

Marshall D Sahlins, 1960, *The Origin of Society*.
In (ed) Peter B Hammond, *Physical Anthropology and Archaeology* (1964), The Macmillan Company, New York, USA. pp 59-65

Despite apparent superficial similarities between animal and human societies, the difference between them is profound: “Human social life is culturally, not biologically, determined.” The triumph of intellect over instinct — of altruism over individualism — was demonstrably basic to our evolution.

5. The Origin of Society¹

This discussion of the early phases of human society considers events that occurred a million years ago, in places not specifically determined, under circumstances known only by informed speculation. It will therefore be an exercise in inference, not in observation. This means juxtaposing the social life of man’s closest relations — monkeys and apes — on the one side, with the organization of known primitive societies on the other. The gap that remains is then bridged by the mind. No living primate can be directly equated with man’s actual simian ancestor, and no contemporary primitive people is identical with our cultural ancestors. In both instances only generalized social traits — not particular, specialized ones — can be selected for historical comparison. On the primate side one must rely primarily on the few field reports of free-ranging groups and on certain pioneer studies of captive animals. These have covered the anthropoid apes, especially the gibbon and the chimpanzee (which are more closely related to man) as well as the New and Old World monkeys. On the human side the nearest contemporary approximations to the original cultural condition are societies of hunters and gatherers, pre-agricultural peoples exacting a meager livelihood from wild food resources. This cultural order dominated the Old Stone Age (one million to 10,000 or 15,000 years ago). Confidence

in the comparative procedure which equates modern hunters and gatherers with the actual protagonists of the Stone Age is fortified by the remarkable social congruence observed among these peoples, even though they are historically as separated from one another as the Stone Age is distant from modern times. They include the Australian aborigines, the Bushmen of South Africa, the Andaman Islanders, the Shoshoni of the American Great Basin, the Eskimo, and Pygmy groups in Africa, Malaya and the Philip pines.

Comparison of primate sociology with the findings of anthropological research immediately suggests a startling conclusion: The way people act, and probably have always acted, is not the expression of inherent human nature. There is a quantum difference, at points a complete opposition, between even the most rudimentary human society and the most advanced subhuman primate one. The discontinuity implies that the emergence of human society required some suppression, rather than a direct expression, of man’s primate nature. Human social life is culturally, not biologically, determined.

This is not to slander the poor apes, to suggest that their social behavior is necessarily innate and unlearned. Yet it is clearly the product of their nature, of animal needs and reactions, physiological processes and psychological responses.

¹ MARSHALL D. SAHLINS, “The Origin of Society,” in *Scientific American*, 203, No. 3 (1960), pp. 76-86. Reprinted with permission of the author and the publisher. Copyright © 1960 by Scientific American, Inc. All rights reserved. Dr. Sahlins is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Michigan.

Their social life therefore varies directly with the organic constitution of the individual and the horde. In an unchanging environment the social characteristics of a given subhuman primate species are unchanging, unless or until the species is organically transformed. The same cannot be said about human social arrangements. We are all one species, but our social orders grow and diversify, even within a constant environment, and they do so quite apart from the minor biological (racial) differences that develop among different peoples.

This liberation of human society from direct biological control was its great evolutionary strength. Culture saved man in his earliest days, clothed him, fed him and comforted him. In these times it has become possible to pile form on form in great social edifices that undertake to secure the survival of millions of people. Yet the remarkable aspect of culture's usurpation of the evolutionary task from biology was that in so doing it was forced to oppose man's primate nature on many fronts and to subdue it. It is an extraordinary fact that primate urges often become not the secure foundation of human social life, but a source of weakness in it.

The decisive battle between early culture and human nature must have been waged on the field of primate sexuality. The powerful social magnet of sex was the major impetus to subhuman primate sociability. This has long been recognized. But it was the British anatomist Sir Solly Zuckerman — whose attention to the matter developed from observation of the almost depraved behavior of baboons in zoos — who made sexuality the key issue of primate sociology. Subhuman primates are prepared to mate at all seasons, and although females show heightened receptivity midway through the menstrual cycle, they are often capable of sexual activity at other times.

