

Freedom and Civilization: A Comparative Analysis

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Humans have been on this planet for three million years – out of the trees to the grasslands of East Africa, the human species began a path of evolution that would, after many gradations of adaptation result, 100,000 years ago, in anatomically modern *Homo Sapiens Sapiens*: us. While there have been many adaptations over time including numerous hominids within the genus *Australopithecine*, and several within the genus *Homo* predating our arrival, taxonomically we have been the same species. We are and have been since our dawn, upright walking primates that have for 99 percent of our existence universally lived within the same ecological niche (Ponting 1991: 18), a cognitive foraging niche that has proven successful in every terrestrial ecosystem on the planet (Ponting 1991: 32). Like all other wild animals, hominids subsisted upon the food sources freely available within the environment, through foraging. Hominids gathered and hunted in a nomadic pattern. On the highest trophic level as omnivorous secondary consumers in the food chain, and without the biological and anatomical tools our primate progenitors were equipped with such agility, tails, etc., we have adapted to life in the wild with upright walking, culture, consciousness, and technology. Contrary to the popular myth interpreted from the works of such archaic social thinkers as Hobbes, life in the wild is not, “nasty, brutish, and short”. Had hominids not been such a successful organism, we surely would not have survived for three million years and have been able to adapt to diverse environments with only cultural, rather than biological evolution. The success of our species as facilitated by our cognitive niche is exemplified by the manufacture of stone tools; the most archeologically well preserved indication of technological innovation. The first stone tools appear along with human bones in the fossil record 2.4 million years ago with the *Homo Habilis*. Since then, stone tool use and innovation has been to the human race what nests are to birds: an environmental modification essential to survival. This simple technological tradition underwent many significant changes in design and elaboration but never to an extent that necessitated a technological system. Tools could be made for a day's use to be left behind and made again the next day in a new location. In addition to tools, many other implements were

made, but none that could not be carried on the backs of these nomadic hominids, or made at an impermanent location to be left behind. It was this nomadic, Paleolithic way of life that continued for close to 3 million years. With minimal elaboration, this system of foraging, nomadism, and tool use proved effective for colonizing, diverse and distant environments throughout the planet by 30,000 BC (Ponting 1991: 19). This, as also mentioned, was the universal history of humanity for 99 percent of our existence. Before discussing the events within the most recent one percent, more data on the social, economic, and political nature of band societies should be outlined.

All wildlife exists and has evolved because of the availability of vast resources that can sustain diverse ecological systems and populations of flora and fauna. Human organisms, like all others, are only on the planet because it freely provides plentiful wild means of sustenance that can be extracted without complex artificial technological systems. Unlike the Christian myth of human genesis from the sky, we have evolved from the earth. We did not find ourselves in a condition of scarcity that caused constant throat-cutting warfare in the wild – rather the wild provided freely all the means of subsistence. Foraging did not continue for 3 million years because it was unstable or unpredictable; it persisted, and in some places persists today, because it is the most effective, least labor intensive, most stable, and most healthful mode of existence. Every other attempted mode has proven to destroy either or both the environment and the egalitarian anarchy of the foraging mode. Through foraging in a world of such vast free resources, humans have lived in harmony with the environment and with each other. As no resource was scarce, no resource was controlled, no property was owned, and every produced item was fully communal.

The Kung San of the Kalarhari desert spend only a few hours per day engaged in subsistence activities (Feder 2000: 306). They share everything, and have no interest in material accumulation, power, or domination; both men and women hold spiritual power, gender equality is expressedly valued (Bonvillain 1998: 21), diseases are few, leaders are non-existent, both men and women equally partake in the consensus process, all food is shared, peaceful cooperation is constant, and selfishness is highly discouraged. This

society is one of the last foraging societies on the planet. Their way of life tells the story of humanity since our dawn. This is the story of egalitarian, wild, free, stateless ecological harmony. Harris states that, “the few remaining foraging societies are the closest analogues we have to the “natural” state of humanity (Harris 1989: 205-209).”

