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# Anthropology: Want Some Anarchy With That?

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2006, Spring/Summer

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In 1983 I graduated from college with a bachelor's degree in Cultural Anthropology. During that time the foremost school of thought in the field was—as it remains—the discourse that resulted from the pivotal Man the Hunter symposium that took place at the University of Chicago in 1966. This event created an upheaval in the world of the humanities; before then, the main idea in anthropology and other social sciences was that hunting for game was the defining social activity of primitive people<sup>1</sup>. In addition, most anthropologists still favored Hobbes' "nasty, brutish, and short" picture of primitive life. This symposium changed all that. Since then, it is taken as a given (based on incontrovertible ethnographic evidence) that primitive people rely most heavily on plant and small animal foods (that can be easily gathered without hunting)<sup>2</sup>; such cultures could more accurately be referred to as "gatherer-hunters" rather than hunter-gatherers (the first term emphasizes the method providing the most calories). The other mistaken idea attributed to primitive cultures was that gatherer-hunter people were constantly on the edge of starvation; Marshall Sahlins was instrumental in showing this fallacy with his submission "The Original Affluent Society." While various challenges have been made to his idea that primitive people engaged in work<sup>3</sup> on average two to three hours per day, all who look at the data concur that primitive people work far less than any sedentary people, not to mention those of us who live in industrial and urban centers.

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<sup>1</sup> The term *primitive* refers to those cultural groups that have no agriculture, no permanent settlements, no formal institutions of any kind. Gatherer-hunters, pastoralists, and horticulturalists are the groups to which this categorization apply. They are by definition *uncivilized*: they do not reside in cities.

<sup>2</sup> Up to 80% of total caloric intake in the cases of cultural groups living in temperate and tropical environments; people who live above the Arctic Circle, on the other hand, have little access to plant foods, so their diet is almost 100% animal-based from hunting.

<sup>3</sup> By *work* I mean activities that are necessary for survival, such as food gathering and preparation, making utensils, hunting equipment, clothing (when applicable), maintaining shelters, child-rearing, etc.

It's difficult today to appreciate the profound changes that resulted from the Man the Hunter symposium and the many articles and books that came out of it. This was a time of serious transformation of the field of anthropology, which until then had been a less-than-stellar social science in terms of positive contributions to the liberation of humanity.

## A Short History of the Ugly Side of Anthropology

Early ethnographers had been missionaries, bringing the Gospels of Christianity and Economic Development to the "savages" of Africa and Asia (much like their colleagues had already been doing in the Americas). Others had been explicit harbingers of colonialism, advance reconnaissance men for European land-grabbers. Regardless of which prong of the attack, these ethnographers' reports overflowed with the same racist assumptions about "the natives" as any government or company analysis.

Despite themselves, however, the anthropologists engaged in fieldwork in the mid-to-late 19th century did manage to bring more or less accurate descriptions of primitive cultures to a Euro-American audience (both popular and academic, as well as official). Many were both astonished and embarrassed at what they found (much like the reports of Columbus finding the Taino overly welcoming, and therefore naive, knowing as he did what he had in store for them): cultures with no state, no centralized or institutionalized mechanisms of social control, no warfare. Yet there was obviously some kind of culture occurring. There was social cohesion based on clearly defined kinship patterns (and a near-universal incest taboo) as well as coherent worldviews based on culturally specific mythology and lore, songs and stories; ceremonies and rituals attached to lifecycle events (rites of passage associated with the attainment of

want to live, nor is it recognizable as a deliberately anarchist society; nevertheless, it is a place where there is no State (not even a hint of one), no economy, no widespread environmental devastation, and no war.

Having an education in anthropology definitely helped me to engage critically with the world. It taught me how to read between the lines of academic discourse, how to find the prejudices and assumptions of authors and teachers, and how to make my own arguments. In the process I was able to recognize the strength and durability of mythology,<sup>7</sup> in academia as well as in radical politics. This in turn spurred me on to a desire to reject ideological rigidity in both areas, and is one of the reasons I decided not to go to graduate school. And while the vast majority of my useful education has occurred since my graduation, this process certainly would have been much slower without studying anthropology.

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<sup>7</sup> A *myth* is not the same as a lie or a tall tale (although there are definitely aspects of mythology that are absurd or false). Myths explain culturally specific ideas about the world inhabited by members of that culture; they are stories told by those members to other members and they are supposed to (and usually do) make sense within that specific context, so it doesn't matter whether they are objectively true or not. The culturally specific worldview reflected in myths is strengthened by those very myths. In Euro-American culture, myths are shrouded in supposed objectivity (a legacy of the presumptions of Enlightenment thinking—the bulk of which is delightfully mythological), masking the philosophical and ideological assumptions behind them. It is this mixture of philosophy and ideology that makes for the durability of mythology.

cultures who engage in them—how presumptuous to tell them that these aspects of their culture are harmful! Those are the same anti-racists who fight for the right to eat dogs in various China towns in the United States—so what if dogs are companion animals to Americans? That’s a culturally specific (Anglo) value of keeping dogs as pets that shouldn’t restrict the equally valuable culturally specific (Asian) value of dog meat.

It is interesting that most of the practices that are found to be abhorrent to Europeans and Americans are those inflicted upon women, girls, and animals; Euro-American cultural mythology promotes the protection of those who are supposedly defenseless (like widows, orphans, and [stray] animals). A quandary exists; there is a clash between cultural values, and the history and legacy of colonial domination of the global south by Europeans and Americans can paralyze the humanitarian impulses of many anthropologists. Unfortunately most non-relativist anthropologists, being tied to the academy, are supporters of some kind of state-sponsored intervention when there’s a program to eradicate cultural practices they find unsavory.

