

Abundance and Scarcity in Primitive Societies – La Guerre Sociale

**Introduction by the
Internationalist Communist
Group (2000)**

Capitalist society denies history, it denies that capitalism had a beginning and therefore that it will also come to an end. If it speaks of history it is only to depict the entire past of the human being as an endless quest for unlimited progress whose model is present-day society, as if primitive man was always in search of the “perfection” of contemporary man with his automobile, his

Coca Cola, his cell phone, “surfing” the Internet and eating at McDonalds. The “man” depicted by this simulacrum of history is, based on the projection of today’s society into the past, above all else “homo oeconomicus”, who makes all his decisions on the basis of the maximization of utility in a world with scarce resources and unlimited goals, that is, just like “our”

entrepreneurs. From this bourgeois view of history, which projects onto man in general the perspective of the employer, all the vulgar conclusions are derived about “human nature” that will allow for the blanket justification of the whole catastrophe of today’s society as an intrinsic product of man himself: “man is egotistical”, “some are born to rule, others are

born to work”, “there has always been a struggle for power”, “war is in the very nature of man”....

This is not the place to elaborate on the development of all the simplifications and falsifications that this worldview contains as an expression of the interests that it defends; we shall only point out that even “man” himself, about whom this

history speaks, as if he will forever and always possess a particular human nature, is a myth, one of many ideological beliefs of this dogmatic society, and that, to the contrary, real man as a social animal is a product of the organization of society and in particular of the relations of production in which he is born and matures. The “man” of today’s bourgeois society,

free to be exploited or to die of hunger, free to starve after working all day without obtaining the means to live or to speculate on the New York Stock Exchange with millions of dollars ... is, contrary to the myth, as Marx said, a historical product. Moreover, he is not a product of ancient history, but a product of modern history. The same thing may be said of labor, “the very essence of

man”, according to the dominant ideology. Or, more generally: the concept of man as “the subject of duties and rights”, who “has to work”, who is “egotistical”, and who spends most of his life “earning a livelihood”, is a very recent “invention” when viewed from the perspective of the history of humanity as a whole. The specialists speak of the existence of the human being since at least a

million years ago (according to current research [ca. 2000], humans have existed for at least two million years), whereas this “homo oeconomicus” has existed for only a few hundred years! This is even the case if we refer not to this man of bourgeois society who emerged just a few centuries ago (through an entire historical process by means of which the world market

was consolidated and revolutionized by means of the production of abstract labor—which is also a recent product—and a single worldwide standard of value), but more generally to man as devoted to labor, who lived in all class and state-based societies, which have existed for no more than a few tens of thousands of years at the most. In other words, even according to all

the current scientific hypotheses concerning bourgeois man, this atomized individual has only existed for less than one-tenth of one percent of human history, and class-based exploitative societies have existed for less than two percent of human history. It is therefore totally aberrant and ahistorical to speak of “human nature” by projecting the impoverished capitalist individual onto the

entire history of humanity.

It is obvious that capitalism has no interest in real history and even less interest in social history.¹ From the revolutionary point of view, on the other hand, knowing that capitalist society is a transitory society is of the greatest importance, and revealing the historical and transitory character of

everything that it implies (exploitation, poverty, war, “homo oeconomicus”, labor...) constitutes a vital task of the communists, perceiving, as far as this is possible, societies prior to bourgeois society and thus exposing—even if only in a negative way—the future society that will issue from the essential/total negation of present day society.

It is within this framework that the constant interest displayed by communists for primitive society, from Marx and Engels to the revolutionary militants of the year 2000, is inscribed. And it is within this framework that we publish this text, “Abundance and Scarcity in Primitive Societies”, written by the revolutionary group, La Guerre Sociale. As the authors say: “Our point of

view is above all historical and perceives primitive communism, like the higher stage of communism, as two moments in human evolution that are simultaneously distinct yet similar. We shall show how one sheds light on the other.”

Contrary to the myth that the reader will find this subject hard to understand, the text we present below, besides

being fully documented, is also accessible and clear.

Furthermore, since the authors themselves explain in their introductory remarks their reasons for writing the text and the myths against which it is directed, it does not require a long introduction specifically dealing with its contents.

We would like, however, to say two things about this

group of proletarian militants and offer an observation about the text itself. In the difficult and chauvinist Parisian “revolutionary milieu” (which not only imagines that Paris is the center of the world but that also believes that France is the revolutionary country par excellence) which has nothing to learn from anyone about anything, this group of militants constituted,

together with a few others (such as Barrot and *La Banquise* and the situationists grouped around Guy Debord), a remarkable exception by swimming against the current in every sense (even practically confronting the united front of the Parisian bourgeois antifascists, from the organized young Israelites to the various Stalinist and Trotskyist groups), producing

very good materials both in discussions and in their press and leaflets. By virtue of their practice, it would be much more correct to say that these groups, as much as our group, do not belong to that pseudo-revolutionary milieu that despite all its verbal proclamations of being the “communist left” has not broken with the essential core beliefs of the social democratic conception

of the world. Many of our comrade militants and sympathizers have found in the texts of La Guerre Sociale, as well as the other groups mentioned above, a source of inspiration, of discussion and agitation and some of these materials will be necessary starting points for the understanding of important aspects of the programmatic positions of the proletariat.

As for the text, “Abundance and Scarcity in Primitive Societies”, we consider it to be very good, and although we do not agree with some passages, we do not think our disagreements are important enough to warrant their full elaboration in this introduction. On the other hand, we have considered it indispensable to draw attention to a few important

points that we disagree with, and at the same time we have thought it necessary to insert a few clarifications concerning the content and/or the translation of this text² in several “Critical Notes by the Editors of *Comunismo*”.

We would like to emphasize here that perhaps the most important difference that separates us from the authors

of this text is the fact that for us capitalism as a mode of production has been a worldwide phenomenon for the last five centuries and that, while elements of primitive life still exist in some contemporary societies, it is incorrect to identify these elements with primitive communism. They are instead forms of the reproduction of life that have been totally altered by

capitalism no matter how diffuse and episodic their contacts have been. Thus, whereas in many cases capital directly and totally subsumes different social forms, in others capital, by virtue of its own conditions of profitability, tolerates or has a “live and let live” attitude towards them. But it would be absurd to claim that primitive communism could subsist, for example, in

societies where capital has been destroying their means of livelihood (appropriation of the forests and lakes, rivers and mountains, subjecting nature to all the conditions of the valorization of capital) and where it has been carving up and isolating the remaining pieces of “natural” land. Nor can one speak of primitive communism in societies that have been driven into

marginal areas and persecuted by those who are seizing their lands or by state terrorism and/or penetrated by various forms of commerce. All that is necessary is for some of their ancestors to have been kidnapped and taken away as slaves by capitalism, or simply to have come to the verge of the forest and to have seen a machine cutting it down, or for their natural

environment to have been destroyed by some dam many kilometers away (droughts, floods, or both in alternation), it is enough for some petty traders, who for centuries have been looking in the forests for fresh meat with whom they can exchange some pretty colored glass or some clothing, to have entered into contact with members of such a community ... to

render any talk of primitive communism in these cases utterly absurd. And even in the most remote locations, or in the “recently discovered” societies, there are always ancestral narratives of the terror of the “palefaces”, of the arrival of “other beings”, of attacks, of members of the community who have “disappeared” and been taken away as slaves, of beings who bring pretty clothing and

exchange it for little girls between 5 and 13 years of age, of being forced to move to another location due to the hunger fostered by the appropriation/destruction of nature, or of alien traders.

It is just such a concession to the myth of a capitalism that can coexist with primitive societies that La Guerre Sociale makes when they say that “primitive peoples still

exist”, which then leads them to claim that “one cannot be a purist and seek absolute frontiers between communist societies and societies of exploitation”, as well as other assertions concerning the coexistence of primitive societies with money.

Actually, however, these are not primitive societies, but societies totally denatured in their essence both by their relations with other class

societies, as well as by the dissolving and destructive effect that money has on the primal community. Actually, there is no such thing as, nor can one speak of the existence of, a primitive communism that coexists with money forms, nor with forms of exploitation. Such claims are in reality the result of a lack of understanding of the fact that capitalism historically

presupposes value, and that the world of money is the community (a false, rather than a real community) that destroys all other communities.

