

The People of the Brook versus Supermarket Splendor

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"Mister America walk on by your supermarket dream

Mister America walk on by your liquor store supreme"

- The Mothers, 1966 album Freak Out

For many thousands of years, any tribe knew not to overfish the local brook. For if the people did so, fish would not be forthcoming from distant places. There was always some trade, but not of staples (nor paperclips!).

It is hard for modern consumers to relate to, but ancient, primitive people could not go shopping for whatever they needed or desired.

Would the people of olden times have preferred to choose, if they could, the method of buying goods from well-stocked refrigerated and frozen stores, with convenient packaging and unlimited variations of products to select? One might imagine that a quaint objection these ancestors might have raised would be regarding the ability to know the merchant one is buying from, and to have familiarity with the exact location that the food came from.

As an antidote to modern trends of artificiality and alienation, the Slow Food Movement can only go so far. It's a limited number of oblivious people who are presently eating fast food too fast, failing to ever fast, who can instead decide to make pasta asciutta by watching the onion and garlic turn golden in the pan of heating olive oil. To really address the root problem, people need to be out from under the oppression of overwork and employment, and be free from advertising by food corporations.

For sure, up against the choice of supermarkets and McGarbage "restaurants," the people of prehistory would have missed the local fish of the pristine brook as well as the conviviality of the tribe's members gathering daily at the stream. Nettles and other edible and medicinal plants were gathered without stripping the resource clean. The connection to the land was strong; it was everything. All was communal and shared, between people and all species, as a unity within the universe they knew. There were unpleasant aspects of life but these were part of the recipe of collective survival that proved successful for tens of thousands of years.

The main difference between the later private-property system with its market economy and the tribal, egalitarian culture is the master-slave or boss/owner-worker feature of the new system we know as civilization. If the prehistoric fishers at their brook had been asked if they would trade their freedom and simplicity for working for others in order to buy what had been free, the answer would be a resounding "No! That's crazy!"

What is the relevance for today of that lost choice, the failure to prevent commodification and commercialization? Modern peoples, made soft with the conveniences and lack of need for physical skills, are quick to imagine that ancient and prehistoric peoples had tough times, did not live long, and, it seems reasonable, were not violence-free warless societies.. However, they endured for far longer than our present societies have or probably will, and the ecosystem was not trashed and poisoned by those prehistoric peoples. The idea of work seems to not have existed, judging by the absence of the word or its equivalent in primitive tongues, and judging by the low number of hours and days in a week devoted to what one could call work. (see previous articles in Further Reading below)

It turns out that primitive societies and pre-modern people lived long lives, but infant mortality has been averaged (by modern students and critics) into estimated life spans. Thus the age one died in primitive or ancient societies, indeed right up to the modern technological era, could appear to be halved to perhaps 40 years old. The infant mortality of weak offspring, possibly among those requiring Cesarean section today, helped keep the species strong and at a low growth rate (if any) than otherwise.

The human species is no longer strong on the whole. Modernized people were strong enough to subdue non-civilized peoples and to tame and exploit nature, but the resultant overpopulation is a false achievement when it cannot be sustained. We cannot go back now to pristine environments and spend minimal amounts of time for obtaining food, clothing and shelter as in the distant past. Moreover, because of our "success" and letting the organized oppressors take over, we will soon be faced with collapse of the system bringing us, for now, supermarket splendor.

The return of tribal, communal living will not be a walk in the park, but once we get there we will appreciate it as the superior, kinder culture we have sorely missed. This view is dismissed today oftentimes as romanticism, but there seems to be only one working model of sustainability to point to: living close to nature.

Social relations are defined today by tolerance of tyranny: of harmful industrial profit schemes, unfair ownership of huge property holdings, and astronomical financial wealth. As soon as the post-peak oil house of cards topples, "new" social structures will be (re)established. There's a growing number of people already welcoming the end of false wealth's tyranny and of civilized arrogance. Many of us can probably identify with the People of the Brook as a strong genetic archetype and a dream for a saner future. Let's get to "work."

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Further reading:

Is "More Jobs" Sustainable or Necessary in the Post-Peak Oil World? by Jan Lundberg

Unlucky to have a job by Jan Lundberg

A return to tribes by Jan Lundberg