

Hunter-gatherers

Ted Trainer

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It is widely believed that in view of the mess we have got the world into in there must be something irretrievably evil built into the nature of humans. We must be basically selfish, aggressive, competitive, perverse, obsessed with power, patriarchy and domination, right?

Sorry, wrong. And the hunter gatherers show us this.

We humans today are the product of 300,000 years of surviving and thriving in the conditions they experienced. That shaped them as individuals and as cultures to have natures and ways that are remarkably admirable, sensible and foundational for utopian thinking.

The trouble is, as will be elaborated on below, is that we now do not live in their kind of conditions and society. We now live in very different circumstances, for which do not suit our nature, and this causes immense intra-personal, inter-personal, inter-group and inter-national trouble. Above all, thinking about the contradictions points to clear implications for the design of a good society, something we urgently need to work on.

Some of the following points are so foreign to the modern western mind that I doubt they would be taken seriously if presented here as just my impressions, so I have included many quotes from anthropologists.

Generalities.

First it is important to realise that many “primitive” tribes described by anthropologists have had typically severely destructive contact with nasty outsiders with what Sorenson terms “conquest mentality”. This has destroyed their original nature and culture. For example the Yanomami are often portrayed as hostile, but they have suffered a long and distressing history of such contact. Gray says,

“... for centuries.... these people had been repeatedly subjected to slave raids and genocide at the hands of truly vicious Spanish, Dutch, and Portuguese invaders.^[1] No wonder they had become a bit "fierce" themselves.”

Sorenson (2019) reports on studies of 25 societies that have not been damaged by contact.

To generalise, hunter gatherers are astoundingly nice. They are friendly, including to strangers, they are pleasant and helpful, intensely cooperative and not at all interested in competition, let alone domination and power. They delight in social activities and interaction. Their societies are intensely egalitarian and non-hierarchical. There is not only no inequality in wealth, property or power, they have strong mechanisms preventing any emergence of tall poppies.

They are non-violent, well described as “peaceful egalitarians.” “Warfare was unknown to most of these societies.” They practise egalitarian, non-hierarchical consensual decision-making. They have an “...extraordinary willingness to share everything...” They have no bosses, chiefs, authorities, let alone police, courts or prisons. Yet they have remarkable social cohesion, conformity, solidarity, harmony, and lack of conflict. They have no concept of economic advantage, wealth, property, profit, or advantage in exchange. “They did not conceive of life in terms of cost and benefit. They saw it, instead, as a playful adventure. You do things because they are fun, and you share the bounty with everyone you know, regardless of what those people have been doing.”

In several papers Gray explains that their fundamental, all-pervasive orientation to life is ... play.

“Play requires a sense of equality, and hunter-gatherers are remarkably able to retain that sense...The drive to play, therefore, requires suppression of the drive to dominate.’ It “..(infuses) essentially all of their activities with play...”

“...hunter-gatherers allowed their children, including teenagers, to play essentially from dawn to dusk. The children grew up believing that life is play and then went on to conduct essentially all of their adult tasks in a playful mood—the mood that counters the drive to dominate.”

This aligns with Bregman’s account of our species as “Homo Puppy”, primarily oriented to enjoyable, spontaneous, uncoerced playful activities engaged in with others. Humans like people and like interacting with them on mutually enjoyable tasks and exchanges. Sorenson explains how this orientation permeates all the activities of the hunter gatherer, including economic activity, house building, caring for children, and above all the raising of children.

The term “play” seems to me to be not quite the most appropriate one. Illich’s term “convivial” might be better. The ideal is where people are disposed to do what is mutually enjoyable and beneficial, and are not coerced by law or authority to behave properly or be punished. Among hunter gathers good behaviour seems to be spontaneous and automatic, not needing thought about moral or legal rights and wrong.

Equity... no inequality, poverty, hierarchy, domination or power

Sorenson says, “...forcing of others (including children) to one’s will a disruptive and unwholesome practice. It was not seen. “ “Their core value, which underlay all of the rest, was that of the equality of individuals”.

Gray says, “... nobody had more wealth than anyone else; so all material goods were shared. It meant that nobody had the right to tell others what to do; so each person made his or her own decisions. It meant that even parents didn't have the right to order their children around; hence the non-directive childrearing methods that I have

discussed in previous posts. It meant that group decisions had to be made by consensus; hence no boss, "big man," or chief.