Such assertions, however, are quite marginal in a text that effectively synthesizes a variety of research that shows us how the mutilated primitive societies that still exist allow us to get a

glimpse of primitive communism. Despite all the denaturing of these societies caused by class societies over the last ten thousand years and despite all the disruption brought about during the last five centuries of world capitalism we can still understand that history is very different from what we have been told, and that in primitive societies not everything was scarcity and

suffering as the champions of progress of all schools would have us believe. Despite the few elements available for the reconstruction of a real “social anthropology” we can nonetheless confirm, now more than ever before, that man did not come into the world to work and to experience pain, to suffer and to be exploited, to kill and to die; but, entirely to the contrary, to live a full life of

satisfaction and pleasure, of joy and affection, of sexuality and play, of delight and enjoyment. We can also confirm, against the entire dominant ideology, which tells us of uninterrupted progress up to the present, that man never worked so hard and suffered so much as he does now; and we can proclaim, against all the religions that call for self-sacrifice in this world in

order to enjoy a paradise later in another one (and this goes not only for the Judeo-Christian religions, but also for Islam and Marxism-Leninism and even Castroism), that the only possible paradise will be here on earth, but only after capitalism is destroyed along with all these ideologies and religions of the state.

Abundance and Scarcity in

Primitive Societies – La Guerre Sociale (1977)

The history of humanity has been traditionally conceived as more or less continuous progress along the road of well-being and the productivity of labor. Well-being and productivity are linked because it is from the yield of labor that the quantity of goods is produced as well as the free time that

remains to us during which we can devote ourselves to leisure and cultural activities. As techniques, tools, and more effective machines appear, thanks to discoveries, man's life improves. Thus, prehistoric times, during which man is presented to us as naked and disarmed before a hostile nature, can only have been an era of terrible poverty. And if we sometimes complain about

the misfortunes of modern life, a glance back at the past of humanity where, even without entertaining ourselves too much with the famines and epidemics of the Middle Ages, we may submerge ourselves in the depths of the caves where our distant ancestors sheltered, would be enough to bring us back to our senses and make us more appreciative of our soft conditions of existence.

Let us imagine a man of the stone age. It is there, to his meager little campfire, with an empty stomach and bad mood, that he returns from an exhausting and unsuccessful day of hunting. And just behind him, frozen and terrified, lurk his wife and children. We should not be surprised that our man—should we even consider this brute to be a human being?—comes home with empty

hands. How could we imagine that he would return victorious after confronting terrible mammoths and gigantic tigers! And he even had the luck not to have to deal with the enormous dinosaurs that lived during even more distant ages, when, a few hundreds of millions of years earlier, an even more terrible scene prevailed. Woe to the weak in those societies where only

force ruled! These men who, terrified of each other and driven by hunger, did not hesitate to devour one another, were in turn terrorized and oppressed by nature. They resorted to magic and other infernal practices, with which they sought to exorcise hostile powers, and with the aid of which they were only subjected to an even more tragic fate. It is

understandable that they tried everything in an attempt to escape from this hell; although we might ask ourselves how they could have had either the time or the inclination to think at all.

This vision of the past is deranged, both when it is presented in the naïve and graphic form of the textbooks or in the comic strips, as well as when it is presented in the

dry language of the scholar. This world of starvation, these men oppressed by economic need, this social jungle, this universe of magic, this era of survival, are not situated in the historical moment to which they correspond: they are nothing but a screen upon which today's society projects its own truth, a truth that it wants to impose as human nature itself.

Primitive peoples still exist in the Far North, in the Amazonian jungle, and in the Australian deserts.³ Their ways of life do not by any means correspond to this classic depiction of the stone age. They are often leisurely and tranquil, they have confidence in nature and have not lost their sense of community.

One might think that it would be easy for us, based on the study of existing reality, and no longer on that of the reconstruction of questionable remains, to obtain a precise notion of the way people lived in prehistoric times. This is not the case, however. Various and numerous observations of primitive peoples have been woven into lies that recapitulate Western

prejudices and have no relation to reality. These theories are in general all the more false the greater their pretenses to scientific objectivity. The most interesting, faithful and charming accounts are generally those provided by missionaries, who, although they tried to bring morality to the savages, did not find their good health surprising despite the fact that they had

characterized their living conditions as “impossible”. After the initial encounters when explorers and philosophers discovered primitive populations and were sometimes captivated by their strange customs, a stage would supervene in which ingrained arrogance and stupidity would take over: the primitive reality must be sacrificed on the altar of the cult of progress.

Such prejudices are not just based in the minds of the ideologues, but also emerge from the conditions under which contact with the primitive peoples was made, since the people they encountered so easily are already victims of civilization. There is a real difficulty in estimating the resources of these strange and seemingly deserted

territories where hunting peoples generally evolved.⁴ The contacts are often brief and superficial, to which must also be added the language difficulties.

Furthermore, the specialists, up until the First World War and Malinowsky's studies, were content to elaborate their theories on the basis of the accounts of others. Interest was focused on

magical-religious behaviors, on mythology, rather than on the “productive” activities of the indigenous peoples and their relation to nature.

Humans did not live worse because they were born in a more backward era or because they had a more rudimentary technology. One might even to be tempted to

think the opposite was true. One example is of great significance, that of the Tasaday: the most primitive people ever studied,⁵ recently discovered living completely isolated from the rest of humanity in the Philippine jungle. The Tasaday are not even acquainted with hunting,⁶ they live a simple life based on gathering and rudimentary fishing. Their

tools are not very complicated since they are satisfied with assembling rocks and bamboo to make their huts.

Even so, these super-primitive people laugh at modern civilization and its happiness. As F. de Clozet writes, commenting on the report of the anthropologists:

“... the Tasaday show every

sign of happiness. Not of an authentically human happiness to which we might aspire, but of a certain balance that is so hard to attain in industrial societies. They know nothing of hierarchy, inequality, property, insecurity, loneliness, frustration. They are perfectly integrated into their natural environment and they can get as much food as they need by working only a

few hours a day.

“Their social life seems to be free of conflicts, tensions and animosity. They spend most of their time playing, talking or daydreaming. This kind of happiness, however, which is more like that of an animal than a man, commands the respect of the civilized.

“Photographs taken by the anthropologists show the

Tasaday grinding hearts of palm, digging up roots, bathing in the river, laughing children playing in the trees. Every face seems to be smiling and tranquil. A marked contrast with the harsh visage of the Parisians in the metro, the anxious faces of the unemployed reading the help wanted ads, the feverish pace of the employees leaving their offices at five-thirty.

Seriously: do we really have any right to ‘civilize’ the Tasaday?

“Yet how can one not rebel against such an idea? How can we accept that all the progress attained since the Paleolithic has not provided us with a decisive advantage on the only terrain that counts: happiness?”⁷

Since technology makes it

possible, they take this snapshot of primitive “happiness” in the jungle and disseminate it in Technicolor. Magazines like *Stern*⁸ provide their readers, with their “anxious faces” and “feverish” pace, this inaccessible happiness, with photos as evidence.

It is becoming fashionable to

make sympathetic references to or reflect nostalgically and sometimes guiltily concerning primitive peoples. But this is not enough to achieve a correct understanding of their way of life, its advantages and its limitations. Such attitudes exhibit many prejudices and are often reconciled with the mythology of the noble savage, poor but happy, because he knows how to be

satisfied with what he has. This lesson is aimed at our insatiable yet unhappy proletarians. The primitive is posited as the Other, the person that modern man would want to be, although this is not possible or even, basically, desirable. The Paleolithic is seen as a different way of life and not as a moment of human history. Historical explanations are, on the other

hand, few and far between. Is it not perhaps racist to place the “savage” at a lower level than ours on the scale of evolution?

When the Western, that is, capitalist, ideology and lifestyle are in crisis, when “nature” sells at a higher price the more endangered it is and perhaps, above all, when primitive peoples have been so persecuted and

devastated that they are no longer disturbing, we can indulge in their rehabilitation. This attitude, which blames industrialism, progress, history, and excess (or abuse) does nothing but obscure the future communism with its nostalgia.⁹

“What matters is not the lifestyle of the primitives,

the image of happiness in simplicity, and innocence, but poverty.”¹⁰ Studies of primitive peoples show us possible forms of social balance and harmony, of the adaptation and utilization of the environment, of an abundance that is not bourgeois wealth and a kind of man who is not economic man, man as commodity. These perspectives are not

limited to a society operating on a more or less rudimentary technical level, with more or less limited needs. Our point of view is above all historical and perceives primitive communism, like the higher stage of communism, as two moments in human evolution that are simultaneously distinct yet similar. We shall show how one sheds light on the other.

Hunting and gathering

Broadly speaking, what distinguishes the productive activity of the savage from that of modern wage labor and from the various kinds of servitudes that preceded the latter, is the fact that, for the savage, the quest for his subsistence is not felt as coercion. It is not a means of earning his livelihood but an

integral part of his existence. Hunting is as much a kind of play as it is work.¹¹ As enjoyment or test, it is not a bad thing that he is trying to flee or minimize, which he would like to palm off on others.

