
Hunter-Gatherers

The Original Libertarians

— ◆ —

THOMAS MAYOR

In this article, I ask a perennial yet still unresolved question: What version of political economy—collectivist or individualistic—is more consistent with man’s basic nature? Does man naturally respect an individual’s right to the products of his own efforts, or does he believe that others have a higher claim on those products? Is he genetically programmed to be an independent decision maker, or does he feel more comfortable in a passive role, following a strong leader? To be sure, philosophers and political theorists have given different answers to these questions, but almost always without significant supporting evidence. I argue here that such evidence does exist and may in fact be obtained by applying basic principles of evolutionary biology to the voluminous ethnographic literature available in the field of anthropology.

Archaeological and biological evidence suggests that humans, defined by Richard Leakey as upright apes, first appeared about seven million years ago (1994, xiii). Since then, with the exception of perhaps the past ten thousand years, it is likely that man lived in small, kinship-based hunter-gatherer bands. In such an environment, over such a long period of time, man would have evolved patterns of behavior and socioeconomic institutions that promoted survival in hunter-gatherer or foraging societies. We must conclude, therefore, that modern man is, in a fundamental, biological sense, a hunter-gatherer. To understand modern man in his entirety, we must understand him in his primitive condition, long before the advent of civilization a scant five to ten thousand years ago.¹

Thomas Mayor is professor emeritus of economics at the University of Houston.

1. I do not enter here into the “nature versus nurture” debate. I merely assume, in accordance with evolutionary biology, that nature tends to favor behavior that contributes to reproductive success. See Wilson 1998, 95, for a summary statement of this principle by an evolutionary biologist. See Robson and Kaplan 2006 for an application of this principle to the development of intelligence and longevity during the hunter-gatherer phase of human history.

The Independent Review, v. 16, n. 4, Spring 2012, ISSN 1086–1653, Copyright © 2012, pp. 485–500.

Basic Characteristics of Hunter-Gatherer Societies

The archaeological record, consisting almost entirely of skeletons and tools, provides insufficient insight into human patterns of behavior. However, a rich and detailed ethnographic literature describes hunter-gatherer people and near hunter-gatherer people who have survived into the modern era.² This literature definitely establishes the distinct features of hunter-gatherer behavior that appear in nearly every primitive society—the “stylized facts” of hunter-gatherer societies that provide important insights into man as an economic and political animal. The most important of these stylized facts are as follows:

1. *The basic unit of society is the band*, which typically consists of a small number of nuclear families related by kinship. Bands rarely exceed fifty persons (Fried 1967, 113). The widespread nature of this basic unit is impressive. All known foraging groups seem to take this form. Moreover, the band form of social organization also predominates among our closest primate species. We can be fairly confident, therefore, that this form of social organization prevailed throughout human history (and probably prehuman history as well) until the advent of settled agriculture.
2. *Bands are widely scattered over relatively large territories*, yielding population densities from perhaps one person for every five square miles to one person for every fifty or more square miles (Steward 1955, 125). The total human population was apparently extremely small until fairly recent times. Some estimates place the entire population of Europe at no more than one hundred thousand people as recently as twenty thousand years ago.
3. *Bands have no effective government or formal laws*. They frequently do have one or two men who command more respect than their peers and might be referred to as “headmen.” But whatever their designation, they typically have little more authority than other men in the band. According to Fried, any band leader is “unable to compel any of the others to carry out his wish” (1967, 83). Of course, bands have norms of behavior that apply, sometimes rather strictly, to all band members.
4. *Food is typically hunted or gathered, not produced, as in pastoral or agricultural societies*. Yet some primitive groups who have survived into the modern era (such as the Yanomamo of remote South America) may engage in a limited amount of gardening while still maintaining basic hunter-gatherer characteristics (Chagnon 1992, 79).
5. *Most goods are perishable*. Primitive people have limited means of preserving food. Even nonfood items may have to be abandoned when the band moves to a

2. Marvin Harris (1977, 82) found 1,179 primitive societies listed in George P. Murdock’s *Ethnographic Atlas* (1967).

different location. This characteristic of foraging society has obvious implications for the accumulation of property.

6. *Goods are exchanged according to a system of reciprocal gift giving.* This system is of course the only practical one for a society that has no money or even a workable substitute for money. It is a much-discussed characteristic of foraging societies and one that must be thoroughly understood in order to answer the questions raised in this article.
7. *There is generally a division of labor between the sexes but not within the sexes.* Thus, each adult male performs more or less the same work as every other adult male, and each adult female performs more or less the same work as every other adult female, but the work of men and the work of women are quite different. Women tend to care for children and to gather food and material, whereas men tend to hunt.
8. *Although hunter-gatherers have individual rights to personal property, no property rights typically exist in the natural resources the band uses.* With very few people and abundant natural resources, creating property rights in those resources yields no advantage. This common-property condition probably prevailed with few exceptions until the development of agriculture some ten thousand years ago.
9. *Life in the band is characterized by extreme lack of privacy.* Individuals therefore have extensive information about the activities of other individuals in the band.
10. *Intraband conflict is relatively minor despite the lack of laws, police, and judges, but interband conflict may be significant.* Marvin Harris concludes that a majority of hunter-gatherer societies engaged in interband warfare, not ordinarily caused by disputes over territories or resources, but by disputes over personal grievances (1977, 47–49). Disputes over women and the widespread practice of capturing women were prominent causes of warfare (Chagnon 1992, 218–19).

