we plant,” asks Lee’s informant/Xashe, “when there are so many mongongos in the world?” Why indeed? Originally, Lee studied the San equivalent of what is conventionally accounted work in industrial society — hunting and gathering in their case, wage labor in ours. This was the comparison Sahlins cited. In terms of our standard eight-hour workday, a San adult works between 2.2 and 2.4 hours a day — well below the provisional four hour figure Sahlins references. Not that the San work a seven- or even a five-day week at these ludicrously low levels of labor, for they spend “less than half their days in subsistence and enjoy more leisure time than the members of many agricultural and industrial societies.” For *many* Lee might better have said *any*. More often than not a !Kung San is visiting friends and kin at other camps or receiving them in his own.

Upon returning to the field, Lee broadened his definition of work to encompass all “those activities that contribute to the direct appropriation of food, water or materials from the environment” — adding to subsistence activity tool-making and fixing and housework (mainly food preparation). These activities didn’t increase the San workload as much as their equivalents in our sort of society increase ours — relatively we fall even further behind. *Per diem* the manufacture and maintenance of tools takes 64 minutes for men, 45 minutes for women. “Housework” for the San means mostly cracking nuts, plus cooking — most adults of both sexes and older children crack their own mongongo nuts, the only activity where women do more work than men: 2.2 hours a day for men, 3.2 hours for women. Nor are these figures fudged by unreported child labor. Until about age fifteen San children do virtually no work, and if they are female they continue to do little work until marriage, which may be some years later. Our adolescents fare worse at McDonald’s, not to forget that women and children comprised the workforce for the brutal beginnings of industrialization in Britain and America.

It is often asserted that in most societies women work more than men and this is probably, in general, true. In a perhaps not unrelated development, women in all known societies wield less political power than men, in fact usually none whatsoever. A thoughtfully strategic feminism should therefore eventuate in

anarchism, not in fantasies of matriarchal table-turning; and in the abolition of work, not in caterwauling for equal pay for equal work. The only mathematically certain way to equalize, gender-wise, government and work is to get rid of both of them. In San society, however, men work more than women. Men do one-third more subsistence work than women, although they provide only 40% of caloric intake.

When the full tally of work as Lee expansively defines it is taken, the average workweek is 44.5 hours for men, 40.1 hours for women.

Lee's original figures relied on by Sahlins were startling enough, but the later data enhance their value by allowing comparisons of housework as well as subsistence work. Our world of work has a dirty secret: wage-work rests on the indispensable prop of unpaid "shadow work." (Illich 1981) The arduous toil of housewives — cleaning, cooking, shopping, childcare — is so much uncompensated drudgery literally unaccounted for in statistics on work. With us as much as with the San such work is usually women's work, to a much greater extent among us. How many husbands perform even two hours of housework a day? How many wives, like their San counterparts, less than three? Nor does San society exhibit any sight so sorry as the majority of married women working for wages or salaries *in addition* to the housework they always did — and at levels of pay which still reflect sexual inequality.

Lee's later figures strengthen the affluence thesis in other ways — for instance, caloric intake, previously underestimated, is upped to a more than adequate level. The surplus is stored as body fat against occasional shortages, fed to the dogs or consumed to sustain people's efforts at all-night trance-healing dances occurring one to four times a month. And despite the staggering variety of plant and animal sources in their diet, the San do not eat many items which other peoples find edible. Their work yields them so many consumer goods that the San as a society can and do exercise consumer choice. To assign such societies to the category "subsistence economy" is not only foolish phraseology — what economy is not a subsistence economy? — as Pierre Clastres argues, it passes an adverse value judgment in the guise of a statement of fact. The implication is that these societies have failed to be other than what they are, as if it were unthinkable anybody might prefer a leisurely life bereft of bosses, priests, princes and paupers. The San have a choice. In the 1960's and 1970's, amidst a worsening political situation in Botswana and neighboring Namibia, many San gave up foraging for employment by Bantu cattle ranchers or South African farmers. All along they were able but not willing to work for wages.