Thus, for the Guayaki Indians: “Hunting is never perceived as a burden. Even though it is the almost

exclusive occupation of the men, their daily task, it is always practiced as a 'sport' ... Hunting is always an adventure, sometimes risky, but always exalting. It is of course pleasing to extract from the comb the sweet honey with its pleasant odor or to split open a palm and discover the delicious *guchu* grubs inside. But in these cases one knows everything in advance, there is no

mystery, nothing is unforeseen: it is routine. To track animals in the jungle, to demonstrate that one is more skilled than the others, to shoot an arrow without letting the animal sense your presence, to hear the hiss of the arrow in its flight, and then the dull sound of its finding its mark in the side of the animal: all of these things are familiar and oft-repeated joyful moments, but

nonetheless experienced each time as if it were the first hunt.¹² The *aché* can never have enough of the *bareka*. Nothing else is asked of them and it is this which they seek above all else. They are in this way, and from this point of view, at peace with themselves.”¹³

Even more surprising is the fact that savages devote

relatively little time to the quest for food. Not only do they enjoy what they do, but they know enough not to overdo it.

This conflicts with the point of view that identifies history with the increase of productive effectiveness. The golden age of leisure lies instead in our past. If the primitives did not invent civilization or build

pyramids, the reason is not because they did not have the time, but more likely because they did not see any need to do these things.

The leisure at the disposal of populations of hunters is all the more significant insofar as they live in inhospitable regions unsuitable for the mode of production of farmers and settlers from the outside world.

The duration and intensity of the activity of these populations obviously depend on their environment and its bounty. It appears, however, that the hunters who inhabit territories that are most hostile to man, such as the Eskimos, are not an exception to the rule. J. Malaurie, who lived with the Eskimos of Thule who are driven by necessity to resist

and struggle with a difficult natural environment, can nonetheless write: “The Eskimo certainly sleeps a lot. More in the winter than in the summer—he hibernates like a bear—but overall, quite a lot, if one considers the fact that half of his life is spent sleeping and dreaming. To put it into figures, one could say that only the other half—and we were surprised at the small amount of time

this represented for such an allegedly active people—is divided as follows: one third in visiting neighbors, another third in traveling to hunting grounds, and the remaining third actually hunting.

Laziness is the sign of wisdom. It is how a society physically protects itself against the exhaustion of a hard life.”

“Only the young people are

naturally an exception to this balanced rhythm of life: a large part of their time is occupied with the sexual urge, depending on the season of the year; in spring and summer, they chase after the girls and lie in wait for them between one village and the next with the most diverse motives: they use hunting as an excuse.”

Marshall Sahlins, in “The Original Affluent Society”,¹⁴ attempts to demonstrate, in opposition to the dominant prejudices, the effectiveness of the activity of the primitive peoples. He bases his conclusions for the most part on two studies. One study is about the Australians of Arnhem Land, and the other is about the Dobe

population of the Kung Bushmen. These studies contain data regarding how these peoples spend their time. They are confirmed by many other observations that show that the most primitive peoples are also the ones who devote the most time to leisure and relaxation.

“In the case of the people of Arnhem Land, who live in the bush, the time spent

looking for food varies widely from day to day. They devote an average of about 4 or 5 hours per person in gathering and preparing food. In other words, no more hours of labor than an industrial worker—when he is a member of a trade union. The time devoted to leisure each day, that is, to sleeping, was enormous....

“Moreover, they do not work

continuously. The subsistence quest was highly intermittent. It would stop for the time being when the people had procured enough for the time being, which left them plenty of time to spare. Clearly in subsistence as in other sectors of production, we have to do with an economy of specific, limited objectives. By hunting and gathering these objectives are apt to be irregularly

accomplished, so the work pattern becomes correspondingly erratic.¹⁵ In the event, a third characteristic of hunting and gathering unimagined by the received wisdom: rather than straining to the limits of available labor and disposable resources, these Australians seem to *underuse* their objective economic possibilities.....

“It follows, fourthly, that the economy was not physically demanding. The investigator’s daily journal indicates that the people pace themselves; only once is a hunter described as ‘totally exhausted’ Neither did the Arnhem Landers themselves consider the task of subsistence onerous. ‘They certainly did not approach it as an unpleasant job to be got

over as soon as possible, nor as a necessary evil to be postponed as long as possible' At least some Australians, the Yir-Yiront, make no linguistic differentiation between work and play....¹⁶

“Apart from the time (mostly between definitive activities and cooking periods) spent in general

social intercourse, chatting, gossiping and so on,¹⁷ some hours of the daylight were also spent resting and sleeping. On the average, if the men were in camp, they usually slept after lunch from an hour to an hour and a half, or sometimes even more. Also after returning from fishing or hunting, they usually had a sleep, either immediately they arrived or

whilst game was being cooked. At Hemple Bay the men slept if they returned early in the day but not if they reached camp after 4:00 p.m. When in camp all day they slept at odd times and always after lunch. The women, when out collecting in the forest, appeared to rest more frequently than the men. If in camp all day, they also slept at odd times, sometimes for long periods.'

“As for the Bushmen, economically likened to Australian hunters by Herskovits, two excellent recent reports by Richard Lee show their condition to be indeed the same.... Lee’s research merits a special hearing not only because it concerns Bushmen, but specifically the Dobe section of !Kung Bushmen, adjacent to the Nyae Nyae about

whose subsistence—in a context otherwise of ‘material plenty’—Mrs. Marshall expressed important reservations. The Dobe occupy an area of Botswana where !Kung Bushmen have been living for at least a hundred years, but have only just begun to suffer dislocation pressures. (Metal, however, has been available to the Dobe since 1880-1890.) An intensive

study was made of the subsistence production of a dry season camp with a population (41 people) near the mean of such settlements. The observations extended over four weeks during July and August 1964, a period of transition from more to less favorable seasons of the year, hence fairly representative, it seems, of average subsistence difficulties.

“Despite a low annual rainfall (6 to 10 inches), Lee found in the Dobe area a ‘surprising abundance of vegetation’. Food resources were ‘both varied and abundant’, particularly the energy rich mangetti nut —‘so abundant that millions of the nuts rotted on the ground each year for want of picking’ His reports on the time spent in food-getting are remarkably close to the

Arnhem Land
observations....

“The Bushmen figures imply that one man’s labor in hunting and gathering will support four or five people. Taken at face value, Bushman food collecting is more efficient than French farming in the period up to World War II, when more than twenty percent of the population was engaged in

feeding the rest. Confessedly, the comparison is misleading, but not as misleading as it is astonishing. In the total population of free-ranging Bushmen contacted by Lee, 61.3 per cent (152 of 248) were effective food producers; the remainder were too young or too old to contribute importantly. In the particular camp under scrutiny, 65 percent were

‘effectives’. Thus the ratio of food producers to the general population is actually 3:5 or 2:3. *But*, these 65 per cent of the people ‘worked 36 percent of the time, and 35 percent of the people did not work at all’!....

“For each adult worker, this comes to about two and one-half days labor per week. (In other words, each productive individual supported herself

or himself and dependents and still had 3 ½ to 5 ½ days available for other activities.)

A 'day's work' was about six hours; hence the Dobe work week is approximately 15 hours, or an average of 2 hours 9 minutes per day.

Even lower than the Arnhem Land norms, this figure however excludes cooking and the preparation of implements. All things considered, Bushmen

subsistence labors are probably very close to those of native Australians....

“The daily per-capita subsistence yield for the Dobe Bushmen was 2,140 calories. However, taking into account body weight, normal activities, and the age-sex composition of the Dobe population, Lee estimates the people require only 1,975 calories per

capita. Some of the surplus food probably went to the dogs, who ate what the people left over. ‘The conclusion can be drawn that the Bushmen do not lead a substandard existence on the edge of starvation as has been commonly supposed.’”

In Africa, among the Hadzas, who, due to their distaste for hard work, prefer not to become farmers, “... Hadza

men seem much more concerned with games of chance than with chances of game. During the long dry season especially, they pass the greater part of days on end in gambling.... In any case, many men are 'quite unprepared or unable to hunt big game' only a small minority ... are active hunters of large animals....”¹⁸

Around 1840, an Australian squatter had to wonder “how that sage people managed to pass their time before my party came and taught them to smoke?.... That accomplishment fairly acquired, matters went on flowingly, their leisure hours being divided putting the pipe to its legitimate purpose and begging my tobacco”.¹⁹

On another continent, Father Biard, in his *Relation* (1616), described the Micmac Indians in the following manner: ²⁰ “In order to thoroughly enjoy this, their lot, our foresters start off to their different places with as much pleasure as if they were going on a stroll or an excursion; they do this easily through the skillful use and great convenience of

canoes.... so rapidly sculled that, without any effort, in good weather you can make thirty or forty leagues a day; nevertheless we scarcely see these Savages posting along at this rate, for their days are all nothing but pastime. They are never in a hurry. Quite different from us, who can never do anything without hurry and worry.”²¹

Food, scarcity and mobility

Are the results of this low level of activity or this indolent lifestyle satisfactory? Are the primitives not the victims of their lack of foresight and their lack of ambition? Would they not benefit from devoting their leisure time to the improvement of their material welfare? Because, after all, their lives are not

always a bowl of cherries. Everyone knows about their poverty. How else can we explain cannibalism, infanticide and the elimination of the elderly if not by the impossibility of feeding so many mouths? It is possible that if the primitives could choose, they would prefer death to certain coercions that are accepted by the civilized. The idea that life is the greatest good and

that it must be preserved at all costs is alien to them. This explains some of the practices that, to Western eyes, might seem utterly barbarous. At the same time, the attitudes of the civilized might seem unacceptable to these savages. Cannibal Indians have been known to protest against the conditions of slavery imposed on prisoners who would have originally been consigned to

the cooking pot, but who had instead been handed over to white humanists. Groups of primitives prefer suicide to conforming to the unacceptable living conditions imposed on them.