Popular Conceptions of Primitive Societies

For the purposes of this article, it is helpful to consider how primitive man has been characterized in the popular imagination. Well-known anthropologist Lionel Tiger argues that in a quest by modern man (including some professional anthropologists) to discover “our loving, peaceful, lyrically fair human core” (2008), primitive man has frequently been romanticized. Other modern men (for example, Sahlins 1972) have used the mystique of primitive societies in criticizing modern societies, perhaps only to contrast the complications and stress of modern life with the supposed simple serenity of primitive life.³ Others have extolled the supposed egalitarianism of hunter-gatherer societies as a model for a future communist society (Lee 1988).

3. Ter Ellingson (2001) argues that very few writers of note, including most prominently Jean-Jacques Rousseau, have ever openly and unequivocally espoused the extreme version of the “noble savage” myth, although he does indicate that this myth was part of the oral tradition among anthropologists.

Over the years, many intellectuals in the Marxist tradition believed that early man lived in a state of “primitive communism.” The impetus for this belief was apparently Lewis H. Morgan’s *Ancient Society*, first published in 1877. According to Morgan, “communism in living” was the standard practice among primitive peoples ([1877] 1958, 454). Both Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were highly influenced by Morgan’s views, and Engels gave them prominence in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. Thus, according to Engels, “Production at all former stages of society was essentially collective, and likewise consumption took place by the direct distribution of the products within larger or smaller communistic communities” ([1884] 1962, 2:322). This view has had an enormous impact on the thinking of socialists up to the present day.⁴ “Communism” within the nuclear family was doubtless the norm in primitive societies as it is in present-day societies. It could hardly be otherwise. The rearing of children to maturity—indeed, the very survival of humans—requires that the family be so organized. Many observers of these societies, however, mistakenly interpreted family communism as extending to all persons outside the family, a view decidedly not supported by ethnographic evidence.

The communist view of primitive societies was also aided by a misinterpretation of the basic nature of primitive economies. These economies are self-sufficient communities with no significant division of labor. All adult members work as hunters and gatherers. The adults’ productivity in these activities cannot vary greatly. Of course, some hunters are more or less talented than others, but such variation is likely to be relatively small. Therefore, in such a society the standard of living will be quite equal even if little or no redistribution of income occurs. The reason for much higher disparities of income in modern societies is not that primitive societies engage in more redistribution or are in some sense more communistic. The modern economy, with its large base of population and its extensive division of labor, allows persons of great talent to be paid commensurately to that talent. J. K. Rowling, a popular writer of children’s stories, went from a modest job as a teacher to earning about five thousand times as much as the typical British woman when she tapped into her special talent. She was able to sell books and movies to hundreds of millions of people around the world. In a hunter-gatherer society, that special talent would remain latent, and her productivity as a gatherer would likely be quite similar to the productivity of every other woman in that society.

Curiously, Marx and Engels did not argue that evolution has shaped man’s basic nature toward collectivism—a view that might seem logical if primitive man did indeed practice “communism in living.” This apparent oversight might reflect the strong Marxist belief in the malleability of human nature. According to Marx, man’s

4. According to Ludwig von Mises, “[M]any socialists, for instance Engels, virtually became advocates of a return to the supposedly blissful conditions of a fabulous golden age of the remote past” (1969, 218). This statement is significant because Mises spent much of his long career studying socialist and Marxist ideology. For a more recent statement of the socialist viewpoint, see Lee 1988. For a mass-media version of the “primitive communism” idea, see Angier 2011.

material condition determines his nature rather than vice versa. Given this belief, seven million years of evolution would have little significance. Modern science, however, is not sympathetic to such a simplistic theory of causation. Economic conditions, culture, and biological inheritance appear to influence human behavior. Given this perspective, it is important to determine whether primitive man was adapted through a long process of evolution to collectivist or individualistic modes of living.

Collectivism versus Individualism

If human nature is indeed not perfectly malleable, a modern society is likely to be most successful when it does not require its citizens to act against that basic nature. Alternatively stated, a modern society is likely to be most successful if its basic institutions are compatible with man's nature. But what are the basic institutions of modern societies? A complete answer to this question obviously goes far beyond the scope of this article. Fortunately, however, our purpose here is adequately served by concentrating on only a few key institutions. With respect to a society based on individualism, three are especially important. First, individuals must be free to make uncoerced choices subject only to the rule of law.⁵ This institutional requirement is of course a central tenet of individual liberty, but it is also a requirement for maximizing economic welfare, an important consideration to most proponents of a liberal, individualistic society. Second, each individual should be able to enjoy the fruits of his own effort without the threat of coerced transfers. This requirement likewise has a dual purpose. Apart from promoting individual liberty, it is essential for economic welfare because such transfers waste economic resources in two principal ways: they cause resources to be diverted from useful purposes in order to defend against such transfers as well as to reduce their harmful effects, and they reduce incentives for productive activities. Finally, a liberal, individualist society is best served by citizens who are comfortable with minimal state authority.

