

Searching for the Culprit

Introduction to “The Original Affluent Society”

Fifth Estate Collective

1979

“Without government life is nasty, brutish and short.”

—Thomas Hobbes

Every person gazing even casually at the sordid history of government realizes that the Hobbesian dictum is nonsense and, in fact, just the opposite is true: with government, humanity has thusly had its life defined.

Viewing the organized political state as the culprit in human affairs for the presence of universal misery is standard fare for the anarchist and libertarian tradition and as a theory is not without merit as far as it goes. Certainly, other attempts historically to locate the culprit in evil spirits, the Devil, human nature or even capitalism, are much more shortsighted as they fail to deliver an explanation of the daily mechanism through which people have been subjugated during the epoch of Civilization.

The appearance on the planet of the political state as well as social classes, private property, the patriarchy and the like are the apparatuses of domination, but the larger framework in which they all appear, the reigning code, that of Civilization itself, is usually taken for granted and only recently has come under critical scrutiny.

The essay by Marshall Sahlins reprinted on the following page undertakes such an examination through the mirror of the societies which immediately preceded establishment of Civilization. The willingness to indict the entire edifice of Civilization as being responsible for the long history of human misery is one that parts company with all existing social theory and opens the way for a larger examination of the entire human experience on the planet, not just that of the last ten thousand years. Although Sahlins' subject matter is limited by design, it immediately suggests many other questions.

For instance, what brought about in such a relatively short period of time the epochal changes that discarded 50 millennia of small-band living marked by extremely low levels of technology, stable populations, and group members highly integrated into the most intimate details of the ecosphere which they inhabited? What features caused these nomadic bands of gatherers and hunters to become the domesticated “citizens” of emerging nation states, their life's purpose altered dramatically to the filling of state coffers, becoming cannon fodder for a suddenly universal state of warfare and consumers of ideology which made them less, rather than more, able to understand their lives and the social relationships around them.

To move technology to the centerpiece of this equation, as we do, meets with resistance from almost every quarter. Yet even the simplest technological development has been part of a continuing process of separation from the world which first bore and succored our emerging species to a situation where now we stand at the apex of that separation as strangers on our own planet, divorced completely from the world about us. Rather than possessing the skills, knowledge and craft which allowed for 5,000,000 years of human evolution, today, we depend almost exclusively upon experts and officials to feed, clothe, govern and perform every function once carried out by individuals themselves.

The links between technology, Civilization and domination appear almost immediately upon examination. The most dramatic technological development in human history was the Neolithic Revolution, the shift from Stone Age

gathering and hunting economies (the Paleolith), to a mode of production based upon fixed populations involved in agriculture and capable of producing an expropriable surplus. This innovation of farming as a means of subsistence guaranteed a population that could not run off in times of adversity and which was easily subjected to an ideology of domination containing the mass social and psychological drive needed to obliterate all of the past desire to be wild and free, replacing it with the desire for subservience.

Marxists see this civilizing process as “progressive”—the myth-imbued dynamic which is supposed to eventually result in socialism—so that every horror, every deprivation is vindicated as a necessary step toward a utopian future in which every slave, every serf, every wage worker becomes part of a continuum which will eventually free humanity. The problem with this perspective is that unless you are willing to accompany this mystical view of human affairs with a religious certainty, you are left with a staggering amount of sacrifices for absolutely nothing other than the reproduction of the dominant society.

Civilization has been aptly described as a “bloody sword” and when its mounting victims are measured against its reward for the survivors, it’s difficult to make a case for it. The “high standard” of living argument as Civilization’s justification always attempts to disguise the fact that the benefits of any given epoch are always enjoyed by a few at the expense of the many and usually for only short periods of time. Other than those exceptions the daily misery experienced by most people is coupled with calamities of such magnitude that they become difficult to comprehend. The physical carnage alone is so vast—100 million dead in ten thousand years of warfare (please compute the yearly average), tens of millions dead from diseases directly attributable to excessive population densities, millions more dead and injured in “accidents” from machinery (millions dead from car accidents alone), starvation as well as explosions, mine disasters, chemical mishaps, etc.—as to define the epoch of organized society as one steeped in blood. Also, there is an upward curve of both technological development and slaughter, and technological development and oppression: they are inextricably linked.

Let us anticipate the critics who would accuse us of wanting to go “back to the caves” or of mere posturing on our part—i.e., enjoying the comforts of civilization all the while being its hardest critics. We are not posing the Stone Age as a model for our Utopia nor are we suggesting a return to gathering and hunting as a means for our livelihood. Rather, an investigation into pre-civilized modes combats the notion that humans have always lived with alarm clocks and factories. It assails the prevalent amnesia which the species exhibits as to its origins and the varieties of social association which existed for tens of thousands of years before the rise of the state. It announces that work has not always been the touchstone of human existence and that cities and factories did not always blight the terrain. It asserts that there was a time when people lived in harmony with each other and with their natural surroundings, both of which they knew intimately.

In the modern epoch it is the marxists who are the leading exponents of taking current technology as a starting point for their vision of the future—a future which, when brought into being, has always produced nightmare police states. Reduced to its most basic elements, discussions about the future sensibly should be predicated on what we desire socially and from that determine what technology is possible. All of us desire central heating, flush toilets, and electric lighting, but not at the expense of our humanity. Maybe they are all possible together, but maybe not.

A discussion generated’ by Sahlins’ article will hopefully begin to bring some of these questions into focus. We welcome reader remarks on the issue.

fifth Estate

Fifth Estate Collective
Searching for the Culprit
Introduction to "The Original Affluent Society"
1979

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/298-june-19-1979/searching-for-the-culprit>
Fifth Estate #298, June 19, 1979

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net