One cannot project upon the activity of hunting peoples a concept of the utilization of time and output that is alien to them and that would ultimately be irrational,

given their way of life.

Indolence might be revealed to be an effective form of activity: "... this apathetic behavior (of the Australian aborigines) is actually an adaptation to the physical environment. In any case, this 'indolence' helps keep them in good shape. In ordinary times, when they are on the move, they rarely travel more than 13 to 19 kilometers per day, and since

‘they travel without haste or pressure, they avoid the afflictions of anxiety and heat stroke; in particular, the harm inflicted by thirst, which among Europeans is provoked not only by physical activities and the strenuous efforts they impose upon themselves, but also, and above all, by the feeling of a lack of security and the anxiety that this causes.’
Furthermore, they look for

food and water ‘without haste and without too much stress, and are capable of great endurance before they are in dire need’.”²²

Thus, the aborigines preserve their good health in regions where the Western explorers of the 19th century, despite all their equipment, could hardly survive. Hence the surprise of those explorers at

finding men who were “good looking, upright, mostly with beards ... in good physical condition, especially if you take into account their impoverished and precarious existence”.²³

With regard to the question of food, the primitives managed to achieve a certain degree of abundance. Here is

what Sir George Grey wrote, who travelled through the most barren regions of Australia during the early 19th century: “One mistake ... is to imagine that they [the natives of Australia] have small means of subsistence or are at times greatly pressed for want of food: I could produce many, almost humorous instances of the errors which travellers have fallen into upon this

point. They lament in their journals, that the unfortunate Aborigines should be reduced by famine to the miserable necessity of subsisting on certain sorts of food, which they have found near their huts; whereas, in many instances, the articles thus quoted by them are those which the natives most prize, and are really neither deficient in flavour nor nutritious qualities.” “...

[To] render palpable the ignorance that has prevailed with regard to the habits and customs of this people when in their wild state”, Grey provides “one remarkable example”, a quotation from his fellow explorer, Captain Sturt, who, upon encountering a group of Aborigines engaged in gathering large quantities of mimosa gum, concluded that “these unfortunate creatures

were reduced to the last extremity, and, being unable to procure any other nourishment, had been obliged to collect this mucilaginous food". But, Sir George observes, the gum in question "is a favourite article of food amongst the natives, and when it is in season, they assemble ... in large numbers to enjoy this luxury. The profusion in which this gum is found

enables large bodies to meet together”, which otherwise they are unable to do. He concludes: “Generally speaking, the natives live well; in some districts there may at particular seasons of the year be a deficiency of food, but if such is the case, these tracts are, at those times, deserted. It is, however, utterly impossible for a traveller or even for a strange native to judge

whether a district affords an abundance of food, or the contrary.... But in his own district a native is very differently situated; he knows exactly what it produces, the proper time at which the several articles are in season, and the readiest means of procuring them. According to these circumstances he regulates his visits to different portions of his hunting ground; and I

can only state that I have always found the greatest abundance in their huts.”²⁴

Sometimes the hunt is unsuccessful. This mode of subsistence has its risks. Is it not the case, however, that agriculture can hardly avoid famines, or overcome the problem of subsistence from one harvest to the next, and that it is dependent on the

variations of the climate?
Disconnected from the natural conditions, the risks of insecurity increase. Even during the worst times, hunters are confident and do not think about laying up stores for the future.

According to Le Jeune, speaking of the Montagnais Indians:²⁵

“In the famine through which

we passed, if my host took two, three, or four Beavers, immediately, whether it was day or night, they had a feast for all neighbouring Savages. And if those People had captured something, they had one also at the same time; so that, upon emerging from one feast, you went to another, and sometimes even to a third and a fourth. I told them that they did not manage well, and that it would be

better to reserve these feasts for future days, and in doing this they would not be so pressed with hunger. They laughed at me. ‘Tomorrow’ (they said) ‘we shall make another feast with what we shall capture.’ Yes, but more often they capture only cold and wind.”

“I saw them, in their hardships and in their labors, suffer with cheerfulness.... I

found myself, with them,
threatened with great
suffering; they said to me,
‘We shall be sometimes two
days, sometimes three,
without eating, for lack of
food; take courage, *Chihiné*,
let thy soul be strong to avoid
suffering and hardship; keep
thyself from being sad,
because otherwise thou wilt
be sick; see how we do not
cease to laugh, although we

have little to eat’.”²⁶

Gessain writes, concerning the Eskimos: “In a world where the forces of wind and ice are so powerful, where the forces of nature are so decisive, is it not better to live with confidence? It is not by storing up reserves that one obtains gifts. Would it not be an insult to the immortal souls who, in

eternal return, offer their animal bodies, to have too many reserves?”²⁷

As for their other goods, besides food, the primitives seem to be somewhat lacking. But does this bother them? Apparently not. They are careless about even the few goods that they have made or been given. They

have no sense of property. As Gusinde writes concerning the Yahgan Indians:

“They do not know how to take care of their belongings. No one dreams of putting them in order, folding them, drying or cleaning them, hanging them up, or putting them in a neat pile. If they are looking for some particular thing, they rummage carelessly through

the hodgepodge of trifles in the little baskets. Larger objects that are piled up in a heap in the hut are dragged hither and yon with no regard for the damage that might be done them. The European observer has the impression that these [Yahgan] Indians place no value whatever on their utensils and that they have completely forgotten the effort it took to make them. Actually, no one clings

to his few goods and chattels which, as it is, are often and easily lost, but just as easily replaced.... [In every case, the supreme and almost exclusive concern of every Indian is to preserve his own life, to shelter himself from the elements as best he can, and to satisfy his hunger. These are their essential preoccupations, which relegate the preservation of their material goods to a

secondary level of importance.]²⁸ The Indian does not even exercise care when he could conveniently do so. A European is likely to shake his head at the boundless indifference of these people who drag brand-new objects, precious clothing, fresh provisions and valuable items through thick mud, or abandon them to their swift destruction by

children and dogs....

Expensive things that are given them are treasured for a few hours, out of curiosity; after that they thoughtlessly let everything deteriorate in the mud and wet. The less they own, the more comfortable they can travel, and what is ruined they occasionally replace. Hence, they are completely indifferent to any material

possessions.”²⁹

The Tasaday of the Philippines, far from being dazzled by the technological marvels shown to them, expressed a sceptical attitude. They rejected the fabrics, the baskets and the bows that were offered to them, although they did accept the machetes that made it easier for them to cut

down palm trees. They accepted only things that would increase their efficiency without contravening their customs. When a group of Tasaday was offered a flashlight, they refused to accept it: you cannot use it to start a fire, they said. When they were told that it was for seeing at night, they laughed and pointed out that they sleep at night. They call the tape

recorder “the man-made object that steals your voice”; they viewed it with neither fear nor animosity, but above all amusement. The provisions and tools for 24 persons kept in their common cave were as follows: three bamboo sections full of water, three stone axes. They accepted the cigarette lighters that spared them the trouble of rubbing two sticks together over dry

tinder to light their fires. They learned how to make traps to catch animals. But when an attempt was made to explain agriculture to them, they were surprised by such proposals and responded that they always had more than enough to eat. If there wasn't enough, the children get first priority to eat what is available. Their supreme pleasure seems to be the feeling of the rain streaming

down over their bodies.

Thus, our savages are indeed poor, but content with their fate. Poor; but why poor?

They do not go without anything. The natural environment provides them with the food they need and allows them to fabricate, without much effort, the objects that they so lightly abandon. They do not live in

conditions of scarcity.³⁰

As Sahlins says, their society was the first society of abundance. If they did not stockpile reserves, this is because nature represents an inexhaustible and always accessible storehouse.

Sahlins' merit resides in his attempt to apply a general materialist explanation, without getting bogged down

in questions concerning the primitive peoples' feelings of satiety and contentment.

What is the cause of the attitudes of the primitive peoples, what is their deep, underlying logic?