Lee and Devore contextualize the foraging mode in stating, “of the estimated 80,000,000,000...who have ever lived on earth, over 90 percent were hunter/gatherers; about 6 percent have lived by agriculture and the remaining few percent have lived in industrial societies (Lee and Devore 1968: 3). Most foragers have been assimilated, conquered, or driven into marginal environments. The global system of industrial resource extraction has affected every culture. Because of this, hunter/gatherers can't be simply defined today by subsistence strategy, as many are now forced to partake in market economies to some extent. Lee and Devore provide the following: hunter-gatherers have few possessions, live in small groups, do not hold rights to communal resources, do not have food surplus, do not control resource areas on the landscape, and live in flexible populations where all can freely move with other bands (Lee and Devore 1968: 12).

12,000 years ago, the foraging population of the planet did not exceed 4 million (Ponting 1991: 24). These four million anatomically modern homo sapiens sapiens lived as nomadic Paleolithic foragers in every terrestrial environment on the planet. At this time, a few of the highly dispersed human foraging bands experienced what is theorized to be either environmental change concurrent with the end of the Pleistocene or self-induced population pressure that forced a radical and historically unprecedented shift in subsistence strategy. These few of the previously all true foraging bands would begin to dredge the path to plant and animal domestication, or the enslavement of flora and fauna for sole use as an artificial (as opposed to natural) subsistence base. Feder notes, “Beginning about 12,000 years ago, some human groups began not just foraging for food, but actually producing it. Various groups began tending plants and taming animals, allowing only those with characteristics desirable from a human subsistence standpoint to survive and propagate. This shift to food production occurred independently in several

places in the New and Old Worlds. Each 'agricultural revolution' involved manipulation of local wild plants and/or animals. The vast majority of the foods we rely on today were domesticated by ancient people many millennia ago (Feder 2000: 300)."

Theories about exactly why certain societies experiencing natural or artificially induced scarcity made this shift are many, but the only certainty is that it is not a universal human mechanism – it is not inevitable nor part of any Marxian unilineal progression of cultural evolution. Feder states this well, "if there was a single, universal cause for the origins of plant and animal domestication, then nearly all foragers would have developed a subsistence system based on agriculture or animal husbandry when faced with the same or similar climatic or demographic conditions. That this universal adaptation did not occur is a clear indication that different cultural groups can and did respond differently to changes in the environment or in their population (Feder 2000: 307)."

Whatever the cause of the genesis of the enslavement of the wild, it occurred in two contexts. The "primary" context is that of a culturally independent process whereby the original foraging mode is gradually replaced by agriculture or pastoralism. In the "secondary" context, domestication is an external force instituted by other cultures, as was the case for Neolithic Europe and the American southwest (Feder 2000: 306). In the primary context, domestication occurred over the span of a few thousand years, independently in three main areas of the world, south-west Asia, China, and Mesoamerica (Ponting 1991: 37). In all cases, the transition from foraging to intensive agriculture was not, as it is mythically described in popular discourse, a universal "Neolithic revolution." This myth implies intent and consciousness of the process, when in fact, "no one generation could have been conscious of making any dramatic changes. Generally people seem to have accepted the process as a natural way of obtaining the resources humans needed (Ponting 1991: 74)."

Beyond a shift from wild to artificial food sources, Neolithic societies shifted from a mobile to a sedentary way of life (the problems with which will be discussed

below). Another important shift that will also be addressed is the beginning of population explosions that could never before have been possible with a plentiful, though limited, natural food resource base.

Before moving on to the social, political, and economic problems caused by domestication and their exacerbation under civilization, a few important elements of this shift must be noted. For one, domestication is a break from an ecological dynamic of equilibrium that most complex organisms live within. Just as a non-human predators may overhunt prey, cause a decline in prey population and then experience proportional food source scarcity and population decline of their own while the prey population recovers, foraging band societies also live within this context. Resource depletion was offset by band societies utilizing the strategies of minimal population, usually no more than 50 people in a band (Harris: 1989: 205-209), and frequent changes of location so as to not over-tax a local environment's resources. Settled societies by contrast, cannot pack up and move every day or week – they are stationary and thus population dispersal cannot occur, nor a mitigated impact on a local environment. Whatever scarcity occurs and whatever internal problems arise, they can only expand; they cannot move away completely.