As Ivan Illich observes, "Economists understand about work about as much as alchemists about gold." In positing as twin fatalities infinite wants and finite (scarce) resources they erect a dismal science on axioms every sensible person

rejects out of hand. By their lifeways the hunter-gatherers give the lie to the Hobbesian hoax. Resources are bountiful and the San consume them with gusto, but since they are rational hedonists, not ascetic madmen, the San find satisfaction in satiety: they have worked enough if there is plenty for everybody. So scandalous are the foragers for the economists and their addicts that they call forth paroxysms of pulpit-thumping prejudice, notably by libertarian economist Murray Rothbard and, in a hostile review of my book espousing the abolition of work, David Ramsey Steele. *Liberty* (as it styles itself) suppressed 90% of my rejoinder to Steele. Let me retaliate by quoting him only in quoting myself:

Steele, with unintended humor, explains why hunter-gatherers loaf most of the time: “If you have one animal carcass to keep you going for the next week or two, it’s a waste of effort to get another one, and what else is there to do but swap stories?” The poor devils are *too rich to work*. Cruelly denied the opportunity to accumulate capital, what else is there for the benighted savages to do but create, converse, dance, sing, feast and fuck? (*Liberty* May 1989)

Behind Steele’s braying ethnocentrism is a fear of wildness and wilderness, a yearning fear for the call from the Forest, a fear of freedom itself.

Foragers like the San and the Australians are not the only prosperous primitives with ample leisure. Gardeners who practice shifting (“slash and burn”) cultivation work a lot less than we moderns. In the Philippines the horticultural Hanunoo annually devote 500 to 1000 hours to the subsistence activity that sustains one adult. At the higher figure, that works out to less than 2 hours and 45 minutes a day. Gardening, augmented by hunting and gathering was the mode of production among most of the Indians in eastern North America when the Europeans arrived. The clash of cultures has been regarded from many perspectives, but not as insistently as it should be as a collision between worlds of work.

Far from living hand-to-mouth, the Indians produced a surplus — had they not, the settlers would have starved at Jamestown and Plymouth. Far from exhausting themselves scrounging for survival, the impression the Indians left on early English observers like Captain John Smith was that their life was a paradise of all but workless plenty. He thought the settlers might enjoy a three-day workweek featuring the “pretty sport” of fishing. In 1643, the magistrates of Massachusetts Bay received the submission of two Rhode Island sachems. “Giving them to understand upon what terms they must be received under us,” as Governor John Winthrop put it, the Indians were told “Not to do any unnecessary workd on the Lord’s day within the gates of proper towns.” Not to worry, replied the sachems: “It is a small thing for us to rest on that day, for we have not much to do any day, and therefore we will forbear on that day.”

According to one of the Roanoke colonists, to feed one Virginia Indian enough corn for a year required annually 24 hours of work. (Morgan 1975) (Of course

the Indians ate more than corn; New England Indians enjoyed an abundant, varied “diet for superb health,” more nutritious and less monotonous than what became standard fare in, say, the back country of the South; or in later industrial tenements.

“Whatever else early America was,” according to recent scholarship, “it was a world of work.” (Innes 1988) Indian America was anything but, as that Roanoke colonist was not the only one to notice. No wonder that he and the others apparently went native, abandoning the earliest English settlement, leaving only a message carved on a tree that they were gone “To Croatan.” These first defectors from civilized toil to barbarous ease were not to be the last. Throughout the colonial period, hundreds of Euro-American agriculturalists joined the Indians or, captured in war, refused to return when peace came. Women and children were inordinately likely to take to the Indian life-style, readily casting off their restrictive roles in white society, but adult males also sought acceptance among the heathen. Without a doubt work was a major motivation for the choices they made. At Jamestown, John Smith enforced a regimen of labor discipline so harsh as to approach concentration camp conditions. In 1613, some of the English were “appointed to be hanged Some burned Some to be broken upon wheles, others to be staked and some to be shott to death.” Their crime? An historian recounts that all “had run away to live with the Indians and had been recaptured.” (Morgan 1975)