The basic institutional requirements of collectivism are in reality just the reverse of those required for individualism. First, freedom of individual choice must necessarily be restricted because state bureaucrats and planners' preferences take precedence in deciding what will be produced and how it will be produced. Second, collectivism requires the coerced transfer of income from those who produce it to the state. Third, as shown by an enormous amount of historical evidence, collectivism requires a strong centralized authority.

The preceding discussion suggests three criteria for evaluating the institutions of hunter-gatherer societies: (1) the degree of autonomy in individual decision making;

5. By "law," I mean "purpose-independent rules which govern the conduct of individuals toward each other, are intended to apply to an unknown number of further instances, and by defining a protected domain of each, enable an order of actions to form itself wherein the individuals can make feasible plans" (Hayek 1973, 85). Primitive societies have no formal laws, but social norms provide an effective substitute at the band level of society.

(2) the degree of freedom from involuntary transfers; and (3) the degree of decentralized authority. If these criteria are thought of as measurable variables, high values indicate compatibility with individualism, and low values indicate compatibility with collectivism.

Decision Making in Primitive Societies

The most fundamental unit of primitive society is undoubtedly the nuclear family—a husband, wife (on occasion multiple wives), and children. A small number of such families living in a common location constitutes a single band. The ethnographic literature about still-existing band societies indicates that decision making in the band is much the same as one would expect from a similar grouping of modern families. Each adult in such a grouping tends to be highly autonomous. Matters affecting a single nuclear family are typically decided solely within that family. When decisions that involve all of the nuclear families must be made, the opinions of some adults are likely to carry more weight than the opinions of other adults, but there is no mechanism to coerce compliance. Because compliance is voluntary, a leader in such a grouping must depend heavily on persuasion and example to achieve a definite result. It is also likely that leadership in such a group will rotate from one adult to another, depending on which person is perceived to be the most trusted leader for the particular matter at hand. All of these expectations are borne out by the ethnographic literature on band societies.

Napoleon Chagnon lived for about five years among the Yanomamo people in the remote Amazon/Orinoco rain forest and befriended the most influential leader of the Bisaasi-teri village. Chagnon's characterization of this man well illustrates a common theme in the ethnographic literature:

Kaobawa is the headman of his village, meaning that he has certain responsibilities in the village's political dealings with other Yanomamo groups, but little control over those within his group except when the village is engaged in conflict with an enemy. . . . Leaders like Kaobawa do not usually give orders unless they are almost certain that the orders will be heeded. Most of the time they make suggestions or lead by example. Before they give an order, they carefully assess the situation privately to consider what might happen, and, if convinced that the order will be followed, they give it. It is especially touchy when there are several prominent men in the village, each not sure what will happen if he gives an order but keenly aware that his status will be diminished if he gives an order that is ignored. (1992, 14)⁶

6. The role of headman as here described is virtually identical to that of managing partner of a law firm, chairman of an academic department, dean of a college, or head of a civil-service office. In each case, owing to property rights, tenure, and civil-service codes, leadership involves the exercise of persuasion instead of command.

Based on a careful interpretation of similar ethnographic evidence, Morton Fried characterizes hunter-gatherers as a “simple egalitarian society” that “recognizes as many positions of valued status as there are individuals capable of filling them” (1967, 52). Put otherwise, individuals in such societies are judged primarily on the basis of individual merit, not on the basis of a position acquired through inheritance or force. In such a society, adults are autonomous decision makers, free to accept or ignore their peers’ counsel. They are not subject to formal laws, courts, police, military conquerors, feudal lords, slave masters, government regulators, or taxation. They live in what might best be described as a state of political or decision-making egalitarianism.⁷ Thus, decision making in primitive societies tends to be autonomous and decentralized.

The anthropological evidence is overwhelming that for seven million years man had a level of individual autonomy in decision making that far exceeded anything experienced since the introduction of extensive agriculture. What could possibly bring about such a result? Several factors were probably decisive. First, the relatively low level of technological knowledge and the relatively small population entailed that adults could not utilize what economists call the “division of labor.” They were autonomous, self-sufficient producers. Being such producers and living in an era of abundant natural resources meant that leaving an oppressive band was relatively costless. Unlike serfs, slaves, and citizens of modern countries, hunter-gatherers could simply pack up their few possessions and move on to different foraging locations. Just as in a competitive market economy, freedom of entry and exit plays a critical role in achieving a socially desirable outcome. The importance of what we might call “economic mobility” cannot be overemphasized. Its loss about ten thousand years ago is the root cause of the rise of economic and political exploitation.