Most significantly for the assessment of its historic role, year-round sex in higher primates is associated with year-round heterosexual social life. Among other mammals sexual activity, and likewise heterosexual society, is frequently confined to a comparatively brief breeding season.

Of course other important social activities go on in the subhuman primate horde. Group existence confers advantages, such as defense against predation, which transcend the gratification of erotic urges. In the evolutionary perspective the intense, long-term sexuality of the primate individual is the historic complement of the advantages of horde life. Nor, in considering subhuman primate sexuality, should attention be confined to coitus. The evidence grows that certain Old World monkeys—the closely related baboon, rhesus monkey and Japanese monkey — do have seasonal declines in breeding without cessation of horde life. But sex enters into subhuman primate social relations in a variety of forms, and heterosexual copulation is only one of them. Sexual mounting is involved in the establishment of dominance, which grows out of chronic competition for food, mates, and other desirable objects. It is a common element of youthful play; indeed, the female higher primate is unique among female mammals in displaying the adult sexual pattern prior to puberty. The familiar primate trait of mutual grooming — the pulling and licking out of parasites and other objects from the coat of another animal — often appears to be a secondary sexual activity. Sex is more than a force of attraction between adult males and females; it also operates among the young and between individuals of the same sex. Promiscuity is not an accurate term for it; it is indiscriminate. And while we might deem some of the forms perversions, to a monkey or an ape they are all just sociable.

Sex is not an unmitigated social blessing for primates. Competition over partners, for example, can lead to vicious, even fatal, strife. It was this side of primate sexuality that forced early culture to curb and repress it. The emerging human primate, in a life-and-death economic struggle with nature, could not afford the luxury of a social struggle. Co-operation, not competition, was essential. Culture thus brought primate sexuality under control. More than that, sex was made subject to regulations, such as the incest tabu, which effectively enlisted it in the service of co-operative kin relations. Among subhuman primates sex had organized society; the customs of hunters and gatherers testify eloquently that now society was to organize sex — in the interest of the economic adaptation of the group.

The evolution of the physiology of sex itself provided a basis for the cultural reorganization of social life. As Frank Beach of Yale University has pointed out, a progressive emancipation of sexuality from hormonal control runs through the primate order. This trend culminates in mankind, among whom sex is controlled more by the intellect — the cerebral cortex — than by glands. Thus it becomes possible to regulate sex by moral rules; to subordinate it to higher, collective ends. The consequent repression of primate sexuality in primitive as well as more developed societies has taken striking forms. In every human society sex is hedged by tabus: on time, place (the human animal alone demands privacy), on the sex and age of possible partners, on reference to sex in certain social contexts, on exposing the genitalia (particularly for females), on cohabitation during culturally important activities which range in different societies from war and ceremony to brewing beer. By way of an aside, it is notable that the repression of sex in favor of other ends is a battle which, while won for the spe-

-cies, is still joined in every individual to this day. In Sigmund Freud's famous allegory, the conflict between the self-seeking, sexually inclined id and the socially conscious superego re-enacts the development of culture that occurred in the remote past.

The design of many of these tabus is obvious: the disconcerting fascination of sex and its potentially disruptive consequences had to be eliminated from vital social activities. Thus the incest tabu is a guardian of harmony and solidarity within the family — a critical matter for hunters and gatherers, for among them the family is the fundamental economic as well as social group. At the same time, the injunction on sexual relations and marriage among close relatives necessarily forces different families into alliance and thus extends kinship and mutual aid.

It has been said that kinship, with its economic aspect of co-operation, became the plan for primitive human society. "Kinship" here means a cultural form, not a biological fact. Apes are of course genetically related to each other. But apes do not and cannot name and distinguish kinsmen, and they do not use kinship as a symbolic organization of behavior. On the other hand, cultural kinship has virtually nothing to do with biological connection. No one, for example, can be absolutely certain who his father is in a genetic sense, but in all human societies fatherhood is a fundamental social status. Almost all societies adhere, implicitly or explicitly, to the dictum of the Napoleonic code in this respect: the father of the child is the husband of the mother.