Secondly, domestication yields surplus, the kind that can never exist in a foraging society. The artificial production of food energy through either fields or animals creates a storable surplus that can, as never before, be generated to feed an increasing population that could never have been sustained by wild food sources. While more food can be produced, that is no indication it is either consistent or sustainable. Drought, soil erosion and salinization, forest clearing, and decline in biodiversity all compromise the long term yields of agriculture. Feder cites Diamond's *Agriculture: the Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race*, to explain that while, “clearly, agriculture can provide more food than most foraging systems...(Feder 2000: 343)”, it is by no means a comparison to the quality of forager caloric intake. This incites the final consideration.

As the dietary diversity represented in the foraging mode declines with the intensification of monoculture crop production, so declines the health of the population. Cohen and Armelagos in their study of paleopathology associated with Neolithic societies in North, Central, and South America, the eastern Mediterranean, western Europe, the Middle East, southern Asia, and Nubia found sharp declines in nutritional health as indicated by skeletal analysis. Their data proved that pre-existing hunter/gatherers had higher health and nutrition. Furthermore, infectious disease increased as a result of the subsistence shift. Feder notes, “agriculture itself doesn't cause disease; it merely establishes the conditions conducive for disease to spread: large, dense, sedentary populations (Feder 2000: 344).”

Cohen and Armelagos also found that malnutrition was higher among Neolithic societies, that hunter gatherers lived longer than later agriculturalists in the same region, and that, “taken as a whole, these indicators fairly clearly suggest an overall decline in the quality-and probably in the length-of human life,” in agricultural societies (Feder 2000: 344).

Finally, the archeological record of the Pleistocene yields only rare evidence for interpersonal violence, as would be indicated in skeletal remains by intentionally inflicted wounds. However, in the assemblages of Neolithic skeletons, such wounds seem to be common – and not of simply one person killing another, but of whole sets of skeletons, thus indicating group warfare. In Feder's analysis, “Perhaps the problems inherent in an agricultural way of life and the always present potential for a collapse of the subsistence base are at the heart of this phenomenon (Feder 2000: 344-345).”

The pan-continental emergence of domestication in the form of pastoralism and agriculture, though beginning 12,000 years ago, was not a sweeping universal process, at least not at first. Harris notes that, “it has been only in the last two thousand years that the majority of the people in the world have not lived in hunting and gathering societies (Harris 1989: 205-209).” Neolithic farming societies alone could not have conquered the planet without the creation of another ecocidal artificial institution, civilization. While

not all Neolithic societies became agricultural states, many did, building empires, expanding, enslaving, and conquering. As the focus of this piece is to contextualize the nature of civilization, I will make only brief mention of the mitigated forms of domestication that form the bridge between foraging societies and civilized empires.

As stated above, all societies on the planet prior to 12,000 years ago were foraging societies. Since then those that chose to continue foraging have either been exiled to high mountains or deserts, decimated, or assimilated. However, intensive agriculture and foraging are not the only modes of subsistence. And not all modes of domesticated existence are destined to increase in complexity to the point of plow-agriculture or civilization. Many forms of less destructive domestication, though not much less recent than intensive agriculture, have been tried and seem to be far more sustainable than the more intensive means of domestication. Namely horticulture, or shifting gardening, is a form of domestication that while still being somewhat artificial, tends to take place within natural systems and cycles as opposed to outright replacement of existing ecosystems.

To conclude this brief mention of the continuum between foraging and civilization, I will quickly outline the known scale of modes of socio-political complexity and subsistence. The first level of complexity is the band, next the lineage, the tribe, the big man, the chiefdom, and the agricultural state. Bands are egalitarian and almost universally foraging; lineage systems occurred in insipient agricultural societies where consolidation of surplus and property made descent a factor in differentiated wealth. Tribes trace their lineage to a single ancestor, are usually 100 people or more, and are almost invariably horticultural, pastoral, or agricultural. Big man societies, unlike tribes that have no institutionalized leaders, have some of the first notable status differentiation with a male provisioner at the top of a minimal scale of stratification. Chiefdoms can be thought to be a more intensified state of the big man – more power is consolidated, military power exists, an ideology of supremacy of the political and religious elite is imposed, and the populace's food production goes first to the chief for distribution to the community. In all the above mentioned systems save the foraging band, property, surplus,

stratification, and differential wealth exist. Furthermore, almost universally, the status of women declines drastically in all but the foraging band. As men begin to control the productive base and marginalize women to the domestic sphere, patriarchy begins.