They practise,

“...a system of "reverse dominance" that prevents anyone from assuming power over others.” In the words of anthropologist Richard Lee,

“ they were fiercely egalitarian. They would not tolerate anyone's boasting, or putting on airs, or trying to lord it over others. Their first line of defense was ridicule. If anyone—especially some young man—attempted to act better than others or failed to show proper humility in daily life, the rest of the group, especially the elders, would make fun of that person until proper humility was shown.”

One regular practice of the group that Lee studied was that of "insulting the meat." Whenever a hunter brought back a fat antelope or other prized game item to be shared with the band, the hunter had to express proper humility by talking about how skinny and worthless it was. If he failed to do that (which happened rarely), others would do it for him and make fun of him in the process. When Lee asked one of the elders of the group about this practice, the response he received was the following: "When a young man kills much meat, he comes to think of himself as a big man, and he thinks of the rest of us as his inferiors. We can't accept this.”

If a person becomes a bit bored with the situation he or she can just leave and join another band nearby. Note that they all have immense knowledge of local plants etc. and can provide for their own needs if they wish. “There are almost always less tasty food sources with some nutritional value in the neighbourhood so that starvation is rarely a prospect.”

“Work”

They don't do any. The production of necessities is not a coercive burden, something that has to be done in order to survive. It is enjoyable activity engaged in at leisure and without much in the way of rules or foremen or time schedules etc. If a house is to be built it gets built by people just joining in spontaneously and helping out. They have no concept of toil.

“The life of the typical hunter-gatherer looks a lot like your life and mine when we are on vacation at a camp with friends.”

“Children play at hunting, gathering, hut construction, toolmaking, meal preparations, defense against predators, birthing, infant care, healing, negotiation, and so on and so on; and gradually, as their play becomes increasingly skilled, the activities become productive. “

They might spend 20-40 hours a week producing food etc., but it's an optional activity. If one doesn't feel like going gathering today one does something else,

maybe just lie about. “A person who doesn't hunt or gather will still receive his or her share of whatever food is brought back.”

Most of their work is done cooperatively, “...converting chores into social occasions”. “They often had something of the atmosphere of a picnic outing with children.”

So hunting and gathering are better described as playful adventures and picnics, engaged in for the fun of it and by a happy group out on a frolic.

Property.

They don't have any. Sorenson says, “The outstanding economic condition is absence of private property, which allows constant cooperative usage of the implements and materials of life for collective benefit.”

“Tools will be for general use or borrowable. So there can be no theft, envy of another's dress or houses. They have a perfect insurance industry; if your house burns down tonight everyone will be around in the morning to start rebuilding it tomorrow.

The contrast with farming communities is stark. Because the latter have property to protect and manage they have problems the hunter gatherer avoids. They have to worry about their crops, work hard, calculate profit and loss, worry about how to pay the lender, defend their land. Power and wealth have entered; landlords, raiders, lenders have to be dealt with, and thus farmers must prioritise self-interest and defending against hostile others. They are insecure, against drought and land theft, whereas the hunter gatherer with immense knowledge of plants and animals can almost always find something to eat. They have to negotiate laws and judges and punishments. You can see how farming brings about an entirely different mentality, leading to inequality, competitive individualism, power, elites kings, armies and imperial conquest, and to where we are today. As Graeber and Wengrow stress in The Dawn of Everything (2022), we have become stuck on the wrong path.

“Government”.

There isn't any ...and its everywhere, “controlling” everything, and largely automatic and unconscious. There's no formal government, no grand buildings, officials, constitutions, elaborate procedures or controversies, or courts of disputed returns. It's all more or less spontaneous and un-thought-about. Decisions and behaviour are mostly regulated by the built-in dispositions and world views of individuals, who just tend to do what's sensible, nice, mutually beneficial and socially cohesive ...because they like doing that and that's all that occurs to them. Also there is no point in being selfish or aggressive; that will not achieve anything they want. What they want is to play with friends.

We would say its consensual decision-making, but even this seems a bit too deliberate and contrived. If a group decides to go gathering but you don't want to go, you don't have to. There are no rules overtly forcing anyone to do anything, so there's not much ruling going on.

Rules, law.

There are virtually no explicit or formal moral or legal codes, let alone law, police and prisons, although there are “customs” such as insulting the successful hunter. Our society is riddled with and coerced by highly codified rules, explicit, coercive and in your face, unavoidable, and troublesome; you have to think about them and you deviate at your peril.