Many hunters and gatherers carry kinship to an extreme that is curious to us. By a device technically known as classificatory kinship they ignore genealogical differences between collateral and lineal kin at certain points, lumping them terminologically and in social be-

-havior. Thus my father's brother may be "father" to me, and I act accordingly. Close kinship may be extended indefinitely by the same logic: My father's brother's son is my "brother," my grand father's brother is my "grandfather," his son is my "father," his son my "brother," and so on. As one observer remarked of the Australian aborigines: "It is impossible for an Australian native to have anything whatever to do with anyone who is not his relative, of one kind or another, near or distant."

The subhuman primate horde varies in size among different species, ranging from groups in the hundreds among certain Old World monkeys to the much smaller groups, often smaller than 10, characteristic of anthropoid apes. The horde may stay together all the time, or it may scatter during daytime feeding into packs of various sorts — mate groups of males and females, females with young, males alone — and come together again at night resting places. Monkeys seem inclined to scatter in this way more than apes.

There are typically more adult females than adult males within the hordes sometimes, as in the case of the howler monkey, three times as many. This may be in part due to a faster maturation rate for females. It may also reflect the elimination of some males in the course of competition for mates. These males are not necessarily killed. They may lead a solitary life outside or on the fringes of the horde, attempting all the while to attach themselves to some group and acquire sexual partners.

The progressive emancipation of sex from hormonal control in the primate order that was noted by Beach seems to be paralleled by a progressive development from promiscuous mating to the formation of exclusive, permanent heterosexual partnerships between specific animals. Among certain New World monkeys, females with their young corn-

-prise a separate pack within the horde, and only when a female is in heat does she forsake this group for males. She does not become attached to a specific male, but, wearing them out in turn, goes from one to another. The Old World rhesus horde and mate relations are similar except that a receptive female is taken over primarily by dominant males, a step in the direction of exclusiveness. In the anthropoid gibbon the trend toward exclusiveness is fully developed: the entire horde is typically composed of an adult male, a permanent female consort and their young. As yet it is not safe to state unequivocally that such progressive change runs through the entire primate order. It does appear that the higher subhuman primates presage the human family more than do the lower.

The primate horde is practically a closed social group. Each horde has a territory, and local groups of most species defend their ground (or trees) against encroachment by others of their kind. The typical relation between adjacent hordes is that of enmity, especially, it seems, if food is short. Their borders are points of social deflection, and contact between neighbors is often marked by belligerent vocal cries, if it does not erupt into fatal violence.

Territorial relations among neighboring human hunting-and-gathering bands (a term used technically to refer to the cohesive local group) offer an instructive contrast. The band territory is never exclusive. Individuals and families may shift from group to group, especially in those habitats where food resources fluctuate from year to year and from place to place. In addition, a great deal of interband hospitality and visiting is undertaken for purely social and ceremonial reasons. Although bands remain autonomous politically, a general notion of tribalism, based on similarity in lan-

-gauge and custom and on social collaboration, develops among neighboring groups. These tendencies are powerfully reinforced by kinship and the cultural regulation of sex and marriage. Among all modern survivors of the Stone Age, marriage with close relatives is forbidden, while marriage outside the band is at least preferred and sometimes morally prescribed. The kin ties thereby created become social pathways of mutual aid and solidarity connecting band to band. It does not seem unwarranted to assert that the human capacity to extend kinship was a necessary social condition for the deployment of early man over the great expanses of the planet.

