

PRIMARY & SECONDARY SOURCES**Reading 23****A** **N ECONOMY OF SHARING**

Western society's emphasis on producing surplus goods and saving for future needs does not apply in many hunter-gatherer societies. In these societies, the individual's needs are a part of the whole groups' needs. Author Marie Roué calls this an economy of sharing. As you read, consider the social implications of such an economy and compare it to the one in which you live. Then answer the questions that follow.



There are two radically different ways for members of a society to satisfy all their needs: by producing a lot, as in Western societies, or by not wanting a lot, as in those the American anthropologist Marshall Sahlins has called "Zen" societies. The "Zen" way chosen by hunter-gatherer societies is to stop producing food as soon as they consider that the quantity in hand has reached a level sufficient for their needs.

It has been shown, and statistically confirmed, that, contrary to a widespread misconception, population groups who live by hunting, fishing and gathering do not live in utter privation, nor are they constantly in search of permanently inadequate food. On the contrary, they may be said to have created "the first affluent society," spending only a few hours a day on meeting their material needs and keeping the rest of their time free for recreational and social activities. It is only observers who are unaware of these people's cultural values who find their few plain possessions so inadequate. Nomads, for instance, set particular store by light, portable objects, but this does not make them poor. One observer has testified that "their extremely limited materials possessions relieve them of all cares with regard to daily necessities and permit them to enjoy life."

However, not all hunter-gatherers live in an earthly paradise where they need only to stoop to pick fruit and vegetables and where game animals give themselves up voluntarily. There are some groups or families within these societies who can never manage, or can manage only at certain times, to meet all their needs, while any group is bound at times to include individuals who are too sick, too young, or too old to take part in productive activities, and disaster can sometimes befall the harvest or the hunt. It is in such circumstances that the sharing of resources becomes especially important.

What is the point of sharing? Some observers claim that it fulfills the same function—that of risk limitation—in "traditional" societies as insurance policies do in Western societies. By sharing a surplus that in any case

could not be consumed in the immediate future, individuals or families are ensuring that other members of the group will do the same for them when the time comes. Other observers, however, are not entirely satisfied with the materialist explanation, since it presupposes an egalitarian, turn-and-turn-about system, when in fact that is far from being the case, and it is rare for those who are never on the giving end to be excluded from the benefits of sharing. Why, in that case, do the ablest hunters who, as everyone knows, produce more than they can consume, continue to hunt large animals when nearly all the meat will be consumed by people other than their own kith and kin? For prestige and the attendant social advantages, to qualify as a husband, a son-in-law, a partner in some undertaking or simply an envied neighbor—these are some of the possible reasons.

What is the point of sharing? Some observers claim that it fulfills the same function—that of risk limitation—in "traditional" societies as insurance policies do in Western societies.

Beyond these reasons of self-interest, however, underlying the good hunters' generosity is a whole outlook that is intolerant of selfish individualism. In the past, Western missionaries and travellers often misinterpreted attitudes quite unlike those that prevailed in the villages where they themselves grew up. Seeing how Eskimos and Bushmen feasted when food was abundant, so that sometimes there was nothing left over for lean times to come, they reproached them for their lack of foresight and their gluttony. But in fact feasting is another way of

PRIMARY & SECONDARY SOURCES (continued) **Reading 23**

redistributing to the community as a whole the foodstuffs brought back by its more fortunate members, thus strengthening the social fabric.

There are also rules of sharing whereby “one good turn deserves another” throughout life, as with the Arviligjuarmiut Inuits when they share a seal they have killed as a team working together. Each member of the team always receives the same part of the beast and indeed takes his name from it—“my shoulder,” “my head,” and so on.

Some of the peoples living in the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions believe that the animals caught by a hunter have given themselves to him, so it is not surprising, for example, that among the Cree Indians of Quebec the hunter’s generosity to his companions in the hunt should match that of his quarry. If the favor was not returned, the cycle would be broken and the animals would not let themselves be caught. Similarly, when a feast is given everything must go, a custom that astonished those who first observed the Algonquins’ way of life and is still maintained today. When

the whole village—visitors included—is invited to a feast, guests will find a plastic bag by the side of their plates, an invitation to them to take away anything left over when they have eaten enough, to be shared with those who could not be present.

Many peoples—the Mbuti of the former Zaire, the Canadian Cree and Inuit, the Batck of Malaysia and Nayaka of southern India, to name but a few—are ignorant of the Western dichotomy between nature and nurture. In many cases, they see their relationship with the natural world of animals, plants and places from which they receive gifts as a genuine child-parent relationship. They therefore regard sharing—nature giving to humans or humans giving to one another—as an essential part of their lives, expressing an outlook on the world that could be described, in Nurit Bird-David’s words as a “cosmic economy of sharing.”

Roué, Marie. “An Economy of Sharing.” *UNSECO Courier*, January 1998

ANALYZING THE READING

1. How could a hunter-gatherer society be seen as an “affluent society”?

2. At what times in a hunter-gatherer society is sharing especially important?

3. What are the reasons that the ablest hunters provide food for the rest of their people?

4. How does the rule “one good turn deserves another” support the economy of these societies?

5. How does the “cosmic economy of sharing” differ from Western individualism?
