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### **Limited Wants, Unlimited Means**

*John Gowdy (ed.)*

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Western Economic Man lives in a world of scarcity because his/her wants are unlimited. However, scarcity is not a natural state of affairs, it is socially constructed. The concept of Homo Oeconomicus does not adequately reflect the totality of economic experiences of mankind since humans lived as hunter-gatherers for about 99 % of our entire existence as a species. Hunter-gatherers typically represent Uneconomic Man whose wants are limited and who has, exactly for this reason, unlimited means to satisfy his/her wants.

Hunter-gatherer societies were surprisingly abundant and at the same time provided social equality and environmental sustainability. It is why ecological economists like John Gowdy are interested in studying hunter-gatherer economics.

John Gowdy, professor and chair of the Department of Economics at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, has produced an engaging reader on hunter-gatherer economics. His book is a carefully selected collection of papers of famous economic anthropologists such as Marshall Sahlins, Richard B. Lee, Paul Shepard and others.

In his Introduction Gowdy offers a short reconstruction of the basic features of the hunter-gatherer economic order as follows: (1) the economic notion of scarcity is largely a social construct, not an inherent property of human existence; (2) the separation of work from social life is not a necessary characteristic of economic production; (3) the linking of individual well-being to individual production is not a necessary characteristic of economic organization; (4) selfishness and acquisitiveness are not natural traits of our species; and (5) inequality based on class and gender is not a necessary characteristic of human society.

Hunter-gatherers were able to achieve affluence by creating a balance between means and ends since they want little. They avoided the tragedy of the consumption so precisely described by Marshall Sahlins: "Consumption is a double tragedy: what begins in inadequacy will end in deprivation".

In hunter-gatherer societies work is social and cooperative. It is integrated with ritual, socialization and artistic expression. The work-leisure trade-off is apparently absent there.

In many hunter-gatherer societies there is no connection between who produces and who receives the economic output. The distribution of goods is based on strikingly different

principles than the criterion of marginal productivity exclusively favored by modern capitalism.

Whereas industrial economies is using the earth's stock of nonrenewable natural resources, especially fossil fuel, hunter-gatherers lived off the flows of renewable biological resources and solar energy through their ecosystems. The capital in their world was not a physical thing that can be manipulated and controlled but rather it was knowledge that can be shared and accessible to all. This is why private property was virtually unknown for hunter-gatherer societies.

Hunter-gatherers were basically or in many cases even "aggressively" egalitarian. In their societies power and authority were kept in check.

Gowdy asks that what we can learn form hunter-gatherer economics. His answer is that with the current population of the earth approaching 6 billion, we certainly cannot return to a hunting and gathering way of life. However, we can try to incorporate some basic features of the hunter-gatherer societies that worked pretty well in promoting ecological balance and social harmony. These include social security; living off renewable flows rather than exhaustible stocks; sexual equality; cultural and ecological diversity based on bio-regionalism; and social rather than private property.

The real crux of the matter is, I believe, the question of the scale. Hunter-gatherers lived in small-scale communities and used simple, viable technologies. It is not sure at all that the attractive features of these little societies can be realized in any form in our large-scale, globalized societies. Hunter-gatherer economics can serve only as some kind of a heuristic model for our age.

Probably we can achieve the same goal, that is, an egalitarian and environmentally sustainable human economy in quite different ways. However, we should agree with John Gowdy that the economic world we live in now is far from the best of all possible worlds.