Also important for autonomous decision making is the fact that virtually every adult male is an armed hunter, and most primitive societies have a hunter-warrior culture. Status, self-esteem, and reproductive success depend on these skills. Although intraband violence is generally uncommon, it is always possible. Ample opportunity for unobserved assassination exists when hunters are in uninhabited territory far from the village. This ever-present threat of retaliation serves as a natural curb against intraband coercion and provides a type of “Second Amendment” alternative to the police power of modern societies.

Reliance on band co-members for protection from outsiders also probably plays a role in limiting internal dominance. Chagnon discovered that among the Yanomamo about 30 percent of adult males die from violence, almost all owing to conflicts with neighboring bands (1992, 239). It is of course true that the Yanomamo describe themselves as “fierce people” and may be more warlike than many other primitive

7. Political or decision-making egalitarianism should not be confused, as it often is, with economic egalitarianism because they have almost opposite meanings.

people, but the potential for intergroup warfare is apparently quite normal. According to Marvin Harris, “Organized intergroup homicide may not have been part of the cultures of our stone age ancestors. Perhaps. Yet most of the evidence no longer supports this view. . . . The majority of hunter-collectors known to modern observers carry out some form of intergroup combat in which teams of warriors deliberately try to kill each other” (1977, 47). With external danger ever present, all members of the band would likely have an interest in maintaining intragroup harmony and in avoiding conflicts over dominance. This tendency is of course greatly reinforced by the close kinship ties among band members.

Finally, it is important to note that the small size of the band, its dependence on kinship, and the lack of privacy within the band allow for the internal maintenance of civil order without the use of police power and its necessary structure of dominance and coercion.

Primitive Exchange and Food Sharing

The modern division of labor with its high degree of specialization necessitates a complex system of trade possible through the use of money. Money allows modern man to sell a commodity, perhaps his own labor, without simultaneously having to buy a commodity of like value. Money similarly allows him to buy a commodity without simultaneously having to sell a commodity of similar value to the seller. Thus, money in a modern society solves the “coincidence of wants” problem that frustrates a barter economy. Money also serves as a “store of value,” allowing individuals to convert temporary surpluses into monetary savings that can be converted back to useful goods at a later time when the need is more urgent. Primitive societies, to be sure, have a limited need for exchange because each adult tends to forage as every other adult does, except for the usual division of tasks between men and women. The acquisition of food in primitive societies is nevertheless variable. At times, a hunter-gatherer may have more perishable food than he can consume or store, and at other times he may have a deficit. A hunter-gatherer cannot sell his surplus for money to be used to purchase food in times of scarcity because money is a modern invention. But the very survival of early man depended on his ability to find an institutional surrogate for money that allowed “saving” during times of surplus and “dissaving” during times of deficit. That simple surrogate is what we might call “food sharing” by members of a band: individuals with surpluses transfer food to members with deficits. The result is consumption smoothing over time. We refer here of course to food sharing outside the immediate family because there is nothing remarkable about such sharing within the family, where it is a basic requirement of rearing children to adulthood in modern societies as well as in primitive societies.

Food sharing outside the family unit and its consequent effect on patterns of consumption can theoretically arise from a number of different motives and institutional arrangements, which generally fall into three categories: (1) altruism, (2) coercion,

and (3) voluntary self-interest. Altruism, of course, implies that individuals with surpluses are willing to give to those with deficits without the expectation of reciprocation. Coercion implies that individuals with surpluses are willing to give to those with deficits in order to avoid potential harm to themselves. Voluntary self-interest implies that individuals with surpluses are willing to give to those with deficits because they expect to receive future goods with greater utility than present goods (that is, to make a “profit” by the transaction).

In order to explore the merits and demerits of the three possible explanations for food sharing, it is useful to review the general setting in which food is obtained and distributed. As described by ethnographers, the hunter-gatherer may forage in a group or by himself, but he tends to return to a central place (a village or campsite) to consume at least a portion of the harvest with his family or other members of the band. Owing to the random nature of finding large “packets” of food, perhaps a large animal or a cluster of fruit, some individuals will necessarily return with more food or less food than others. If success in the hunt is random or has a substantial random component, the band members’ average consumption will vary less as the band size increases. Thus, living in bands and sharing food smooth the amount of consumption over time despite food’s perishability and any particular hunter’s random success in the hunt. Indeed, the durability of the band form of organization over millions of years of foraging is doubtless owing in large part to its ability to accomplish this task.⁸

To the unsophisticated observer, food sharing outside the immediate family might appear to be an obvious case of altruism. According to this interpretation, those who have excess food sympathize with those who have less and seek selflessly to improve the others’ situation. Altruism, however, is not well supported by the ethnographic literature, in part because much better explanations for food sharing exist and in part because altruism is incompatible with much of the observed behavior in foraging societies. What is that observed behavior? First, anthropologists have noted that “gifts” or food transfers are frequently initiated by the receiver and not by the giver. Nicolas Peterson (1993) cites a multitude of supporting studies for a wide range of foraging groups where “demand sharing” is the most appropriate description of how food is distributed.⁹ Second, it is widely reported that in certain circumstances successful foragers consume as much as possible of their acquisition before returning to camp so as to minimize the need to share (Hiatt 1982, 24). Third, hiding food (perhaps when food is scarce everywhere in the band) to avoid sharing is also prominent in the descriptive literature (Peterson 1993, 864). Fourth, conflicts can arise if sharing is not reciprocated. Thus, even though the generous person is widely admired in foraging societies (or in modern societies, for that matter), the actual behavior of

8. In addition to the effect of band size on consumption smoothing, a theory of the optimum size of the foraging community would have to account for such important factors as the negative effect of band size on the per capita availability of food and the positive effect of band size on group security.