Brettell and Sargent state in their discussion of Engel's *The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State* , “In Engel's scheme...gender relations were linked to changes in material conditions because the ownership of productive property (initially domesticated animals) was concentrated in the hands of men (Brettell and Sargent 2001: 295).”

In Bonvillain's discussion of materialism in *Women and Men: Cultural Constructs of Gender* , it is stated that, “the organization of production in each type of culture has an impact on political, economic, and social activities,” and that, “ classifying cultures according to their predominant mode of production is a useful analytic approach in investigating the ways that gender concepts and behaviors are organized (Bonvillain 1998: 2).”

Civilization takes agriculture, domestication, stratification, patriarchy, ecocide, warfare, famine, disease, slavery, conquest and expansion to the highest level. The term civilization is derived from the root “civis,” meaning city . Beyond this simple definition of civilization as a human environment, it should be thought also to inextricably entail urban human settlements wherein social stratification, monumental architecture, state political structure, large and dense populations, intensive agriculture, and food surplus used to feed non-producing elites exist. The first civilizations began in west Asia in 7,000 BC, in Egypt in 4000 BC, in Sudan in 1500 BC, in Southern Mexico in 2,000BC, in South Asia in 5500 BC, in China in 3000 BC, in Crete in 3000BC, in Highland Mexico in 500 BC, in South American in 250 AD, and in Khmer in AD 500 (Feder 2000: 384). As is commonly known, all ancient civilizations have collapsed with the remnants left either to decay or for a new trajectory to be moved towards by the survivors. Cowgill notes that almost all “collapsed” civilizations continue, if an attenuated form, and often begin the empire building process again only to endure another “collapse”. To replace the

misleading notion of collapse, he uses “political fragmentation” to explain the end of all the early state societies (Feder 2000: 490).

As with domestication, many theories have been put forth to explain the emergence of civilization. Rather than addressing all of these, suffice it to note, almost all ancient civilizations were surrounded by walls, fortified from attack indicating that civilization was just the next logical step in the intensification of protecting elite power and control over property; the stolen resources of people and nature (Ponting 1991: 327). Again, it is men who are the elite, the managers, and the dominators. It would necessitate infinite space to fully address the structure and history of civilizations; for the purposes of this piece, I will focus on the more universal nature of civilization, what it invariably entails, and some of the more telling evidence for its destructive effects on all within and beyond its “walls”.

All civilizations are what could be thought of as complex anthropogenic structures on the landscape that represent the appropriation and transformation of energy forms into a hierarchical complex system. All human made structures and systems necessitate energy sources. In the earliest civilizations, this energy was extracted from that of living and harvested plants, animals, and humans. Today the energy fueling the system includes fossil fuels, charcoal, nuclear energy, etc. The impetus for this kind of energy transformation is the imperative of what would have previously been the chiefs in chiefdom societies-now rulers of states-to amass, protect, and perpetuate power, wealth, territory, and hegemony. It is all but the ruling elite within civilization that are either slaves or servants to the tyrants and their projects, be they conquest, monument construction, expansion, war, food production, art, science, music, etc.

Servitude for sustenance provisioned by the state has only intensified today, as almost half the world lives in urban environments. Unlike the old civilizations, where village subsistence economies were either in the area or not yet faded from cultural memory, the populace of global civilizations have no choice but to be slaves to those who control the means of sustenance. However Feder mentions, “ in older civilizations, most

people worked harder than people did who lived in simpler Neolithic villages, and they gave up much of the control they had over their lives. Most people were needed to produce a surplus, part of which they turned over to the temple or the army or the state bureaucracy (Feder 2000: 420).” Ponting further concludes that until the last two hundred years, most of the world lived as agriculturalists, outside of civilization. Within this context, controlled by empires, spare resources were taken by the elite or directed into major projects such as temples, palaces, pyramids, and cathedrals (Ponting 1991: 316).

