

# Anthropology, Anarchism and Agroecology

Chris Smaje remembers Marshall Sahlins.

Chris Smaje

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Marshall Sahlins (1930-2021) was a professor of anthropology at the University of Chicago. A colossus of the discipline from the 1960s right up to his death, Sahlins was a specialist in societies of the South Pacific. While never wilfully obscure in the manner of some academic writing, and often leavened with wry humour, his books were formidably intellectual, so not always easily accessible. However they covered many topics of interest to anyone hoping to wrest a renewable, agroecological society from the ever-proliferating ruins of the present.

By far the most widely influential piece of Sahlins's writing was the opening essay of his 1972 book *Stone Age Economics*, 'The Original Affluent Society'. This argued that the reality of 'hunter-gatherer' and 'primitive' agricultural societies did not match the stereotype of a hardscrabble life scratching miserable returns from an unforgiving nature. The idea that foragers and autonomous farmers may in fact have enjoyed relatively abundant and convivial lives is quite familiar today, but at the time this was a seismic rupture with a dominant narrative in which modern, high-energy, urbanised, bureaucratic society placed itself at the apex of civilisational ascent.

Sahlins wasn't the only voice contesting this self-satisfied confection, and his arguments and evidence were later picked over by everyone from eminent professors to the Unabomber Ted Kaczynski. Still, his essay had a profoundly enabling effect for many who came afterwards with visions for a future of work grounded in something other than more machinery, more high-energy inputs, more centralised politics, and more expert control.

The other essays in *Stone Age Economics* are less frequently read by non-specialists, but no less important. They highlight not only the virtues, but also the difficulties and contradictions, of locally focused, nonmonetary societies where households work to satisfy their needs rather than to expand wealth and productivity.

## The Power of Culture

Modern writers tend to separate humans' relations with each other into different domains, with labels like 'the political', 'the economic', and 'the family', among others. Sahlins wrote incisively on all three of these (*On Kings*, 2017; *Stone Age Economics*, 1972; *What Kinship Is...And Is Not*, 2013). His larger point though was that people in most historic societies didn't regard these domains as separate, and nor should their latter-day analysts. An abiding concern of his was the power of human culture to construct our mental and social worlds. For instance, his answer to the question in that last book title was that kinship is cultural rather than biological.

This concern with culture put Sahlins at odds with Marxism, which he aptly critiqued in *Culture and Practical Reason* (1976) for accepting at face value too many of the categories set up by the capitalist society it wished to overthrow.

His emphasis on cultural worlds also notably brought disagreement with another prominent anthropologist. Gananath Obeyesekere took exception to the argument in

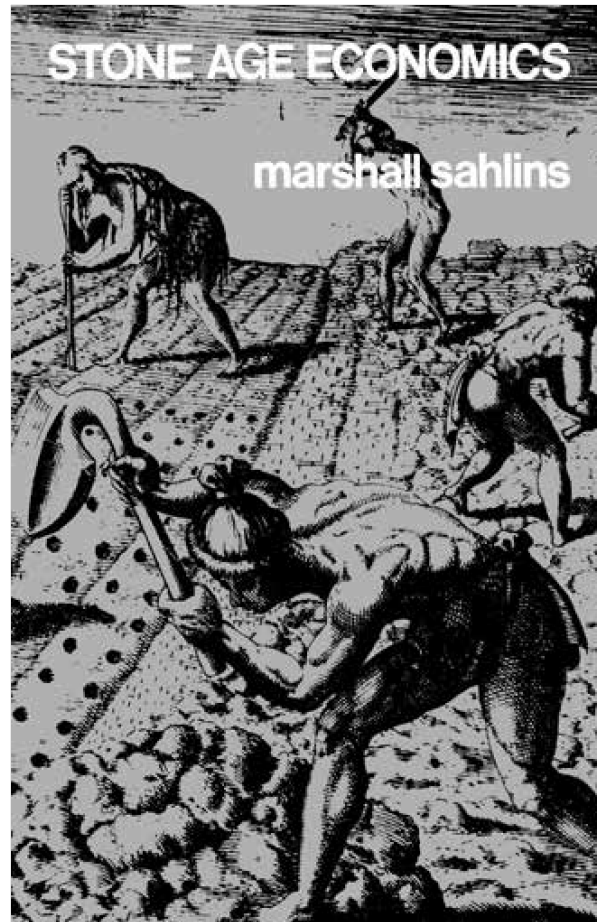
Sahlins's *Islands of History* (1985) about the strange fate of Captain James Cook in 1779, who was first welcomed by Hawaiian islanders and then killed by them. This happened, said Sahlins, because Cook unwittingly blundered into a ritual cycle in which he figured as a god. Obeyesekere's view that *Islands of History* presented a colonialist narrative about inferior and credulous natives worshipping a white man as a god prompted a lengthy and empirically detailed response from Sahlins. In *How 'Natives' Think: About Captain Cook, For Example* (1995) he argued that indigenous people and their cultural categories deserved greater respect than that. On balance, Sahlins probably got the better of the engagement. The debate prefigured contemporary concerns about how to represent indigenous cultures, and who is entitled to do the representing.

It's hard to summarise the lessons from Sahlins's writings succinctly, but they perhaps include the following. Take seriously the long-term cultural categories that people construct over generations, and be aware of how they live on within your own thought. Appreciate that the idea of civilisational progress delivered by bureaucratic states is just one of these cultural stories. Take kin and exchange relations seriously, and don't try to reduce them to something else. Beware of assumptions that some particular category of person – whether rulers, ordinary subjects, or 'native' indigenes – is the 'real' agent of change within any system.

## Challenges for Today

A superficial reading of 'The Original Affluent Society' has suggested to many with countercultural leanings that people in the past lived amicably together without private property, within egalitarian gift economies, in extended family groups and villages with abundant commons, until they were dragged into the oppressive modern world by enclosures of one kind or another, enforced by landlords, bosses, colonial states and busybody reformers.

There are grains of truth in this widely held view. But I would argue that the real challenge today is in addressing the numerous ways in which this rosy picture is *not* accurate, in sufficient detail to help plot a plausible cultural path forwards, towards a just and renewable agrarian future.



*A classic from 1972.*

Sahlins didn't tend to write directly about contemporary challenges, though his political views often shone through. But within academia, he was a lynchpin of an influential school of anthropological thought sometimes called 'the Chicago anarchists', another of whom was David Graeber.

Sahlins co-authored *On Kings* with Graeber and wrote in the book's Preface, with typical generosity: "David was a student of mine; I supervised his thesis at the University of Chicago. Since then it has been difficult to say who is the student and who the teacher". Graeber was very much his own man, but in many ways his political activism and his books – such as *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, *Bullshit Jobs*, and *Debt* (see *The Land* Issue 14 pp45-48 – carried Sahlins's legacy into a more active political engagement with the modern world, often focused around the idea that government is an endless problem with no really satisfactory solution.

I met Sahlins a couple of times in the 1980s when he offered me a PhD studentship at Chicago. In the end I turned the offer down, in part because I felt unworthy to dwell among such gods. He kindly wrote to me wishing me "good luck and good anthropology", which I hope my later career as a kind of amateur scholar-farmer has fulfilled to some extent, not least through the ongoing stimulation of reading his books.

Sadly both he and David Graeber have now left us to join the ancestors. But unlike the dead rulers described in *On Kings*, who in death dominate the living kings in ever more troublesome ways, Sahlins and Graeber have left us a sparkling body of work to help illuminate our paths into the future.

The Ted K Archive

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