The anthropology of work does not suggest any reduction in the quantity or increase in the quality of work in societies of greater complexity. The trend or tendency is rather the other way. The hunt for Virginia Indian men, as for their San counterparts, was more like “sport” than work, but their wives seemed to have worked more than San women if less than their white contemporaries. On the other hand, the gardeners work perhaps even less than the San but some of the work, like weeding and clearing new fields, is more arduous. The watershed, however, is the onset of civilization with its government, cities, and class divisions. Peasants work more because they are compelled to: because they have rents, taxes, and tithes to pay. Later the laboring class pays all that plus profits too which are taken by employers whose interests lie in prolonging and intensifying work. There is, in the words of the Firesign Theatre, “harder work for everyone, and more of it too.” Consider how many weeks of subsistence work an Englishman had to do over the centuries: in 1495, 10; in 1564, 20; in 1684, 48; and in 1726, 52. (Eyer & Sterling, *Review of Radical Political Economics* Spring 1977) With progress, work worsens.

So it was with the American worker. In the eighteenth century, there was a general trend for labor, slave and free alike, formerly seasonal, to become continual. Technical progress, as usual, made matters worse. Seamen, for instance, were something of an avant garde of wage-labor. During the eighteenth century, the

size of ships and their capacity for cargo greatly increased and the work became heavier and also harder to do. Seamen responded by collective action including strikes — they coined the word, they would *strike* the sails — mutinies, and the ultimate, piracy, the seizure of the workplace. Pirates simplified the management hierarchy, elected their captains, replaced wages with cooperative ownership and risk-sharing, and vastly reduced the hours of work since a pirate ship had a crew five times larger than the merchantmen they preyed upon. Aversion to work was a main motivation. For one pirate, “the love of Drink and a Lazy Life” were “Stronger Motives with him than Gold.” An admiral who impressed some suspected pirates into service on his man-of-war thought to rehabilitate them, “to learn them . . . working” which “they turned Rogues to avoid.” The governor of the Bahamas said, “for work they mortally hate it,” and another resident of those islands concurred: “Working does not agree with them.” (Rediker, Innes 1988)

It goes without saying that the next turn of the wheel, industrialization, made for more and more monotonous work than workers as a class ever endured before. There were no volunteers in the industrial army. The earliest American factory operatives were not even, in most cases, formally free: they were women and children sent to work by their lawful superiors, their husbands and fathers. The factories of the North, like the plantations of the South, rested, so to speak, on servile labor. For a time, much later, the hours of work did decline as organized labor and assorted reformers made shorter hours a part of their agenda. The eight-hour day which we officially enjoy is the cause for which the Haymarket anarchists of 1886 paid with their lives. But the new deal in legislating a forty hour week scotched proposals by then-Senator Hugo Black (later a Supreme Court Justice) for a thirty hour week and the unions dropped shorter hours from their shopping lists. In recent years, workers have dropped unionization from *their* shopping list. Everything that goes around, comes around.

Not only have the hours of work not diminished, for all the technological progress of the last half century, the years of our lives devoted to work have actually gone up. The reason is that many more people are living to retirement age, which means that the system is getting more years of work out of us: the average American male works eight more years than his counterpart in 1900. In the eighteenth century a worker ended his days, if he lived so long, in the poor-house; in the twentieth, if he lives so long, in the nursing home, lonely and tortured by medical technology. Progress.

I have saved the worst for last: women’s work. Today’s working women (most women now work, outside the home, as employees) are worse off working than they have ever been. They still do most of the household work they have done since industrialism, and additionally they do wage-work. Their entry in force into the workforce (they were working all along, but unpaid labor, insane to

say, isn't counted as work) in the last twenty years has greatly increased their total toil and, as a result, the total toil altogether (since nobody thinks men are working *less*). Even if sex discrimination were entirely eradicated, which is far from imminent, equalized women workers would still shoulder an unequal load of what Ilich calls "shadow work," "the consumer's unpaid toil that adds to a commodity an incremental value that is necessary to make this commodity useful to the consuming unit itself." Civil rights laws do not — can not — penetrate the household. The history of work, if it has any evolving logic, is a history of the increasing imposition of exhausting toil on women. Any feminism which is not implacably anti-work is fraudulent.