9. According to Peterson, the widely held view among anthropologists is that “little if any giving is truly altruistic” (1993, 860).

hunter-gatherers does not suggest altruistic principles. Bronislaw Malinowski well summarizes this conclusion: “Whenever the native can evade his obligations without loss of prestige, or without the prospective loss of gain, he does so, exactly as a civilized business man would do” (1959, 30).

Coercion, perhaps the polar opposite of altruism, is the next possible explanation for food transfers. N. G. Blurton Jones (1987) originally proposed the idea of “tolerated theft” or “scrounging” as a mild form of coercion. Bruce Winterhalder succinctly summarizes this mechanism: “Food transfers occur because it pays individuals with a deficit to contest the holdings of those with a surfeit. Those with surplus will relinquish their extra portions because they gain little or no advantage in defending them.” Winterhalder also concludes that “scrounging is probably a dominant mechanism generating food transfers among those primate species occasionally observed to hunt other vertebrates” (2001, 26), but he declines to make the same conclusion with respect to humans.

The ethnographic literature indicates that tolerated theft or scrounging is not a regular feature of human foraging societies. Why not? One dominant factor has to do with the basic nature of the foraging mode of production. Systematic scroungers have no way to force nonscroungers into remaining in the band and continuing to pay what is in effect a tax. And, of course, a community of nonscroungers would have the ability to force a persistent scrounger to change his behavior as a condition of remaining in the band. Chagnon relates an eyewitness account of how such force was applied when a Yanomamo man was too lazy to cultivate a garden sufficient for his family’s needs: “I once overheard a headman vigorously scolding one of the unmarried men in his village who regularly had to borrow food. ‘This isn’t big enough for your wife and children,’ the headman warned. ‘You will have to beg plantains from others if you don’t make it bigger. See that tree over there? Clear your garden out to there and you will have enough—and you won’t have to beg from the rest of us later.’ His tone of voice made it clear that future begging would not be tolerated. One mistake might be overlooked, but the same ones again and again would not” (1992, 89). A missionary among the Seneca, the Reverend Asher Wright, reported a similar incident in a 1873 letter written to Lewis Morgan, which was included in a footnote to chapter IV of Morgan’s *Ancient Society* ([1877] 1958) and quoted by Engels: “Usually, the female portion ruled the house, and were doubtless clannish enough about it. The stores were in common; but woe to the luckless husband or lover who was too shiftless to do his share of the providing. No matter how many children, or whatever goods he might have in the house, he might at any time be ordered to pick up his blanket and budge; and after such orders it would not be healthful for him to attempt to disobey” (in Engels [1884] 1962, 209).

The anthropological model commonly referred to as “reciprocity” appears to provide a much better understanding of the food-exchange process. According to reciprocity, an individual with surplus food transfers a portion to an individual who has less with the expectation that the favor will be returned later. Thus, reciprocity can

smooth out consumption in a moneyless economy without reliance on forced income redistribution or altruism. Individual self-interest is the prime motivator in a system of reciprocity.

Primitive societies of course do not have laws and courts for the enforcement of contracts, so how does reciprocity work? Theoretical considerations (including basic game theory) tell us that reciprocity is likely to work when participants engage in many such transfers over time and when the ability to give and the need to take balance over the long run. These conditions are not difficult to fulfill in foraging bands based on kinship ties when foraging success depends largely on random factors. But what is to prevent some individuals from accepting transfers and then not reciprocating? According to John Dowling, "In this mutual giving and taking there must be something of a balance at least in the long run if stability is to be achieved. If there is a long run imbalance in the sharing of goods, pressures leading to social disintegration will develop unless there is a counter development of what Gouldner has called a compensatory mechanism" (1968, 504). Because members of hunter-gather bands have no effective means of engaging in a long-run system of coercive transfers, Dowling concludes that reciprocation in some form must eventually occur, or the band will likely dissolve. Here again the freedom of association and mobility plays an important role in understanding hunter-gatherer behavior. Nonreciprocators are not likely to be tolerated in a band of reciprocators. And an entire band of nonreciprocators is unlikely to have evolutionary success.