The wealth of the hunter-gatherer is based on his mobility. It is this mobility that allows him to combat the

tendency of “diminishing returns”, by constantly moving to new territories of subsistence. From this perspective, nomads’ need to have few possessions will be understood. The possession of numerous objects would only be a hindrance to them. The same can be said of storing reserves. Saving in this sense would not be useful, but rather, in the final instance, harmful, since it

would restrict their freedom of movement.

Objects are valued to the degree that they are easy to transport. “The Murngin have an undeveloped sense of property; this seems to be connected with their lack of interest in developing their technological equipment. These two characteristics seem to be rooted in the desire to be free from the

burdens and responsibilities of objects which would interfere with the society's itinerant existence.... The principle that determines which kind of objects will be preserved more or less permanently by their owners, is the relative ease of transportation of the article by human beings or in canoes. For the Murngin, the amount of effort required to produce each object also

contributes, in a way, to establishing the value of an object as a personal possession. It is also the case that the degree of scarcity of an object, whether in nature or in barter, also plays a part in the determination of the economic values of the Murngin; but the decisive criterion is still how easily the object can be transported, because this society has not domesticated any beasts of

burden. The metallic objects obtained through exchange, whose original source was white missionaries, are extremely rare and very highly esteemed: if they are large, however, they will be handed over to the next person they meet in the bush or cut up to be used for other purposes. The ultimate value is freedom of movement (Warner).”³¹

An explorer named Van der Post states: “The matter of presents gave us many an anxious moment. We were humiliated by the realization of how little there was we could give to the Bushmen. Almost everything seemed likely to make life more difficult for them by adding to the litter and weight of their daily round. They themselves had practically no

possessions: a loin strap, a skin blanket and a leather satchel. There was nothing that they could not assemble in one minute, wrap up in their blankets and carry on their shoulders for a journey of a thousand miles. They had no sense of possession.”³²

An explanation based on the need for mobility is very

revealing. But this need must not be viewed as an objective factor of coercion that would somehow prevent the development of a subjective sense of possession and accumulation. It only confirms a spontaneous attitude. The Tasaday, who were hardly interested at all in the acquisition of new tools, never traveled more than three kilometers beyond their permanent settlements.

The basic requirement of a functioning hunting and gathering society is a very low density of human population. Pre-Columbian America was inhabited by only a few million Indians.³³ The population of Australian Aborigines has been estimated at 300,000 persons in the 18th century. In one or another form, paleolithic

societies obey strong demographic pressures. The size of groups must be limited and they generally move from one place to another over large territories. It is in this context that one must situate the frequently encountered customs of infanticide and the elimination of the elderly. The same reasoning applies to the practices of sexual continence, and the

prevailing polyandry that is connected with female infanticide.

According to Sahlins, the same considerations of limits govern the attitude of primitive people with respect to people as well as things: “The presumption that such devices [infanticide, senilicide, etc.] are due to an inability to support more people is probably true—if

‘support’ is understood in the sense of carrying them rather than feeding them.”³⁴

Such forms of conduct are not a consequence of scarcity, but are necessary to maintain the efficacy of, and therefore the capability of providing abundance for, the group. They are the result of a whole way of life in which the real wealth is health and

the ability to live in accordance with the necessary activities for the group's subsistence.

That one must be left behind, or killed, when one can no longer meet these requirements, is obvious.

This harshness with respect to the useless does not proceed from the egoism of those who have power.

Numerous acts of extreme

solidarity, among hunters or with respect to the group, testify to this.

The primitive is as generous with his own life as he is with the lives of others. He is ready to risk his life, and in fact he risks it every day so that the group can survive. For the individual in bourgeois society, and first of all for the proletarian himself, certain practices of

the primitives seem to be terrible barbarisms. They prefer to relegate their helpless elderly to the nursing home rather than abandon them to snow and death like the Eskimos. This is because, for him, life is a good thing. The supreme good! He is all the more interested in it to the degree that he is incapable of living it, to the degree that it escapes him. From in front of

his refrigerator he looks with horror on the cannibals, without seeing that he is himself being devoured by the anthropophagic economy.

From Hunting and Gathering to Agriculture

If these groups of hunter-gatherers were truly the first societies of abundance, why didn't we stay that way? Because humanity took the

road of agriculture and class division? Because it had to wait for thousands of years to “restore (although in a higher form) the liberty, equality and fraternity of the ancient *gentes*? (Morgan)”.³⁵

First of all, humanity does not choose to take one road or another. History is not made by reason. The explanation based on a kind

of profound tendency towards progress and innovation is unsustainable. Then there is the “Marxist” explanation that employs the concept of the “surplus”. Progress with respect to the division of labor and productivity entails the appearance of a surplus: the production of more goods than are strictly necessary for those who create them. This surplus production becomes

an incentive and the social division of labor bears, in germinal form, class division. A relative abundance is therefore necessary, a precondition, for the rise of classes.

According to this perspective, there can be no doubt that our hunters, having acquired a little leisure, some time to reflect and to make new, more

sophisticated tools, will have developed agriculture, which makes possible a more intensive exploitation of the environment and therefore a higher productivity. Once this point is reached, technical improvements fostered and reinforced the class domination that arose as a result of these developments. All that was necessary was to wait for the moment when the usurped

wealth will be so vast that it can be enjoyed in common.

Unfortunately for these thinkers, and fortunately for the savages, the latter do not lack food, and they are even less in need of leisure. They do not take advantage of their free time, however, to accumulate a surplus, to improve their technical knowledge or to read Muscovite handbooks on the

materialist conception of
history.³⁶

The transition to agriculture can only be explained by a defect of the paleolithic era, by the product of its contradictions or by the impetuous development of the productive forces that caused an upheaval in the relations of production. It did not take place due to certain

discoveries or thanks to the revelations of those passengers on UFOs that are so common in the explanations of Invariance.³⁷ Hunter-gatherers currently exist alongside agricultural populations, without any desire to appropriate their savoir-faire; although, in certain circumstances they do feel a somewhat stronger temptation to help

themselves to their harvests
or their cattle!

The abandonment of hunting
and gathering as the sole
resource of livelihood, has
depended on fortuitous
causes: climatic variations,
diminution of the yield of
hunting, demographic
growth, a forced restriction
of the hunting territory....

But was the inception of

agriculture due to a fortuitous event? Is it an unimportant event itself? Obviously not. If the conditions that drove this or that group towards farming or herding are fortuitous, this is only because chance, which is in this case the road of necessity, allows the capacities of the species to undergo further elaboration, to affirm themselves and to triumph. The problem is not

one of origins, it is one of the immediate conditions that have spurred such a break with the past; a break that was not perceived as a break. From the moment when such capacities existed, when the necessary knowledge arose from the former conditions of existence themselves, it was unavoidable that over the course of thousands of years, and among thousands of human groups, the step to

agriculture would be taken. The problem lies in understanding why it has subsisted and triumphed. It is conceivable that this is not a question of the superiority of one way of life over another, but of relations of force.

Everything cannot be reduced to the opposition between hunting and agriculture. The transition was not necessarily abrupt. The first forms of

agriculture were extensive and were not necessarily incompatible with a nomadic lifestyle. Gathering is not that far removed from slash and burn agriculture. For a long time in the history of humanity, hunting and gathering remained an important factor of subsistence for farming communities: they constituted, in the case of poor harvests,

complementary or
emergency procedures.

Agriculture and the Rise of Classes

For millions of years, the
hominids, pithecanthropoids,
and Neanderthals pursued a
hunting and gathering
lifestyle with rudimentary
tools of a kind that are still
used by our Tasaday
“contemporaries”. The first

traces of the domestication of fire date from about 700,000 years ago. The transition to agriculture was quite recent—a few thousand years—and is therefore closely connected with the capacities of the species, homo sapiens (which appeared about 40,000 years ago, at the beginning of the Upper Paleolithic era), which is today the only human species, since the

destruction-absorption of the Neanderthals.

Agriculture bore the seed of a future development that would have been absolutely impossible on the basis of hunting and gathering. It implied the possibility and the necessity of storing reserves, of exercising foresight.... It favors a settled way of life that allows for a great deal of stability in

social relations; it made a departure from “dilletantism” possible.

Why did agricultural societies prevail over hunter-gatherer societies? First, we shall say that this took a long time. It was not the primitive farmers who posed a real threat to the hunter-gatherers. It was the ancient imperialist class societies that destroyed them or marginalized them

and, a few centuries ago, capitalism put the finishing touches on this process.

Agriculture makes possible a more intensive exploitation of the environment, and therefore not a higher productivity per person, but a larger number of persons on the same territory, and the constitution of larger and more stable social units. The fact that agriculture made

possible the real appearance of a durable, storable and transportable product engendered the appearance of exploiters. This was also favored by the division that tended to be established between the farmer—who automatically ceases to be a warrior like the hunter—and those who were to concern themselves with pillaging, or “defending” him.