Sorenson says in the preconquest era “ .. people freely spread their interests, feelings, and delights out for all to see of, “... “It was an altogether different world from that of ...behaving ‘properly,’ having ‘right’ answers, wearing ‘appropriate’ clothes, etc. In such a world, “Improper’ aspirations, inclinations, and desires were ... masked as people tried to measure up to the ‘proper’ rule and standard. They used rhetoric and logic argumentatively with reference to norms, precedents, and agreements to gain and maintain dignity, status, and position.”

Thus the hunter gatherers seem to not even be aware of codes, rules, laws. They just seem to behave as their moment to moment impulses determine. The trick is, these impulses are the right ones, built into their friendly, mutually beneficial, cooperative, altruistic pro-social habitual natures.

Religion.

Religion “ ... plays no role in the ongoing life of the band: they make no demands and receive no sacrifices or worship. In general hunter-gatherer societies have little superstition and they usually laugh at their agricultural neighbours' fears and rituals. Hunter-gatherers lack superstition and witchcraft. On the other hand primitive agricultural societies are rife with superstition and fear, and accusations of witchcraft.

Individual vs society

We see these as being in conflict; to have social order we think individual freedom must be curtailed. Sorenson says this is not the case with the hunter gatherers. It is an intensely collectivist society, yet individual freedom is great and there seems to be no overt pressure on individuals to conform. Gray says, “Deciding what another person should do, no matter what his age, is outside the Yequana vocabulary of behaviours. There is great interest in what everyone does, but no impulse to influence--let alone coerce--anyone.

“ ... hunter-gatherers everywhere maintain an extraordinary ethic of personal autonomy, to a degree that may seem radically extreme by our standards. They deliberately avoid telling each other how to behave, in work as in any other context. Each person is his or her own boss.”

Consciousness.

The core element in all this is the mentality, consciousness or world view the hunter gatherers have. The above account shows it to be very different to that evident in Western “civilisation”.

Sorenson refers to the centrality of

“...empathetic, integrative, intuitive rapport.”, an “...indubitable trust”. There is an unhesitating readiness, perhaps impulse, to engage with others, to delight in this, and to do so frankly, spontaneously and without inhibitions, knowing that one need not be careful or calculating, because everyone does this in a climate of friendliness and an absence of danger.”

Sorenson stresses that there is great trust, security, and thus absence of fear of conflict or disapproval over having said the wrong thing. This is about lack of inhibition, readiness to express feelings...especially empathy. There is,

“... intuitive helpfulness and a constant considerate regard by each for all the others. These extended not just to associates and friends but to strangers too. Long before we shared a single word of any common language (indeed, in my first hours there), these forest-dwellers had instinctively tuned in to my feelings and made life easier and happier for me.”

What has produced all this?

Sorenson’s account is at its most profound in his explanation of where this remarkable pre-conquest consciousness comes from. He details the way it is created by the child rearing practices. “Preconquest mentality emerged from a sociosensual infant nurture common to its era but shunned in ours.”

“When I first went into those isolated hamlets in the deep New Guinea forests I was dumbfounded by the lush sensuality of infant care I saw”. “Infants were kept in continuous bodily contact with mothers or the mothers’ friends—on laps when they were seated, on hips, under arms, against backs, or on shoulders when they were standing. Even during intensive food preparation, or when heavy loads were being moved, babies were not put down. They had priority.” “There was always a place for them against the body of a ‘mother’ or close associate.”

“ ... babies were simply not put down, not deprived of constant, ever-ready, interactive body contact—even when the group was on the move under difficult conditions.”

“Babies responded to this blanket of ever-ready empathetic tactile stimulation by tactile responses of their own. Very quickly they began assembling a sophisticated tactile-speech to transmit desires, needs, and states of mind. They didn’t whine or cry to get attention; they touched.” “They had amazing freedom to explore momentary whims and interests.”

"I was astonished to see the words of tiny children accepted at face value—and so acted on. For months I tried to find at least one case where a child's words were considered immature and therefore disregarded. No luck. I tried to explain the idea of lying and inexperience. They didn't get my point. They didn't expect prevarication, deception, grandstanding, or evasion. And I could find no cases where they understood these concepts. Even teenagers remained transparently forthright, their hearts opened wide for all to gaze inside."

