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**Original Affluent Society- Hunting Gathering Society**

*Note prepared by Bisaka Blone*

**What is an affluent society?**

An affluent society can be defined as a society which is characterized by the availability of the benefits of material prosperity.

In the year 1966, in a symposium held in Chicago, organized by Richard Lee and Irven DeVore, named Man the Hunter, the theory of the “Original Affluent Society” was first put forward by Marshall Sahlins, who was an American cultural anthropologist. During this time, new research by many anthropologists, like Lee’s research on Kung (they are one of the San peoples residing on the Western edge of the Kalahari desert) of Southern Africa, posited challenges to the conventional idea that the societies of hunter-gatherers were always at the ‘brink of starvation’ and burdened with the struggle for survival.

Sahlins, through his thesis, tried to deconstruct the well-known conceptions of hunter-gatherers (that existed then) that their living conditions were of primitive level and they had to work hard through and through in order to survive.

Sahlins’ research had its base in the works of Lee on Kung and of McCarthy and McArthur in Arnhem Land. After collecting significant data from these works, he upheld a comprehensive argument according to which the community of hunter-gatherers did not endure deprivation; instead, they resided in a society where the wants of all the people were easily satisfied.

**He observed that affluence typically refers to the satisfaction of wants, which is likely to be easily satisfied by either producing more or wanting less.** Since there exists a culture of limited wants amongst the hunter-gatherer community, according to Sahlins, they were able to live their lives affluently by means of quick satisfaction of their simple material needs. Sahlins argues that since the hunter-gatherer societies can satisfy or meet the limited desires that they have with whatever is available to them, they can be labelled to be “affluent”.

**According to Sahlins, there exist 2 possible courses to affluence – wants can be satisfied easily by either producing more or wanting less.**

As Sahlins attempted to step away from a Western conception of affluence, the theory of ‘original affluent society’ eliminates the ideas about the hunter-gatherer societies that were prevalent at the time of the symposium.

He mentions that the **diet of the hunter-gatherers is characterized as “marvellously varied”,** which is based on the flora and fauna available locally, and in abundance. This upholds the fact that hunter-gatherers live amidst plenty of resources and do not live on a subsistence level of the economy. They have immense knowledge of their environment and by employing this knowledge they can transform the so-called ‘meager and unreliable’ natural resources into a rich subsistence economy. As a consequence of this transformation, they can provide for themselves and limit the time devoted to the procurement of food to a minimum. This quest for food is very successful.

The lives of the hunter-gatherers also come across as ‘affluence without abundance’. This is because their needs are minimal and simple and they do not seek any surplus or material possessions which, if they indulge in, would decline their lifestyles from being characteristically nomadic. The hunter-gatherer communities place faith in the environment – that they will provide for by it.

**Work time” and “leisure time”**

Sahlins upheld that since the hunter-gatherers were not burdened with the demands of the commercial market which is why they had enough leisure hours. According to his research, the people from the hunter-gatherer society were required to work only 15 to 20 hours a week, which is pretty much not the case for the so-called civilised society. The hunter-gatherers could allocate the rest of their time to leisure.

Since their immediate needs are satisfied by the plentiful resources, the number of hours that can be designated as ‘free’ increases. Thus, though they live in what Western society calls ‘material poverty’, the number of hours they need to dedicate to work is less than in societies where people indulge in other modes of subsistence. In spite of working less, the hunter-gatherers’ work provides for all their needs and their overall leisure time rises.

The so-called Neolithic Revolution, rather than improving life, imposed a harsher work regime and set in motion the long history of growing inequality (a claim recently revived by James C. Scott in Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States [2017]).

These arguments can be attributed to the fact that, in accordance with Sahlins’s observation, the original affluent society is essentially the society of hunter-gatherers. The hunting and gathering society satisfied their needs with far less work than people in agricultural and industrial societies, leaving them more time to use as they wished.

To Sahlins, this showed that foragers are not simply examples of human diversity or victimhood but something more profound: they demonstrated that societies make real choices.