The relation between the nature of what is produced and the development of class societies is not without importance. Cereals were the pillars of the great empires: wheat in the Mediterranean basin, rice in China, corn in the Inca empire. The Inca empire attempted to replace the cultivation of potatoes with that of corn, even in regions that were more suited to potatoes. This function of

cereal grains is linked in part to the fact that they are measurable, storable ... and in part to the methods and sophisticated agricultural infrastructure they require.

The defeat of the hunter-gatherers was inevitable. It corresponds to the victory of the development of the productive forces and the power of the species. But this determinism is not a

determinism that is inherent to society; it does not correspond to any immediate advantage.

History and the social forms that succeed one another cannot be explained only by a spontaneous tendency to increase the productivity of labor on the basis of the internal divisions of society. As Marx wrote, labor is itself an elaborate historical

product: “Labor seems like a very simple category ... however ... labor is a category that is as modern as the social relations that gave rise to this simple abstraction” (*Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 1858-1859). Man’s relation to his environment cannot, any more than his relation to the development of history, be reduced to labor, to the development of

its productivity and to that tendency towards a material well-being that is manifested by the increase of a surplus that is, unfortunately, confiscated. This is a view that is derived from the reality of capitalism and is projected upon a previous epoch.

From One Communism to Another

The essay by Sahlins, which has the merit of not restricting its investigations to the experiential and emotional side of reality, in its concept of the “savage” for whom labor has no reality, shows that the wealth of the primitive peoples is not the result, the crowning achievement, of their “productive” activity. What determines the productivity of the hunting and gathering

lifestyle, or the “labor” of the primitive peoples, is the general relation that they maintain with their environment: mobility, dispersion, social cohesion, demographic control. The historian T. Jacob, who was present with the archeological team that discovered the pithecanthropus in Java, after having mentioned the possibility that the

pithecanthropus might have prohibited incest and thereby reinforced social cohesion, writes: "... it is possible that since the Pleistocene the families³⁸ of pithecanthropus had voluntarily practiced 'family planning' by way of infanticide and the killing of the elderly in order to resolve their economic problems. This hypothesis must be considered, even if we prefer

to think that we have ourselves invented, in the 20th century, programs for the control of the world population.”³⁹ Such a relation of man to his environment cannot be reduced to mere use, without transformation or restoration. The Eskimos were careful not to destroy too many of the animals they hunted. Thus, when the rifle was first introduced among

them, they only killed an animal after first harpooning it. The vast and fertile North American prairie, where the bison once grazed, is the result of the age-old activities undertaken by the American Indians to increase its extent.

It cannot be claimed that the hunter has an animal-like relation to his environment. He makes and uses tools with

great skill, a skill that could be envied by many Taylorized workers and transistorized intellectuals. Above all, he has an extraordinary and loving knowledge of his environment: “This is my fatherland. My fatherland knows me”.⁴⁰ He is distinguished from the animals by certain intellectual qualities, his

capacity for conceiving an object, for making it and for representing his environment. As Elkin says, after having depicted the Australian Aborigines manufacturing their stone tools: “The objects made by the Aborigines testify to the skill of these men to realize, in a perfect form, right down to the smallest details, the models that are perfectly represented in their minds.

Their art also provides proof of this mental aptitude.... the little indigenous girls, on their own, can thus paint the watercolors they are asked to paint. This was interesting to watch. Instead of tracing on a piece of paper the various outlines of the natural object they had chosen to depict—a mountain, a valley, a road with trees—and then completing this sketch by coloring each of the parts of

the whole, the child painted the whole thing all at once, both the details as well as the colors, so that the whole painting unfolded from one side of the page to the other as if, in a way, the child was creating it, and in fact the child had it in his or her mind's eye before beginning the painting. The Aborigine, who lives on the resources offered by the land, is in direct and constant contact

with it, the aspect and the shapes of the area that surrounds him are familiar to the point that he has a ‘photographic’ knowledge of it. It is almost impossible for us to grasp this, because our artificial conditions of life are opposed to this way of perceiving things.”⁴¹

It is true that representation can be the enemy of the

imagination, and certainly the enemy of the trial and error approach and therefore of experimentation, but it is very far removed from the animal in this world in which a capacity for abstraction is truly exercised that is also manifested in a mythology and various complicated systems of kinship. This mode of existence, this intellectual/sensory relation with the environment, in fact

surpasses technical skill. It is this same mode of existence that is the basis of the power of the hunter and allows him to stay alive.

Can one speak of primitive communism? Some have opposed the term, afraid that confusion might arise between a past and a future that are very different. The existence of common property, and the primal

group marriage that Engels found so enthralling, have been cast in doubt.

Exploitative relations have been discovered between the old and the young, and between first-born and later offspring, in certain primitive agrarian societies; although they are not class societies, are they communist?

One cannot be a purist and

look for absolute borders separating communist societies and societies based on exploitation. One will soon find more or less well-established, more or less permanent, relations of exploitation and domination. Does the cannibal exploit the person he eats, by consuming the “labor” accumulated in the fat of his feast? Is it “good surplus value?” Likewise, in the forms of

circulation of goods that prevail among primitive peoples, one can find the origin of exchange and even embryonic forms of money. This does not mean, however, that they are necessarily the forms that have historically given rise to the commodity economy, any more than modern industry developed from Incan textile factories.

So, what about common

property, and group marriage? They are myths. A kind of zero point of private property and the family. An undifferentiated state that preceded differentiation, the original nature before civilization.

Communism does not mean common property as opposed to private property, but the

abolition of property. And this abolition by no means signifies a state of undifferentiated relations in which everything belongs indiscriminately to everyone. And this applies to modern communism as well as to the communism of the past. Among hunter-gatherers, the rules of sharing, of the distribution of the yield of the hunt, are strict; they are not left to chance. They are

based on kinship relations and sometimes even forbid the hunters to eat the animals they have themselves killed. And the same is true of the rules that prohibit or encourage certain sexual combinations.⁴²

The communism of the future will discover, beyond labor and production, the universal relation of the

primitive peoples with their environment. It will leave behind the stage of *homo faber*, the man who manufactures things.

The abundance of primitive humanity was based on the preservation of a low population density. Small human groups used their environment without profoundly transforming it. Future humanity will be

numerous and technically efficient. But, unencumbered by competition and the conflicts that currently afflict and motivate it, it will not comprise a multitude of separate productive processes, which will be transformed by an uncontrolled, unforeseen and calamitous evolution. Each particular transformation will be conducted in accordance with a global evolution and

equilibrium.

It will not be so much a matter of production, as of participating in the improvement and enrichment of the human environment.

Each individual will participate in efforts and enjoyments without wanting, and without needing, to monopolize any part of the common patrimony. He will be able to lead a nomadic

existence because he will feel at home everywhere. He will lose the sense of ownership, he will not be attached to objects, because he will not need to fear that there will be a shortage of them; he will therefore be exempt from corporeal and spiritual worries. One cannot be free, of course, unencumbered and rich in desires and possibilities, without a certain degree of a personal

lack of possessions.

Unfortunate is the bourgeois that bears his wealth like a shell on his back. And even more unfortunate is the proletarian who possesses neither an airplane nor a yacht to transport him and his *penates*.⁴³

It is not a matter of confusing the past with the future. A return to the paleolithic is

impossible, if one excludes the hypothesis of a liquidation of almost all of humanity and civilization in a nuclear war. Nor is such a return desirable. The customs of the hunter-gatherer societies might seem cruel to us; their living conditions, hardly comfortable; what truly distinguishes that epoch, however, from the aspirations that produced the modern world, is its limited

character. Hunters content themselves with what they have and they are contented with little. The possibilities are reduced, the horizon is narrowed, the concerns materialistic. This way of life is somewhat dull. All the potlatches, all the feasts, all the sexual extravagances, are largely the products of the explorers' imaginations: priests, intellectuals, and traders, who, having few

frameworks for comparison,
quickly generate illusions.

The sexual life of the
Eskimos actually seems
rather prudent and modest,
even if some of them had to
crack open the skull of
priests who did not want to
do them the courtesy of
having sex with their wives.

The transition to agriculture,
to class societies, to
capitalism, has been the via

dolorosa along which the possibilities of the species have developed; the dehumanization of labor has been the via dolorosa leading to a truly human kind of activity. Now is the time to leave prehistory behind us.

“There is no Indian so wretched as not to retain under his hut of bark a lofty

idea of his personal worth; he considers the cares of industry and labor as degrading occupations; he compares the husbandman to the ox which traces the furrow; and even in our most ingenious handicraft, he can see nothing but the labor of slaves. Not that he is devoid of admiration for the power and intellectual greatness of the whites; but although the result of our efforts surprises

him, he contemns the means by which we obtain it; and while he acknowledges our ascendancy, he still believes in his superiority.” Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, tr. Henry Reeve (1840).