## What Anthropology Taught Me

Being trained and getting a degree in Cultural Anthropology taught me about the reality—not just the dreamy utopian possibility—of life without the State and other hierarchical institutions and mechanisms of social control (police, courts, prisons). This condition of anarchy<sup>6</sup> reflects the successful adaptation of humans for 99% of our history (that is, the time before the invention of agriculture). This primitive life is not necessarily a place where I would

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<sup>6</sup> This is not the place to rehearse or explain in any detail the distinction between *anarchy* (a condition of existence without the State and government) and *anarchism* (an ideology that posits that condition as desirable and attainable using anarchist methods).

adulthood, childbearing, death and mourning). These savages had culture—they weren’t just wandering around doing whatever they felt like; there were plenty of proscriptions as well as duties and obligations. This the ethnographers could not avoid describing.

They were baffled that culture could exist without a complicated system of morality (that is, religion) or a putatively neutral institution for dispensing justice (that is, the State). They were, indeed, facing the fact that human culture could exist quite successfully without both. But as there were anarchists in their home countries promoting exactly that idea of a good life without religion and the state, the ethnographers (loyal missionaries and/or pro-state colonialists) had to devise a new term to capture both their assumptions about what was really going on in primitive culture, and their shock that perhaps these savages were not really all that savage. They created the term *acephalous* (without a head), a reflection of their conviction that no culture could exist without hierarchy, while grudgingly acknowledging that these were cultures after all.

Finding the actual value for radicals and anarchists in such ethnographies requires a lot of reading between the lines. One must filter out the racism, the assumptions of the positive value of hierarchy and institutionalized social controls, and the pompous self-righteousness of equating cultural sophistication with superior firepower and/or industrial development as well as the existence of capitalism. In addition, there are the filters that the ethnographers put on their own reports, especially when describing the excretory and sexual practices of their subjects; European—especially Victorian—bourgeois morality would just not allow certain things to be talked about frankly in print or in public.

## After Man the Hunter

Once the majority discourse in anthropology shifted toward the gatherer-hunter analysis, and once that became less shocking to the

academic establishment, it could be reported that primitive people had a good life. Not only that, but many ethnographers could begin to discuss the egalitarianism of gatherer-hunters relative to class-based societies. While that sounds like a further blow to the pro-hierarchy, pro-state discourse of previous ethnography, it still hides Euro-American cultural assumptions.

To give an example that illustrates this problem, European ethnographers who specialized in studying musical traditions knew that African people did not share the 12-tone scale of European music theory. Therefore they already knew that African folk music would have no harmony, and because they knew all that, when they heard African folk music they heard no harmonies, and could then report with great authority that harmony was unknown in Africa.<sup>4</sup> Anyone today who has listened to early recordings of the same music will find that absurd.

Similarly, when male ethnographers discern egalitarianism among primitive people, it is the egalitarianism that exists between adult men. There is an almost universal gender-based division of labor among primitive people, which fosters and is fostered by a system of fairly strict gender-based segregation of activities, along with their attendant restrictions, duties, and responsibilities. There are only a few cultures where women or children are allowed to participate in hunting, and none that I know of where women are allowed to engage in raiding or other forms of armed combat with neighboring people. Women make women's garments (or all gar-

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<sup>4</sup> *Folk music* is the music that people play by listening to other folk musicians; more specifically, it is music that is not influenced or taught by musicians who've been trained in music theory. This applies to any culture that has a system of music theory and standardized musical education. The opposite of *folk* is *classical*. The assumption of superiority is inherent in the terminology. Similarly, the term *superstition* is loaded with the same cultural assumptions; the more polite way to describe it is *folk religion*, to distinguish it from a presumed real religion. The hierarchical prejudice is that *folk* is a synonym for unsophisticated or ignorant.

ments); men may occasionally contribute raw or decorative material. Women make baskets and other implements associated with food gathering and preparation. This is not the kind of egalitarianism that I (and many other anarchists) would appreciate as an anarchist egalitarianism. Indeed, there are many aspects of primitive cultures that should make anarchists pause, from infanticide to self-mutilation, from wife-beating to cannibalism.

By the mid-70s, as the post-Man the Hunter generation of anthropologists entered the academy, and a new school of thought took hold of anthropology. Based in a new generation of academics who were steeped in the leftist ideologies of Cultural Studies, anti-colonialism, and Third World national liberationism, cultural relativism became the majority discourse. Cultural relativism is based on the idea that the customs and characteristics of a particular culture should be judged on their own terms; it is presumptuous, colonialist, and racist for Europeans or Americans to judge any part of another culture, so a new sensitivity to the temptation to ridicule or condemn came to dominate anthropological discourse. To a large degree this remains the dominant discourse among left-liberals in the social sciences.

The problem with cultural relativism is that despite it supposedly being the opposite of the paternalistic and authoritarian ethnography of the previous century, and despite the appearance of tolerance and an automatic acceptance of others, it is in actuality profoundly conservative.<sup>5</sup> It promotes the maintenance of brutality for the sake of anti-racism. Cultural relativists claim that any attempt to curtail or end the practice of clitoridectomy or female infanticide is racist and colonialist. Cultural relativists are complicit in the maintenance of the amputation of knuckles of women whose male relatives have died. Such practices make sense to the people in the

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<sup>5</sup> The same is true of the ideology of Political Correctness. Initially a way of talking about nondominant characteristics in a way that is sensitive to the judgmentalism inherent in the choice of terminology (see footnote 4), PC discourse has become a self-parody of euphemism and obfuscation.