Another implication of interband kinship deserves emphasis: Warfare is limited among hunters and gatherers. Indeed, many are reported to find the idea of war incomprehensible. A massive military effort would be difficult to sustain for technical and logistic reasons. But war is even further inhibited by the spread of a social relation — kinship — which in primitive society is often a synonym for “peace.” Thomas Hobbes’s famous fantasy of a war of “all against all” in the natural state could not be further from the truth. War increases in intensity, bloodiness, duration and significance for social survival through the evolution of culture, reaching its culmination in modern civilization. Paradoxically the cruel belligerence that is popularly considered the epitome of human nature reaches its zenith in the human condition most removed from the pristine. By contrast, it has been remarked of the Bushmen that “it is not in their nature to fight.”

The only permanent organization within the band is the family, and the band is a grouping of related families, on the average 20 to 50 people altogether. Bands lack true government and law; the rules of good order are synonymous with customs of proper behavior

toward kinsmen. In certain ways this system of etiquette is even more effective than law. A breach of etiquette cannot go undetected, and punishment in the form of avoidance, gossip and ridicule follows hard upon offense.

The primitive human family, unlike the subhuman primate mate group, is not based simply on sexual attraction. Sex is easily available in many band societies, both before and outside marriage, but this alone does not necessarily create or destroy the family. The incest tabu itself implies that the human family cannot be the social outcome of erotic urges. Moreover, sexual rights to a wife may even be waived in the interest of securing friendly relations with other men, as in the famous Eskimo custom of wife lending. This, incidentally, is only one cultural device among many for enlisting marriage and sex in the creation of wide social alliance. In remarkable contrast to subhuman primate unions, often created and maintained in violence, marriage is in band society a means of securing peace. Adultery and quarrels over women are not unknown among primitive peoples. But such actions are explicitly considered antisocial. Among monkeys and apes, on the other hand, comparable events create the social order.

Marriage and the family are institutions too important in primitive life to be built on the fragile, shifting foundations of “love.” The family is the decisive economic institution of society. It is to the hunter and gatherer what the manor was to feudal Europe, or the corporate factory system is to capitalism: it is the productive organization. The primary division of labor in band economy is that between men and women. The men typically hunt and make weapons; the women gather wild plants and take care of the home and children. Marriage then is an alliance between the two essential social elements of production. These fac-

-tors complement each other — the Eskimos say: “A man is the hunter his wife makes him” — and they lock their possessors in enduring marital and familial relations. Many anthropologists have testified that in the minds of the natives the ability to cook and sew or to hunt are much more important than is beauty in a prospective spouse.

The economic aspect of primitive marriage is responsible for many of its specific characteristics. For one thing, it is the normal adult state; one cannot economically afford to remain single. Hence the solitary subhuman primate male has no counterpart in the primitive band. The number of spouses is, however, limited by economic considerations among primitives. A male ape has as many mates as it can get and defend for itself; a man, no more than he can support. In fact, marriage is usually monogamous among hunters and gatherers, although there are normally no rules against polygamy. Culture, reflecting the compulsions of economics, thus dramatically altered human mating and differentiated the human family from its nearest primate analogues.

“Peck orders” of dominance and subordination are characteristic of subhuman primate social relations. Chronic competition for mates and perhaps food or other desirable objects establishes and maintains such hierarchies in every grouping of monkeys and apes. Repeated victory secures future privileges for a dominant animal; subordinates, by conditioned response, withdraw from or yield access to anything worth having. As Henry W. Nissen of the Yerkes Laboratories of Primate Biology has observed, “the bigger animal gets most of the food; the stronger male, most of the females.” In most species males tend to dominate over females, although in certain anthropoid apes, notably the chimpanzee and the gibbon, the reverse can occur. A difference in what has been called

dominance quality seems to arise between primate suborders: in New World monkeys, dominance is “tenuous”; in Old World monkeys it may become “rough” and “brutal”; in apes, while clearly apparent, it is not so violently established or sustained. In all species, however, dominance affects a variety of social activities, including play, grooming and interhorde relations as well as sex and feeding.