“I beg thee now to believe that, all miserable as we seem in thy eyes, we consider

ourselves nevertheless much happier than thou, in this that we are very content with the little that we have.... Thou deceivest thyselfes greatly if thou thinkest to persuade us that thy country is better than ours. For if France, as thou sayest, is a little terrestrial paradise, art thou sensible to leave it? And why abandon wives, children, relatives and friends? Why risk thy life and thy property every year?

And why venture thyself with
such risk in any season
whatsoever, to the storms and
tempests of the sea in order
to come to a strange and
barbarous country which thou
considerest the poorest and
the least fortunate of the
world. Besides, since we are
wholly convinced of the
contrary, we scarcely take the
trouble to go to France
because we fear with good
reason, lest we find little

satisfaction there, seeing in our own experience that those who are natives thereof leave it every year in order to enrich themselves on our shores. We believe, further, that you are also incomparably poorer than we, and that you are only simple journeymen, valets, servants, and slaves, all masters and Grand Captains though you may appear, seeing that you glory in our

old rags, and in our miserable suits of beaver which can no longer be of use to us, and that you find among us in the fishery for cod which you make in these parts, the wherewithal to comfort your misery and the poverty which oppress you. As to us, we find all our riches and all our conveniences among ourselves, without trouble, without exposing our lives to the dangers in which you find

yourselves constantly
through your long voyages.
And whilst feeling
compassion for you in the
sweetness of our repose, we
wonder at the anxieties and
cares which you give
yourselves, night and day, in
order to load your ships. We
see also that all your people
live, as a rule, only upon cod
which you catch among us. It
is everlastingly nothing but
cod—cod in the morning, cod

at midday, cod at evening,
and always cod, until things
come to such a pass that if
you wish some good morsels
it is at our expense; and you
are obliged to have recourse
to the Indians, whom you
despise so much, and to beg
them to go a-hunting that you
may be regaled. Now tell me
this one little thing, if thou
has any sense, which of these
two is the wisest and
happiest: he who labors

without ceasing and only obtains ... with great trouble, enough to live on, or he who rests in comfort and finds all that he needs in the pleasure of hunting and fishing.” T. C. McLuhan, ed., *Touch the Earth: A Self-Portrait of Indian Existence*, Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, New York, 1971, pp. 48-49. Original source: Father Chrestien LeClercq, *New Relation of Gaspesia, with*

*the Customs and Religion of
the Gaspesian Indians,*
translated and edited by
William F. Ganong, The
Champlain Society, Toronto,
1910, pp. 104-106.

“But the worst lapse of this
kind is the shortage of
research on the primitive
period, or Eden. There are
masses of archeological

materials but no social archeology. They want to go back 14,000 years based on inscriptions, on the zodiac of Denderah, etc. Yes, let them go back only 5,000 years, to the first three centuries of the human race, before the flood; and if they manage to discover the nature of the domestic and social order of that time, the way will be open to the most beautiful of mysteries, distribution by

contrasted series.” Charles Fourier, “Theory of Universal Unity”.

“We have seen: a social revolution possesses a total point of view because – even if it is confined to only one factory district – it represents a protest by man against a dehumanized life, because it proceeds from the point of

view of the particular, real individual, because the community against whose separation from himself the individual is reacting, is the true community of man, human nature.” Karl Marx, “Critical Notes on the Article: ‘The King of Prussia and Social Reform.’ By a Prussian.” (1844)

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Source of the Spanish translation: <http://gci-icg.org/spanish/comunismo45>

Notes

[←1]

As Charles Fourier said, we know absolutely nothing about the primitive era, or Eden, and when some aspect of it is studied, what is undertaken is “material archeology”, rather than “social archeology”.

[←2]

The translation of this text was an extremely difficult project.

[←3]

As we said in our Introduction to this text it does not seem correct to us to say that “primitive peoples still exist ...” because in reality the worldwide capitalist mode of production has for centuries condemned and subsumed in various ways all such societies despite the fact that they

may retain this or that appearance of primitive life and of the primitive community. This does not, however, by any means invalidate what follows, but to the contrary endows it with even more force: despite all the destructive work exercised by capital for centuries, the societies in question still preserve certain characteristics

(ever fewer, since even in the brief period since this text was written [1977] the destruction of what remained of the “primitive” way of life has been more brutal than ever) by virtue of which one may “read” a totally different past from the one that is customarily presented by all the supporters of progress. Of course, the

most plentiful elements that can still be found that reflect that primitive lifestyle are to be found in those societies which have remained the most isolated from civilization; and despite this isolation it must always be considered as relative. It is precisely these societies from which the authors of this

text derived most of
their information.
[Editorial Note of
Comunismo.]

[←4]

We think it would be more correct to use the term, hunter-gatherers, instead of hunting peoples, because it more nearly approximates the reality of the primitive peoples among whom the activity of searching for resources is not limited to hunting but is also based above all on gathering, both of plants

and animals. Currently, only the most archaic and conservative historiography still uses the term hunter to refer to the primitive peoples of the paleolithic era. Since we are not authorized to make changes in the content of the text we have in every instance maintained the original expression, “hunters”,

which is why we ask the reader to keep this warning in mind every time this expression appears. [Editorial Note of *Comunismo*.]

[←5]

Since this text was written [1977] several other communities have been discovered that are certainly more primitive but this does not by any means invalidate what is written here. [Editorial Note of *Comunismo*.]

[←6]

There is generally an overestimation of the role of hunting as a means of subsistence in primitive societies. The fact that a community does not use certain tools or techniques does not mean that they are unacquainted with them but merely that they are not interested in them, due to an evaluation of

how easy they are to
move, the effort needed
to use them, the yield
obtained from their use
... and the risks implied
by an activity like
hunting. [Editorial Note
of *Comunismo*.]

[←7]

De Clozet, *Le Bonheur en plus*, 1973. [Note of La Guerre Sociale.]

[←8]

Stern, No. 45, October
1972. [Note of La
Guerre Sociale.]

[←9]

We understand that this commodified and “environmentalist” way of obscuring communism must be understood in the strict meaning of the word obscure, which performs not just the task of concealing, but also of proposing an active and counterrevolutionary alternative project. The

fashionable resort to nature and support for the primitives, as the simplistic antithesis to progress, is not only not a negation of progress, but to the contrary forms a part of capitalist progress itself.

[Editorial Note of *Comunismo.*]

[←10]

We cannot understand this sentence that we placed in quotation marks and that appears both in the original as well as in our translation; we think there must be some mistake here or that what the authors really wanted to say was “what does not matter to us” in the sense of “what

currently matters to the individual of bourgeois society”; because this compulsion to see poverty—which in reality is a product of class society—in primitives is a typical compulsion of bourgeois society and particularly of its anthropologists. [Editorial Note of *Comunismo.*]

[←11]

For us it is clear that it makes no sense to speak of work in the context of primitive society where this torture has not been institutionalized and transformed into an everyday fact; nor does it make much sense to speak of play as opposed to work in this context. Later in the text, the word “leisure” will

appear, which is also defined in opposition to work; in the dictionary, it is defined as “cessation of work”, “diversion or recreational activity ... rest from other activities” and therefore it is a sub-product of work (despite its opposition to work). Therefore it, too, like work, is a historical

product rather than an eternal reality. The same may be said of other words that implicitly refer to the contrast “work/leisure” and which precisely in these societies do not exist, such as, for example, “ludic activity”. We might be tempted to replace all these words with “activity” or “human activity”, which

would more faithfully
express the reality of the
primitive peoples, but in
this way the text would
become
incomprehensible
because what the
authors are trying to do
is precisely to explain
that these separated and
opposed activities do
not make sense outside
of societies based on
exploitation and it is

therefore necessary to preserve these expressions in order to reveal that this opposition does not exist in primitive society, just as the polar opposites, work and leisure, do not exist in primitive communism. Moreover, our current language is the product of a society based on exploitation, and in fact

on its maximum elaboration, and we have no other language to express ourselves. This is why we are obliged to preserve this incorrect terminology, as were the authors (in the light of this and other texts it is obvious that they have a perfectly clear grasp of this problem), in order to explain precisely that this opposition between

work and leisure has no meaning in a society where exploitation does not exist. It seems to us imperative to have made this clarification once and for all so that the reader can have a clear grasp of the problem whenever this servile terminology appears, so that it does not distort or influence the understanding of the

text's essential message.
[Editorial Note of
Comunismo.]

