Affluence without abundance: the hunter-gatherers --a sound road to health?

In an attempt to build or recall a holistic vision of health as a balanced condition where the joy of living can emerge, it may be relevant to think over different sorts of living –very different from the allegedly advanced western modern life: hunter-gatherers, for example.

Hunter-gatherers consume less energy per capita per year than any other group of human beings. Yet when you come to examine it, the original affluent society was none other than the hunter's - in which all the people's material wants were easily satisfied.

There are two possible courses to affluence: wants may be "easily satisfied" either by producing much or desiring little.

The familiar conception based on the concept of market economies states that human beings' wants are great, not to say infinite, whereas their means are limited, although they can be improved. Thus, the gap between means and ends can be narrowed by industrial productivity, at least to the point that "urgent goods" become plentiful. But there is also a road to affluence which states that human material wants are finite and few, and technical means unchanging but on the whole adequate. Adopting this strategy, a people can enjoy an unparalleled material plenty - with a low "standard of living" from a Western viewpoint.

The traditional dismal view of the hunters' fix goes back to the time Adam Smith was writing, and probably to a time before anyone was writing. Maybe it was one of the first distinctly neolithic prejudices. Current low opinions of the hunting-gathering economy need not be laid to neolithic ethnocentrism. The existing business economy will promote the same dim conclusions about the hunting life.

Is it so paradoxical to contend that hunters have affluent economies, their utmost lack of possessions notwithstanding? Modern capitalist societies, however richly endowed, dedicate themselves to the proposition of scarcity. Inadequacy of economic means is the first principle of the world's wealthiest peoples. The market-industrial system institutes scarcity, in a manner completely without parallel.

Scarcity is the judgment decreed by the capitalist economy. And it is precisely from this anxious vantage that we look back upon hunters. Yet scarcity is not an intrinsic property of technical means. It is a relation between means and ends. We should entertain the empirical possibility that hunters are in business for their health, a finite objective, and that bow and arrow are adequate to that end.

For most hunters, such affluence without abundance need not be long debated. A more interesting question is why they are content with so few possessions for it is with them a policy, a "matter of principle", and not a misfortune. But are hunters so undemanding of material goods because they are themselves enslaved by a food quest "demanding maximum energy from a maximum number of people", so that no time or effort remains for the provision of other comforts? Some ethnographers testify to the contrary that the food quest is so successful that half the time the people seem not to

know what to do with themselves. On the other hand, movement is a condition of this success, more movement in some cases than others, but always enough to rapidly depreciate the satisfactions of property. Of the hunters it is truly said that their wealth is a burden. In their condition of life, goods can become "grievously oppressive".

Mobility and property are in contradiction. That wealth quickly becomes more of an encumbrance than a good thing is apparent even to the outsider.

The hunters, one is tempted to say, are "uneconomic" human beings. At least as concerns non subsistence goods, they are the reverse of that standard caricature immortalised in any General Principles of Economics, page one. Their wants are scarce and their means (in relation) plentiful. Consequently they are "comparatively free of material pressures", have "no sense of possession", show "an undeveloped sense of property", are "completely indifferent to any material pressures", manifest a "lack of interest" in developing their technological equipment.

From the internal perspective of the economy, it seems wrong to say that wants are "restricted", desires "restrained", or even that the notion of wealth is "limited". Such phrasings imply in advance an Economic Human Being and a struggle of the hunters against their own worse nature, which is finally then subdued by a cultural vow of poverty. The words imply the renunciation of an acquisitiveness that in reality was never developed, a suppression of desires that were never broached. It is not that hunters and gatherers have curbed their materialistic "impulses"; they simply never made an institution of them."

A good case can be made that hunters and gatherers work less than we do; and, rather than a continuous travail, the food quest is intermittent, leisure abundant, and there is a greater amount of sleep in the daytime per capita per year than in any other condition of society.

The world's most “primitive” people have few possessions, but they are not poor. Poverty is not a certain small amount of goods, nor is it just a relation between means and ends; above all it is a relation between people. Free from market obsessions of scarcity, hunters' economic propensities may be more consistently predicated on abundance than our [Western] own.

A holistic vision of health could well imply probing into the sheer basis of our societies, in a quest not only for health but for healthy societies. In that sense, for many living in modern “affluent” societies, the simple and plain freedom from whatever need may be a sound road to health.

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