Further, in all civilizations, the political elite attempt to perpetuate the illusion of control over, or divine ordination by, the deities and the supernatural. Ponting mentions that civilizations built their cities, “according to complex designs reflecting religious symbols of divine order...these ceremonial centers are found in virtually every early settled society (Ponting 1991: 296).” Brettell and Sargent discuss Mayan and Incan political theology, “political hierarchies were legitimized by cosmological explanations in early states...rulers legitimized myths that established them as mediators between the natural and supernatural worlds...(Brettell and Sargent 2001: 297)”

As with the enslavement of classes, animals, and the environment, the nature of civilizations, as with most all sedentary societies, is to enslave women to the devalued domestic sphere. Brettell and Sargent associate a shift in gender ideology with the rise of state. Women are increasingly subjected to the patriarchal domination of men in their natal families, later their husbands, and their affinal kin. Women are disempowered by men and valued only as mothers and for their purity (Brettell and Sargent 2001: 297). Rapp is certain that with civilization came a rapid decline in women's status. To Rapp, there is consensus that with civilization, women as a social category become subjugated further to the male head of the household. The explanation provided is as follows: with a decrease in reciprocal relations among kin, an inequality of access to productive resources begins. Eventually class society emerges out of the ruins of women's autonomous alliances (Rapp 2001: 301). With industrialization and modernization, the devaluation of women's work only intensifies. Lockwood states that, “ ‘work’ becomes commodity or cash crop production, or wage employment, activities that were typically

dominated by men after their introduction: men, then, become associated with a formal, 'productive' sphere that is often physically (spatially) separated from the activities of the household/domestic sphere (Lockwood 2001: 536). Bonvillain adds to the discussion of ideology and status decline in state societies noting that at the root of intensified gender hierarchies lies the ideology of male dominance. Gender biases exist within notions of women's work, legal rights, and quality of family and social life (Bonvillain 1998: 124).

With this cursory analysis of the universal structure and nature of civilization complete, at least for the demands of this piece, the focus will now shift to more qualitative and quantitative data from modern and ancient civilizations on the social, political, and economic elements of life under or affected by civilization. Just as civilization is a recent cancerous artificial entity, its grasp on the world population at least within the "walls" is of even less antiquity.

Only within the last two hundred years has civilization assimilated a major amount of the world population. Until 1800 only 2.5 percent of the world population was urbanized, by the 1980s, this number increased to 41 percent (Ponting 1991: 295). The conditions of life within civilization have for the majority of the population, including to a lesser degree the elites, have been essentially equivalent to the conditions of disease, death and poverty within modern Iraq under the sanctions regime. To Ponting, the history of settled societies is one of "grinding poverty". People had few possessions, were miserable, and spent most of their time on a razors edge of survival, obtaining only the absolute minimum food resources to survive (Ponting 1991:215). Civilization is also the history of constant low level disease, punctuated by virulent outbreaks killing major portions of the population (Ponting 1991: 227). Only recently have any technological solutions to this constant state of poverty been found, and at that only for the few. Half of the world still lives in poverty . In terms of disease, it has only been within the last two hundred years, that the emergence of sanitation systems and water treatment facilities, rather than actual advances in medicine and vaccination, has managed to stave off the tide of infectious epidemics. In fact, medical intervention after infection seems to have

had, since 1900 in the U.S., an effect of only 3.5 percent on reducing mortality rates (Ponting 1991: 234).

Pathology has up until the 19th century, plagued civilization. Beginning with the domestication of animals, pathology exponentially increased in settled societies. Ponting notes that tuberculosis originated from cattle, the common cold came from the horse, leprosy from water buffalo. We now share 65 diseases with dogs, 50 with cattle, 46 with sheep and goats, and 42 with pigs. He further notes that with the non-existence of many domesticated animals in the New World, there had been no history of disease within the human populations to make them resistant to all those that were brought by Europeans (Ponting 1991: 226). Beyond domesticated animals, the conditions of settled societies as mentioned above allowed infectious disease to flourish. Even beyond the walls of the city, on the battlefield in all wars predating the 20th century, more soldiers died of disease than to casualties to the enemy (Ponting 1991: 232).