[←12]

It seems to us that this exultation in the hunt as an activity in the quest for food is excessive and is due to the quoted author's particular perception. It should also be pointed out that, as is logical, the primitive communists risked their lives as seldom as possible and that hunting is not an

individual act (of the male), as one might imagine on the basis of the limited horizon of contemporary man in the light of which one might interpret this passage, but to the contrary is a collective and carefully planned activity in which strategies of collective action are implemented in which the whole

community participates (the elderly, children, women ...), where the lion is approached and surrounded until killing him does not pose great risks because he is already tired and vanquished and in some cases almost dead. [Editorial Note of *Comunismo.*]

[←13]

Pierre Clastres,
*Croniques des Indiens
Guayaki* [Chronicles of
the Guayaki Indians],
Plon. [Note of La Guerre
Sociale.]

[←14]

Marshall Sahlins, “The Original Affluent Society”, available online (January 2014) at:

<http://www.primitivism.com/affluent.htm>. Later, Sahlins published the book, *Stone Age Economics*, Routledge, New York, 1974, which includes a revised version of this essay.

The French edition used by the authors is apparently somewhat different from the original English editions, but only with respect to the arrangement of the sentences and not with respect to the meaning of the text. This English translation uses the version published as Chapter One of *Stone*

Age Economics (Aldine-Atherton Inc., Chicago, 1972, available online in June 2017 at:

<http://libcom.org/files/S&%20Stone%20Age%20E>
[Note of the American Translator.]

[←15]

As we have already pointed out in previous editorial notes, it is extremely difficult to express the reality of these societies with the limited categories of the world of the commodity that we suffer under and some of the authors quoted are not even aware of this problem, and that is why they see

everything in terms of work-leisure, of work time-leisure time, which are all categories that pertain to a society of exploited and exploiters. This lack of awareness leads to absurdities like the assertion that “the work pattern [is] erratic”, when what the author should emphasize is that, in fact (except at the levels in which one

or another society is
subsumed in capital),
work does not exist at
all. [Editorial Note of
Comunismo.]

[←16]

Here we may once again confirm, against all mainstream thought in today's society, that even in this remnant of primitive communism, there is no work (or leisure). We shall also take this opportunity to call attention to the ideological limitations of the person who wrote this account, who still

continues to speak of
work and play.

[Editorial Note of
Comunismo.]

[←17]

It is impossible to insert a note every time the author who is quoted uses a totally ideological concept by projecting his own perspective as a man of commodity society to “understand” a society that is not a commodity society. [Editorial Note of *Comunismo*.]

[←18]

Quoted by Sahlins [Note of La Guerre Sociale]. American translator's note: all subsequent quotations from Sahlins are taken from the book, *Stone Age Economics*, cited above, or from the separate edition of the essay on "The Original Affluent Society", also referred to above. It would appear that the

French edition of Sahlins' text was re-edited or re-arranged for publication. The overall meaning is preserved, however, with some minor variations.

[←19]

Quoted by Sahlins [Note
of *La Guerre Sociale*].

[←20]

Here is the original text of the passage that follows: “... pour bien jouyr de ce leur appanage, nos sylvivoles s’en vont sur les lieux d’iceluy avec le plaisir de peregrination et de promenade, a quoy facilement faire ils ont l’engin et la grande commodite des canots qui sont petits esquifs

... si vite a l'aviron qu'a
votre bel-aise de bon
temps vous ferez en un
jour les trente, et
quarante lieues: on ne
voit guiers ces Sauvages
postillonner ainsi: leurs
journees ne sont tout
que beau passé-temps.
Ils n'ont jamais haste.
Bien divers de nous, qui
ne faurions jamais rien
faire sans presse et
opresse." [Editorial

Note of *Comunismo.*]

[←21]

Quoted by Sahlins [Note
of *La Guerre Sociale*].

A. P. Elkin, *Les aborigenes australiens*, Gallimard. Quoted by Sahlins [Note of La Guerre Sociale].

[Original title: *The Australian Aborigines: How to Understand Them*, Angus & Robertson, 1954.

Translated from the Spanish translation—note of the American

translator.]

[←23]

Ibid. [Translated from
the Spanish translation
—note of the American
translator.]

[←24]

Quoted by Sahlins [Note
of La Guerre Sociale]

The text quoted is from
Sir George Grey,

*Journals of Two
Expeditions of
Discovery in North-West
and Western Australia,
During the Years 1837,
38, and 39, Volume II,
T. and W. Boone,
London, 1841, pp. 259-
263 [American*

translator's
supplemental note].

[←25]

See footnote 20 above.
Here is the original
French text: "... Le mal
est qu'il font trop
souvent des festins dans
la famine que nous
avons enduree; si mon
hoste prenoit deux trios
et quatre castors, tout
aussi tost fut il jour, fut
il nuit on en faisoit
festin a tous les
Sauvages voisins; et si

eux avoient pris quelque chose, ils en faisoient de mesme a mesme temps: si que sortant d'un festin vous allez a un autre, et parfois encore a un troisieme et un quatrieme. Je leur disoios qu'ils ne faisoient pas bien, et qu'il valoit mieux reserver ces festins aux jours suivants et que ce faisant nous ne serions

pas tant presses de faim:
ils se moquoient de
moy; demain (desoient
ils) nous ferons encore
festin de ce que nous
prendrons: ouy, mais le
plus souvent, ils ne
prenoient que du froid et
du vent....” “...Je les
voyais, dans leurs peins
dans leurs travaux
souffrir avec
allegresse.... Je me suis
trouve avec eux en des

dangers de grandement souffrir; ils me disoient nous ferons quelque fois deux jours, quelques fois trios sans manger, faute de vivre prends courage. Chihine, aye l'ame dure, resiste a la peine et au travail, garder toy de la tristesse, autrement tu seras malade; regarde que nous ne laissons pas de rire, quoyque nous

mangions peu....”

[←26]

Quoted by Sahlins [Note
of *La Guerre Sociale*].

[←27]

Gessain, *Ammassalik ou
la civilisation
obligatoire*. [Note of La
Guerre Sociale.]

[←28]

The two sentences in brackets are not included in the English editions of the Sahlins texts used for this English translation, and were translated from the Spanish translation [American translator's note].

[←29]

Quoted by Sahlins, *op. cit.* [Note of La Guerre Sociale.]

[←30]

Here we can see that the comrades of La Guerre Sociale are criticizing the bourgeois notion that sees nothing but poverty and scarcity in primitive peoples [Editorial Note of *Comunismo.*]

[←31]

Quoted by Sahlins, *op. cit.* [Note of La Guerre Sociale]. This passage appears in a an extremely truncated and summarized form in the edition of Sahlins' *Stone Age Economics* that was used for this English translation, and was therefore translated from the Spanish translation, which was

presumably based on a French edition that contained a more extensive quotation from Warner's text [American translator's supplemental note].

[←32]

Quoted by Sahlins, *op. cit.* [Note of La Guerre Sociale]

This has been contested by recent scholarship published since this text was written. See, for example: David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1992, in which the author argues that the population of the pre-

Columbian Americas was over 100 million people; and also, Charles Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2005, in which the author estimates the population of the Americas before 1492 to have been between 90 and 112 million people [American translator's

note].

[←34]

Sahlins, *op. cit.* [Note of
La Guerre Sociale]

[←35]

Quoted by Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. [Note of La Guerre Sociale]

[←36]

This text was obviously written at a time when the world bourgeoisie still upheld the myth of the “socialist countries” to designate the countries of Eastern Europe, and Marxism-Leninism (i.e., Stalinism) as a worldview and a view of history that was still robust. [Editorial Note

of *Comunismo.*]

[←37]

Invariance, which is so bitterly criticized here by La Guerre Sociale for its modernist “discoveries” that characterized its last stages, was a group of militants who in Europe (mainly in France and Italy) engaged in a very interesting activity by publishing the historical materials of the so-

called “Italian communist left”, as well as other communist groups (KAPD, Miasnikov’s group) that opposed the Leninist degeneration of the Third International. Camatte, who was the leading figure in Invariance, also made some interesting militant contributions to the critique of various

“Marxist” ideologies
and interpretations in a
particularly desolate
period, at the
international level, for
programmatic
theoretical affirmation.
[Editorial Note of
Comunismo.]

[←38]

Here, too, a term that currently has a precise definition is used and applied to a completely different reality. It is obvious that the author is not referring here to the “family” as understood under the rule of the bourgeoisie, but to a group of humans that share a living space (a group

which in many cases varies and changes its parameters). [Editorial Note of *Comunismo*.]

[←39]

T. Jacob, *L'Homme de Java*, “L'Homme de Java”, in *La Recherche*, No. 62, December 1975.

[Note of La Guerre Sociale]

[←40]

Quoted by Gessain.

[Note of La Guerre
Sociale]

[←41]

Quoted by Gessain.

[Note of La Guerre
Sociale]

[←42]

In the next issue of our journal we will publish an article on distribution and “exchange” in primitive societies that will criticize the classical authors like Malinowski, Mauss, Levi-Strauss, etc. [Note of La Guerre Sociale]

[←43]

Household gods of the
ancient Romans
[American translator's
note].