"With adults and older children constantly a source of gratification rather than obstruction, toddlers had no desire to escape from supervision ... bastions of security to which babies could return for comfort, assistance, or a sense of surety."

Negative feelings thus faded before they had a chance to grow. Full-blown expressions of, for example, anger or sadness, were therefore very rare."..." Individuals from the most isolated regions became highly agitated when shown photographs of anger."

"During adolescence, their rapport intensified. A rapid flow of synchronous regard began uniting them even more closely as they scattered through the forest, each constantly enlivening the others by a ceaseless, spirited, individualistic input into a unified at-oneness. "

Gray compares this with the Western conception of "education".

"... we train ... children to do the tasks that we think will be necessary for their future success. We do that whether or not the ... child wants such training. Training requires suppression of the trainee's will, and hence of play."

Our society's concepts of raising and training children assume a dominant-subordinate relationship between parent and child." "The child's primary duty, at least in theory, is to obey. ...in the context of our long history as a species, it is new. It came with agriculture."

"Hunter-gatherers do not give orders to their children; for example, no adult announces bedtime. At night, children remain around adults until they feel tired and fall asleep. ... Parakana adults do not interfere with their children's lives. They never beat, scold, or behave aggressively with them, physically or verbally, nor do they offer praise or keep track of their development."

"The idea that this is 'my child' or 'your child' does not exist [among the Yequana, of South America.]"

"Aborigine children are indulged to an extreme degree ... physical punishment for a child is almost unheard of."

"Ju/'hoansi children [of Africa] very rarely cried, probably because they had little to cry about. No child was ever yelled at or slapped or physically

punished, and few were even scolded. Most never heard a discouraging word until they were approaching adolescence, and even then the reprimand, if it really was a reprimand, was delivered in a soft voice."

"Free from frustration or anxiety, sunny and cooperative, the children were every parent's dream. No culture can ever have raised better, more intelligent, more likable, more confident children." " ... there are no or few battles of will between adults and children." They are " ...rarely criticised."

Gray sums it up as, "Hunter-gatherers trust their children." And in a climate of trust and acceptance the children grow up to be trustful, frank, and empathetic".

" They trusted infants' and children's instincts, and so they allowed infants to decide, for example, when to nurse or not nurse and allowed children to educate themselves through their own self-directed play and exploration. If an infant cries or shows even a lesser sign of distress, any adult or older child nearby responds immediately to see what is the matter and to help." They trust, further, that when young people are ready to start contributing in meaningful ways to the band's economy, they will do so gladly, without any need for coercion or coaxing."

So they grow up in a climate of open willingness to express feelings, to be empathetic to the feelings and wishes of others, knowing that not only is there no need to be guarded, but that it's enjoyable to be open and empathetic, and this is what people like to do. This orientation is not contrived or deliberately constructed, or encouraged or even recognised. It is just like the way they learn that when it rains you get wet ... it's the reality they encounter and they unwittingly learn that that's how people are and it's nice and that's just the way the world works.

Gray again puts it in terms of trust, although that seems to me not to be the best term.

"Such trust, I think, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. People who are trusted from the very beginning usually become trustworthy. People treated in this way do not grow up to see life as a matter of trying to overpower, outsmart, or in other ways manipulate others. Rather, they grow up viewing life in terms of friendships, that is, in terms of people willingly and joyfully helping each other to satisfy their needs and desires. That is the attitude that I have been describing throughout this series as the playful approach to life--the approach that brings out the best aspects of our humanity."

"It makes sense that infants and children who are themselves trusted and treated well from the beginning would grow up to trust others and treat them well and would feel little or no need to dominate others in order to get their needs met."

Collapse.

Sorenson details the extreme fragility of this idyllic culture, the way everything can be almost instantly destroyed when conquest culture is encountered.

“... individuals thrust their inner thoughts and aspirations for all to see, appreciate, and relate to. This unabashed open honesty is the foundation on which their highly honed integrative empathy and rapport become possible. When that openness gives way, empathy and rapport shrivel. Where deceit becomes a common practice, they disintegrate.”

“ ... preconquest mentality was so vulnerable to anger, deceit, greed, and aggression.”