Imbalances in reciprocal transfers can of course occur in the long run if those who provide net food subsidies achieve another form of compensation. In this regard, it is widely noted that hunter-gatherer men place high value on esteem. The reputation of being a good hunter may in some instances provide compensation for unrequited transfers. In a frequently quoted study of the Ache foragers of Paraguay, Hillard Kaplan and Kim Hill provide a concrete example:

Thus, high producers could expect better treatment than average or below-average producers to encourage them to remain in the band. What kinds of better treatment might high producers receive? Preliminary review of unanalyzed demographic data suggests that infanticide is frequent and that decisions concerning whether particular children should be killed are sometimes made with the input of many band members. It is possible that the offspring of high producers are less likely to be killed. . . . High producers should be more attractive as mates. . . . High return hunters are reported to have more extramarital sexual relationships than poor hunters, and their children survive in significantly greater numbers. (1985, 237)

I have stressed the lack of money or some other universal store of value as a primary explanation for the system of exchange through "gifts." It is also instructive

to view the food-sharing system as a substitute for formal insurance markets.¹⁰ In this perspective, gifts become premiums paid for “hunger insurance.” As in formal insurance markets, individuals on both sides of the bargain profit from the exchange. The “gift” giver purchases insurance with a food premium that has limited value because it is not currently needed for the giver’s own consumption and cannot be readily stored. In return, he receives a promise of food at a later time when the original giver’s food is scarce and consequently of higher value to him. The recipient of the “gift” is in the opposite situation. To the receiver, current food has a high value but can be repaid at a future time with food of a lower value. Thus, the “insurance contract” is profitable or beneficial to both individuals.

Equally useful is the characterization of food sharing as a system of borrowing and lending. Persons with a temporary surplus and little effective means of storage find it profitable to lend the surplus to persons with a deficit. In this characterization, an observed transfer of food can represent either the making of a loan or the repayment of a loan. Without further information, it would be impossible for the outside observer to make such a distinction. The usefulness of this interpretation cannot be diminished by the apparent absence of interest charged on the loan of food. In a modern economy, the lender has a positive opportunity cost of funds due to the existence of a positive rate of interest in fluid credit markets, and hence the lender must receive compensation over and above repayment of the loan in order to receive any benefit from the transaction. In a foraging society, however, the lender actually has a negative opportunity cost for his loan proceeds because of the food’s perishability or the difficulty of moving stocks of food from one campsite to another. Simply put, the lender’s surplus food in a foraging economy may spoil or be discarded and have little value unless he can find someone to take or “borrow” the food in return for future repayment.¹¹

Hunter-gatherers appear to place a high value on esteem, and ethnographers frequently cite “generosity” as the chief means of acquiring esteem. This theme recurs in the ethnographic literature for virtually all known foraging societies. The superficial reader of this literature, however, might easily be misled into thinking that “generosity” applies only to the giving of a “gift,” not to the repayment of the gift at a later date. Yet both actions are equally important and largely indistinguishable because typically a long chain of exchanges extends over a period of time. Thus, observed “givers” of food in fact may be living up to a prior bargain by repaying a loan or by making good on a commitment to provide hunger insurance. An esteemed person in a foraging society is therefore better described as someone who participates

10. See Posner 1980 for a systematic discussion of the insurance analogy. See also Cashdan 1985 for evidence on how African foragers reduce their reliance on sharing when food variability (that is, the need for food insurance) diminishes.

11. We might speculate on whether the ancient and atavistic prejudice against “usury” has its origin in the fact that both parties to an exchange in a foraging society typically benefit without the need for any additional compensation. The mere repayment with an article or item of food of equal value is enough to benefit the lender when opportunity costs are negative. Indeed, if “interest” were to be paid, it is not at all clear which party should be the payer of the interest and which party should be the recipient.

in the mutual insurance system or the mutual lending system and who honors his “contractual” obligations to other participants.¹² Seen in this light, the social norm of granting esteem to “generosity” is primarily a mechanism for promoting efficient exchange and not a mechanism for promoting the redistribution of income. Such an interpretation is, of course, more consistent with the expectations of evolutionary biology because altruism does not generally produce reproductive success.

In a well-known study, Marcel Mauss (1990) examines the gift system among the Northwest Coast American Indians, the Melanesians, and the Polynesians. These societies are primitive yet somewhat more complex than basic hunter-gatherers. Gifts include many hand-crafted items as well as food. Mauss concludes that the gift system in these societies (and elsewhere) does not at all represent the principle of altruism. In fact, the system produces enormous social pressures for reciprocity with gifts of equal or greater value. The individual who does not reciprocate with a gift of equal or greater value suffers a great loss of esteem and may also be punished by the “spirits” as well as by fellow members of the group. As Mauss (himself an ardent socialist) convincingly demonstrates, the individual who is self-sufficient and does not expect to be subsidized has the highest esteem in these societies. The individual who falls short of this standard and expects to give less than he receives is subject to harsh sanctions. It is difficult to imagine a social norm more consistent with the individualist ethic and less antithetical to the collectivist ethic.