Compared both to subhuman primate antecedents and to subsequent cultural developments, dominance is at its nadir among primitive hunters and gatherers. Culture is the oldest “equalizer.” Among animals capable of symbolic communication, the weak can always collectively connive to overthrow the strong. On the other side, political and economic means of tyranny remain underdeveloped among hunters and gatherers.

There is some evolutionary continuity in dominance behavior from primate to primitive; among hunters and gatherers leadership, such as it is, falls to men. Yet the supremacy of men in the band as a whole does not necessarily mean the abject subordination of women in the home. Once more the weapon of articulate speech must be reckoned with; the Danish anthropologist Kaj Birket-Smith observes: “A census would certainly show a higher percentage of henpecked husbands among the Eskimos than in a civilized country (except, perhaps, the U. S.); most Eskimos have a deeply rooted respect for their wives’ tongues.” The men who lead the band are the wiser and older. They are not, however, respected for their ability to commandeer limited supplies of desired goods. On the contrary, generosity is a necessary qualification for prestige; the man who does most for the band, who sacrifices most, will be the one most loved and heeded by the rest. The test of status among hunters and gatherers is usually the reverse of that among monkeys and apes;

it is a matter of who gives away, not who takes away. A second qualification for leadership is knowledge — knowledge of ritual, tradition, game movements, terrain and the other things that control social life. This is why older men are respected. In a stable society they know more than the others, and to be “old-fashioned” is a great virtue.

Knowledge of itself breeds little power. The headmen of a band can rule only by advice, not by fiat. As a Congo Pygmy leader bluntly remarked to an anthropologist, there is just no point in giving orders, “as nobody would heed them.” The titles of reference given leaders of hunting and gathering bands speak eloquently of their powers: the Shoshoni leader is “the talker,” and his Eskimo counterpart is “he who thinks.” In a primitive band each family is a more cohesive, stronger polity than the band as a whole, and each is free to manage its own affairs. Birket-Smith said: “There is no rank or class among the Eskimos, who must therefore renounce that satisfaction, which Thackeray calls the true pleasure of life, of associating with one’s inferiors.” The same may be said of other primitive societies.

The leveling of the social order that accompanied the development of culture is related to the fundamental economic change from the selfish — literally rugged — individualism of the primate to co operative kin dealings. Monkeys and apes do not co-operate economically; monkeys cannot even be taught by humans to work together, although apes can. Nor is food ever shared except in the sense that a subordinate animal may be intimidated into handing it over to a dominant one. Among primitives, on the other hand, food sharing follows automatically from the division of labor by sex. More than that, the family economy is a pooling of goods and services — “communism in living” as a famous 19th-century anthropologist called it. Mutual aid is extended

far beyond the family. It is a demand of group survival that the successful hunter be prepared to share his spoils with the unsuccessful. “The hunter kills, other people have,” say the Yukaghir of Siberia.

In a band economy goods commonly pass from hand to hand, and the circulation gains momentum in proportion to the degree of kinship among households and the importance of the goods for survival. Food, the basic resource, must always be made available to others on pain of ostracism; the scarcer it becomes, the more readily it must be given away, and for nothing. In addition, food and other things are often shared to promote friendly relations, utilitarian considerations notwithstanding. There was a time in human affairs when the only right of property that brought honor was that of giving it away.

The economic behavior of primitives obviously does not conform to the stereotype of “economic man” by which we organize and analyze our own economy. But it does conform to a realm of economics familiar to us, so familiar that no one bothers to talk about it and it lacks an economic science: kinship-friendship economics. There is much to be learned about primitive economics here, and it would not be a mere exercise in analogy, for our kin life is the evolutionary survival of relations that once encompassed society itself.

In selective adaptation to the perils of the Stone Age, human society overcame or subordinated such primate propensities as selfishness, indiscriminate sexuality, dominance and brute competition. It substituted kinship and co-operation for conflict, placed solidarity over sex, morality over might. In its earliest days it accomplished the greatest reform in history, the overthrow of human primate nature, and thereby secured the evolutionary future of the species.