“Though durable and self-repairing in isolation, the unconditional open trust this way of life requires shrivels with alarming speed when faced with harsh emotions or coercion. Deceit, hostility, and selfishness when only episodic temporarily benumb intuitive rapport. When such conditions come to stay and no escape is possible, intuitive rapport disintegrates within a brutally disorienting period of existential trauma and anomie. With no other models about except those of conquerors, a ‘savage-savage’ emerges from the wreckage of a once ‘noble-savage’.”

“Any form of subjugation, even those barriers to freedom imposed by private property, are the kiss of death to this type of life.”

He describes his own experience of such a collapse within a band he was studying, which left him stunned, uncomprehending and quite disturbed.

“In a single crucial week a spirit that all the world would want, not just for themselves but for all others, was lost, one that had taken millennia to create. It was suddenly just gone. “A “... week in which the subtle sociosensual glue of the island’s traditional way-of-life became unstuck.”

What can we learn from them.

I think there are profoundly important things the hunter gatherers get us to grasp.

1. Humans today have been shaped by 300,000 years of evolutionary pressure to be nice, to like interacting, to enjoy the company of others, to be helpful, egalitarian and not selfish, greedy, aggressive or interested in property or power
2. The conditions humans experience are the major determinants of the nature they exhibit. In many ways the conditions we experience today are very undesirable. They involve and produce nastiness...competition, power seeking, greed, wealth seeking, conquest mentality, selfishness, aggressiveness, suspicion and insecurity, and bad values and social systems. This is good news; it means all we need to do is change our systems, not change our basic nature.

Bregman, Mate, and Graeber and Wengrow recognise this. They point out that our hunter gatherer conditioning did not prepare us for coping let alone thriving in the kind of society we have now. It requires and rewards very different ideas, values, dispositions and behaviours to those hunter gatherers experienced.

Mate is especially important in emphasising how stressful life in our society is. Just about everyone is subject to many sources of stress. We are insecure and have to be concerned about unemployment, being able to afford necessities, the approval of others, competing and striving to succeed and fearing failure, kids and drugs etc., loneliness, depression, what will happen in old age, the deceit and predations of others such as advertisers. Mate details the physical and mental illnesses that stress causes, and how this stressful existence is regarded as normal, although it is actually quite pathological; hence the title of his book The Myth of Normal. (2022.) He emphasises that this is a toxic culture.

3. It's a mistake to think that we can get people to be nice, friendly and helpful by encouraging them to "knock on your neighbour's door." That is a common response, but it is to put it mildly, very sociologically naïve. You can't expect much niceness in a society structured to work on competition, self interest, predation and exploitation, one that isolates people in dormitory suburbs with no reason to knock on the door of their neighbours who they don't even know, with no forces in their neighbourhood enticing/pushing them to get together to work for mutual benefit. The council and the corporations fix the potholes and provide goods.

A good cohesive society is highly integrated. There are many connections, relationships, bonds, and needs and incentives to interact and care. The butcher is the person who plays in your soccer team and who got your cat down from the tree the other day, and his wife makes excellent scones for the working bees, and organises the concerts... The trust and reputations and friendliness and readiness to help and work out solutions have been built over long periods of familiarity. None of this can thrive unless structures are of the right kind, geared to the welfare of all, to equality, inclusion and cooperation. You can't take a faulty society and just add some neighbourliness.

4. Goodness must be spontaneous, automatic, not seen as an option to be considered and chosen. Hunter gatherers yawn, blink, laugh and treat each other nicely, without having to think about whether or not to do so. Their life experience has built into them dispositions to be friendly and playful and these automatically produce friendly and playful behaviour. Again the desired behaviour can only emerge from an integrated culture involving structures, processes and people all built to elicit those behaviours.

5. Hence The Simpler Way. It requires and rewards goodness. Everyone can see that their own welfare depends on how well the town is thriving, that the more individuals thrive then the more the town will. They will be concerned to make sure no one is struggling and that social and ecological systems are in

good shape. They will experience the satisfaction of helping, cooperating taking responsibility, turning up to working bees. Kids will grow up in this climate, experiencing the delight of working bees getting the job done well followed by scones and banter. (See the [Pigface Point video](#).)

6. All this is [anarchism](#). Hunter gatherer society is a marvellous example of classical anarchism...social functioning without hierarchy or anyone having rank, status or power over others, equality, mutually agreed arrangements, good citizens, a climate of care for others, community self-government aimed at consensus, automatic spontaneous behaviour.

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