The strong obligation for reciprocation that Mauss found in primitive societies has obviously survived into the modern era. A social invitation, a gift, or any act of kindness produces a strong desire on the part of the modern recipient to return the favor with equal value. The modern recipient may not fear the wrath of the gods, but he does feel an overwhelming ethical obligation to balance the books.¹³ Moreover, it would not occur to the modern recipient to return the favor with greater or lesser value depending on the relative wealth position of the giver compared to the recipient. This antiredistributive social norm of *quid pro quo*, with such ancient origins, must be deeply ingrained in human nature.

Conclusions

Let us return to the fundamental question posed in this article: Is man’s basic nature collectivist or individualistic? Has he evolved over millions of years by adapting to

12. The use of the word *generosity* in the anthropological literature is particularly unfortunate and potentially misleading because we generally do not characterize people who faithfully repay their borrowings as being “generous,” nor do we typically describe an insurance company as being generous when it pays a claim according to its contractual obligations.

13. The existence of this trait of human nature is amply demonstrated by various marketing practices. Businesses expect that unsolicited gifts will cause a sense of obligation on the part of potential customers, which will increase sales. Even charities and other nonprofit organizations use the technique. Many charities, for example, place items of value in their mass solicitations through the mail, thinking that

institutions that support individual decision making and each individual's right to receive the benefits of his own efforts? Or has he evolved and adapted to institutions that stress collective decision making and collective ownership of those benefits? The ethnographic evidence, as examined in this essay, decisively supports the individualist conclusion. Primitive man lived in a state of political autonomy and economic freedom for millions of years prior to the widespread adoption of agriculture some ten thousand years ago.¹⁴ His basic behavior was that of the self-interested individualist, not the altruist depicted in much of the socialist literature. He was in fact the original libertarian. And we may be confident that modern man shares that basic nature.

The great socialist experiments of the twentieth century certainly bear out this conclusion. Socialism, despite an unprecedented application of coercion, could work only if people were willing to subordinate their own individual interests to the state's conception of the general good. But this subordination never happened. Enterprise managers routinely met planned targets by producing poorly made products that consumers did not value; by hoarding raw materials, labor, and equipment; and by reporting inaccurate information to planners. Workers who were underpaid responded by working less. And citizens everywhere treated public property with little respect. It is not surprising that none of these problems troubled societies that supported, however imperfectly, free markets and private property. Citizens in such societies produced goods that the public wanted; economized on raw materials, labor, and equipment; spent their time on productive work; and paid careful attention to the maintenance of property. All of these things were accomplished simply because the basic institutions of society depended on and were compatible with that most ancient attribute of human nature—self interest.¹⁵ The socialist countries that relied most heavily on what Communists called “moral incentives” (Castro's Cuba and Mao's China, for example) achieved the most disastrous results.

If man is naturally individualistic, however, why did he lose his basic freedoms as soon as settled agriculture became the predominant mode of production? The answer to this question may be stated simply. Hunter-gatherer societies were free primarily because each individual possessed effective economic mobility. In the face of attempted political or economic exploitation, the hunter-gatherer always had the opportunity to pick up and move without paying a significant price for doing so. If a militarily stronger band attempted to force tribute from a weaker band, the weaker band could simply change locations without incurring any substantial sacrifice.

potential donors will feel obligated to return the favor at a profit to the charity. The persistence of these practices constitutes strong, if not overwhelming, proof of the nonredistributive ethic.

14. Max Weber concluded that communism in production was also not practiced by early agricultural societies, the implication being that communist agriculture was an innovation of the twentieth century (1927, 15–24).

15. It is well understood that self-interest, broadly interpreted, does not preclude action motivated by altruism. But the strength of an unfettered market system is that it works well without having to rely on altruism. “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest” (Smith [1776] 1991, 12).

Attempts at coercion by powerful individuals within a band would meet a similar fate. Given the basic characteristics of these primitive societies—low population density, abundant foraging resources, and the absence of the division of labor—there was little opportunity for successful exploitation.

All of these conditions changed about ten thousand years ago not because of man's basic nature, but in spite of it. In the Neolithic era, owing to the development of settled agriculture and animal husbandry, man had a substantial opportunity cost in relocating in the face of superior force and exploitation. Land had to be acquired, fields cleared, crops harvested and stored, and farm improvements made. The potential loss of such hard-earned assets provided powerful warlords with the necessary leverage to dominate settled agricultural communities, establish the first states, restrict individual autonomy, and abolish the individual's right to his own production. Although no conclusive evidence exists, this process, which ended seven million years of individual freedom, was probably well under way long before the development of the first urban civilizations and, of course, has persisted to this day. Indeed, discovering a set of institutions that can nurture individual freedom in a modern society is the central ongoing task of political economy.