With the modernization of civilization of the last two hundred years, the susceptibility to plague and massive outbreaks has been off-set, at least in the first world, only to be replaced by lifestyle pathologies caused by diet and carcinogen consumption. Cancer and cardiovascular disease cause 2/3 of the mortality in industrialized nations. Heart disease was virtually unknown a hundred years ago outside of rich populations – now it kills 40 percent of men and 20 percent of women in industrialized nations. Cancer is contracted by one in three Americans, with one in four a fatality. Cavities, virtually unknown in the prehistoric fossil record, are now proportional with the rise in industrialized sugar consumption (Ponting 1991: 236-239).

While pathologies have exponentially increased first with domestication, then cities, and now industrialization, the war against communal culture has had notable effects. Atomization and alienation from community has been increased as modern technology has given us more incentive to cyberize our sensory input, to consume, to be individualistic, etc.

Beyond the devastating effects on the health, gender equality, economic equality, and individual autonomy of civilized people, the tentacles of civilization have devastated all the integrated international communities, economies, and environments from which they have extracted resources. Only 30 percent of the world lives within industrial society, all the rest are subject to extraction-induced scarcity, left in remnant colonies established to sustain civilization and industrialization. Indigenous people have for 500 years been decimated and enslaved by civilization. Only recently has “independence” been granted, but it is of illusory empowerment. Just as the freed American slave was no longer coerced by force to work in the fields, economics kept the dynamic of servitude in full effect. While a colonizing empire may no longer directly control third world economies, the conditions of world market dependence, maintains the role of “management” corporations, often the same that were operating before “independence (Ponting 1991: 217).” It has only been by way of western industrial societies' conquest and integration of global resources that it has managed to expand beyond the bioregional constraints of all predating civilizations.

While this discussion has only been an overview of both the nature of the foraging mode and that of civilization, the literature is immense. A critique of civilization and the message implicit in the knowledge of the true harmony of band level existence is now text book anthropology. The myths of primitive savagery and the progress of civilization are no longer protected by ethnocentric insularity nor a hegemonic theology. It should no longer be believed that humans are by nature destructive – it must be known that humans are by nature cooperative, egalitarian, anarchic, and ecological. Further, it must be elucidated that the trajectory of civilization does not represent a natural inevitable progression, nor the universal path of humanity. This can be illustrated in this manner: ten to twelve thousand years ago, all but a few of the 4 million humans were foragers; today the poles have shifted to where now most of the 6 billion humans are dependent on artificial environments for subsistence. If one's unit of analysis from which to draw conclusions about the nature of human society is the modern state of our species, it would seem logical that a natural progression must have occurred to bring virtually everyone into the enslavement of domesticated existence. Though if one's unit of analysis is the full

time scale of our species, the modern situation should appear quite unrepresentative of the nature of human society. What exists today is the last chapter of the story of at least one culture, namely western civilization, the most spatially expansive virulent incarnation of civilization, it is by no means the history of humanity, nor the inevitable future of primitive society.

The intent of this piece is to contextualize the nature of human society and the social, political, and economic modes of organization it has taken. What should be clear is that this one percent of history, and the destruction of the last 10,000 years, is not the history of humanity. It is the history of one failed mode of existence, and most recently, one collapsing culture. Though it has decimated much of the wild in its path, there still exists wild nature and peoples who cannot be implicated in the history of domestication and civilization. At this moment what truly represents humanity is not the cancer that has artificially conquered the planet, but the last foragers and indigenous cultures whose myths, stories, and cosmologies are their own.

To Feder, civilization is not an inevitable sequence of change, not an exorable “march of progress” from ancient hominids to Western society; “our society represents merely one point along one of many possible pathways...not better or more ‘evolved’ than any others, and in no way an inevitable outcome of cultural evolution (Feder 2000: 503).”

In conclusion, the wisdom of Harris: “I believe it is essential that we understand our past...once we are clear about the roots of human nature...we can refute, once and for all, the notion that it is a biological imperative for our kind to form hierarchical groups. An observer viewing life shortly after cultural takeoff would easily have concluded that our species was destined to be irredeemably egalitarian...that someday the world would be divided into aristocrats and commoners, masters and slaves, billionaires and homeless beggars would have seemed wholly contrary to human nature as evidenced in the affairs of every human society then on Earth (Harris 1989: 205-209).”

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