The world of civilization, the world of history is above all, objectively and subjectively, a world of work. The jury is in on the verdict workers pass on what work means to them, subjectively: it hurts and they hate it. Objectively it just gets worse in terms of the ways it might imaginably get better. Since the late nineteenth century, most work has been "de-skilled," standardized, moronized, fragmented, isolated, policed, and made secure against piratical expropriation. To take and hold even one workplace the workers will have to expropriate them all.

Even hard work could be easier, and easier to take, than the bossed work most of us do. In Liberia the Kpelle, for instance, grow rice, which is work — strenuous work — by any definition. But these "neolithic farmers" conduct their work in a way that the organizers of our work can't or won't even consider. *Lii-nee'*, "joy," axiomatically accompanies any work the Kpelle do or they won't do any. Work is conducted in groups to the accompaniment of musicians whose rhythms pace the strokes of their hoes and machetes. Intermittently a woman throws down her hoe and dances to entertain her companions and relax muscles made sore by repetitious movements. At the end of the day the workers drink palm wine and sing and dance together. If this is not Sahlin's original affluent society, it is still an improvement on our allegedly affluent one, workwise. The anthropologist adds that the government has compelled the Kpelle to switch from dry rice-farming to wet (irrigated) rice farming since it is more productive. They demur, but not out of any inherent conservatism: they accepted the advice of the same experts to raise cocoa as a cash crop. The point is that "paddy-rice cultivation will be just plain work without the vital leavening of gossip, singing and dance — the traces of play which have been all but leached out of most modernized work.

As the 80's ended and the 90's commenced, working hours in America, where millions are without work, went up. The new two-income family has a lower standard of living than the one-income family of the 1950's. Housework has hardly been diminished by 20<sup>th</sup> century technology. Time studies suggest 56 hours of housework a week in 1912; 60 in 1918; 61 for families in 1925. In 1931, college educated housewives in big cities worked 48 hours a week, but by 1965 the

average for all housewives was 54 hours, with college educated women putting in 19 more minutes a day than those with grade school educations. By 1977, wives without outside employment worked 50 hours a week, those with jobs, 35 hours *excluding* wage-work which at 75 hours “adds up to a working week that even sweat shops cannot match.” (Cowan 1983)

Primitive productive life was neither nasty nor brutish, nor is it even necessarily short. Significant proportions of San men and women live past age sixty; the population structure is closer to that of the United States than to a typical Third World country. With us, heart disease is the leading cause of death, and stress, a major risk factor, is closely related to job satisfaction. Our sources of stress hardly exist among hunter-gatherers. (Cancer, the second greatest killer, is of course a consequence of industrialization.)

“Working conditions” for hunters can be hazardous, yet civilized work does not even here exhibit a clear superiority, especially when it is recalled that many of the 2 1/2 million American motoring fatalities to date involve one or more participants in wage-work (police, cabbies, teamsters etc) or shadow work like commuting and shopping.

Sahlins had already remarked upon the superior “quality of working life” enjoyed by primitive producers, to borrow a catchphrase from the pseudo-humanist experts in job redesign and job enrichment. In addition to shorter hours, “flextime” and the more reliable “safety net” afforded by general food sharing, forager’s work is more satisfying than most modern work. We awaken to the alarm clock; they sleep a lot, night and day. We are sedentary in our buildings in our polluted cities; they move about breathing the fresh air of the open country. We have bosses; they have companions. Our work typically implicates one, or at most a few hyper-specialized skills, if any; theirs combines handwork and brainwork in a versatile variety of activities, exactly as the great utopians called for. Our “commute” is dead time, and unpaid to boot; they cannot even leave the campsite without “reading” the landscape in a potentially productive way. Our children are subject to compulsory school attendance laws; their unsupervised offspring play at adult activities until almost imperceptibly they take their place doing them. They are the makers and masters of their simple yet effective toolkits; we work for our machines, and this will soon be no metaphor, according to an expert from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration: “In general, robots will work for men, but there may be exceptions in which some robots are higher in the hierarchy than some humans.” The last word in equal employment opportunity.



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May 21, 2012



Bob Black  
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1992

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