References

- Angier, Natalie. 2011. Thirst for Fairness May Have Helped Us Survive. *New York Times*, July 5.
- Blurton Jones, N. G. 1987. Tolerated Theft, Suggestions about the Ecology and Evolution of Sharing, Hoarding, and Scrounging. *Social Science Information* 26: 31–54.
- Cashdan, Elizabeth A. 1985. Coping with Risk: Reciprocity among the Basarwa of Northern Botswana. *Man* (new series) 20, no. 3: 454–74.
- Chagnon, Napoleon A. 1992. *Yanomamo: The Last Days of Eden*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Dowling, John. 1968. Individual Ownership and the Sharing of Game in Hunting Societies. *American Anthropologist* 70: 502–7.
- Ellingson, Ter. 2001. *The Myth of the Noble Savage*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Engels, Frederick. [1884] 1962. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. In Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works*, 2: 185–307. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House.
- Fried, Morton H. 1967. *The Evolution of Political Society: An Essay in Political Anthropology*. New York: Random House.
- Harris, Marvin E. 1977. *Cannibals and Kings: The Origins of Cultures*. New York: Random House.
- Hayek, F. A. 1973. *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*. Vol. 1: *Rules and Order*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hiatt, Lester. 1982. Traditional Attitudes to Land Resources. In *Aboriginal Sites, Rites, and Resource Development*, edited by R. M. Berndt, 13–26. Perth: University of Western Australia Press.

- Kaplan, Hillard, and Kim Hill. 1985. Food Sharing among Ache Foragers: Tests of Explanatory Hypotheses. *Current Anthropology* 26, no. 2: 223–39.
- Leakey, Richard. 1994. *The Origin of Humankind*. New York: Basic Books.
- Lee, Richard. 1988. Reflections on Primitive Communism. In *Hunters and Gatherers I: History, Evolution, and Social Change*, edited by Tim Ingold, David Riches, and James Woodburn, 252–68. Oxford, U.K.: Berg.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw. 1959. *Crime and Custom in Savage Society*. Patterson, N.J.: Littlefield Adams.
- Mauss, Marcel. 1990. *The Gift*. New York: W. W. Norton. Translated from the 1950 edition.
- Mises, Ludwig von. 1969. *Theory and History: An Interpretation of Social and Economic Evolution*. Westport, Conn.: Arlington House.
- Morgan, Lewis H. [1877] 1958. *Ancient Society or Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery Through Barbarism to Civilization*. 2d Indian ed. Calcutta: J. C. Saha Roy.
- Murdock, George P. 1967. *Ethnographic Atlas*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburg Press.
- Peterson, Nicolas. 1993. Demand Sharing: Reciprocity and the Pressure for Generosity among Foragers. *American Anthropologist* 95, no. 4: 860–74.
- Posner, Richard. 1980. A Theory of Primitive Society, with Special Reference to Law. *Journal of Law and Economics* 23, no. 1: 1–53.
- Robson, Arthur J., and Hillard S. Kaplan. 2006. Viewpoint: The Economics of Hunter-Gatherer Societies and the Evolution of Human Characteristics. *Canadian Journal of Economics* 39, no. 2: 375–98.
- Sahlins, Marshall. 1972. *Stone Age Economics*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Smith, Adam. [1776] 1991. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Norwalk, Conn.: Easton Press.
- Steward, Julian. 1955. *Theory of Culture Change*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Tiger, Lionel. 2008. Of Monkeys and Utopia. *Wall Street Journal*, December 27.
- Weber, Max. 1927. *General Economic History*. New York: Greenberg.
- Wilson, David Sloan. 1998. Hunting, Sharing, and Multi-Level Selection. *Current Anthropology* 39, no. 1: 73–97.
- Winterhalder, Bruce. 2001. The Behavioral Ecology of Hunter-Gatherers. In *Hunter-Gatherers: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, edited by Catherine Panter-Brick, Robert H. Layton, and Peter Rowley-Conwy, 12–38. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.

SUBSCRIBE NOW AND RECEIVE A FREE BOOK!



“*The Independent Review* does not accept pronouncements of government officials nor the conventional wisdom at face value.”

—**JOHN R. MACARTHUR**, Publisher, *Harper’s*

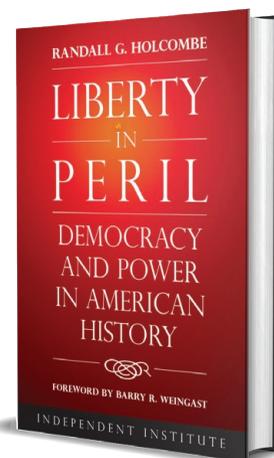
“*The Independent Review* is excellent.”

—**GARY BECKER**, Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences

Subscribe to [*The Independent Review*](#) and receive a free book of your choice such as *Liberty in Peril: Democracy and Power in American History*, by Randall G. Holcombe.

Thought-provoking and educational, [*The Independent Review*](#) is blazing the way toward informed debate. This quarterly journal offers leading-edge insights on today’s most critical issues in economics, healthcare, education, the environment, energy, defense, law, history, political science, philosophy, and sociology.

Student? Educator? Journalist? Business or civic leader? Engaged citizen? This journal is for YOU!



Order today for more **FREE** book options

SUBSCRIBE

The Independent Review is now available digitally on mobile devices and tablets via the Apple/Android App Stores and Magzter. Subscriptions and single issues start at \$2.99. [Learn More.](#)

