

INTRODUCTION

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Marshall Sahlins passed away on April 5, 2021, at the age of 90.¹ “A sage among anthropologists, maybe the last one”, as Claude Lévi-Strauss once wrote of him, Sahlins played a major role in the development of anthropology and the social sciences. An extremely influential thinker, Sahlins undisputedly made “an outstanding contribution to human self-understanding” (Scott 2011). Moreover, as his former student David Graeber (who died suddenly a few months before Sahlins himself) observed in his foreword to the 2017 edition of *Stone Age Economics*:

Marshall Sahlins ... is a representative of one grand tradition in anthropology – perhaps the very grandest – that of the activist intellectual, engaged with social movements, but at the same time whose anthropological writings are if anything even more politically important, because they are aimed at having an impact on popular understandings of social, domestic, political, and economic possibilities. We might call this the anthropology of liberation, because the role of such anthropologists has always been to liberate their readers from some mind-forged manacles that they didn’t even know were there (Graeber 2017: 8-9).

Over the course of his career Sahlins published a large number of books and articles, including several ground-breaking contributions which transformed the discipline of anthropology: *Culture and Practical Reason* (1976), *The Use and Abuse of Biology: An Anthropological Critique of Sociobiology* (1976), *Islands of History* (1985), *Anahulu: The Anthropology of History in the Kingdom of Hawaii* (1992, with Patrick Kirch), *How “Natives” Think: About Captain Cook, for Example* (1995), *Culture in Practice* (2000), *What Kinship is –*

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¹ For a biographical overview of Marshall Sahlins’s thought see GOLUB, ROSENBLATT, and KELLY (2016).

and is Not (2012), *On Kings* (2017, with David Graeber). He completed the forthcoming *The New Science of the Enchanted Universe: An Anthropology of Most of Humanity* just before passing away. His best-known work, however, was certainly *Stone Age Economics*, the book whose fiftieth anniversary we are celebrating here.

Stone Age Economics originates from Sahlins's research work in the second half of the 1960s. It was written in the tradition of substantivism developed by Karl Polanyi – with whom Sahlins studied at Columbia University – and inspired by the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss, with whom he worked at the Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Sociale du Collège de France in the years 1967-1969.

As known, Polanyi's substantivism directly opposed economists' approach to primitive and traditional non-market societies: the latter show no evidence of institutional frameworks compelling individuals to obey a logic of "rational" ("efficient") economic activity and optimum allocation of their resources. Research work by Polanyi and his group thus divided economic anthropologists between substantivists and formalists, who considered the principles of economics to be of universal validity and therefore applicable to primitive societies as well. The debate peaked at the beginning of the 1970s, when Sahlins's book, arguably the most important contribution in substantivist economic anthropology, was published. As Sahlins writes, the book was part of the controversy, but aimed to reorient the discussion: "If the problem in the beginning was the 'naïve anthropology' of Economics, today it is the 'naïve economics' of Anthropology" [Sahlins 2017 (1972): xxvii], he wrote. He thought it was necessary to develop a new analysis "more appropriate to the historical societies in question" (*ibid.*), by founding an "anthropological economics" which could move past the ever-more sterile formulation of the substantivists – formalists controversy. From the perspective of Sahlins's anthropological economics, the economy is a category of culture, "a distinctive and symbolic human creation" as he wrote in *The Use and Abuse of Biology* (1976: x), which has to do with the material life processes of society "for what they are" [Sahlins 2017 (1972): xxviii]: this is the subject of *Stone Age Economics*.

The first part of the book is devoted to the model of production and distribution in hunter-gatherer societies. The starting point is a criticism of the traditional concept of the subsistence economy, which considered those societies as characterized by a relentless quest for food. In founding classical political economy in the *Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith famously described such societies as the "early and rude state of society", "the lowest and rudest state" in the evolution of humankind. Still, ethnological field research works Sahlins referred to in his book (among them, those by Richard Lee on the Dobe section of the !Kung Bushmen of the Kalahari) pro-

vided no confirmation of any such presumed deep material backwardness. Rather, such studies emphasized (as was known and recounted by many travelers, explorers and missionaries of the past) a state of relative abundance, with limited work activity, a leisurely pace of work, and adequate caloric intake. Sahlins insolently wrote that hunter-gatherer societies were “affluent” societies – Sahlins first presented the idea in 1966 at the “Man the Hunter” symposium, organized by Richard Lee and Irven De Vore (1968) at the University of Chicago.

To understand the “profound structure” of primitive societies, Sahlins proposed the concept of “domestic mode of production”, combining the old categories of *oikos* and mode of production used respectively by the German economic historian Karl Bücher and Karl Marx. The “dominant production-institution” of such societies exhibits low production “relative to existing possibilities” (*ibid.*: 38), due to under-use of resources and of labor power. And yet, contrary to the traditional view (dating back to Smith himself) in this regard, Sahlins’s sources clearly demonstrated that available technology was sufficiently productive to generate a surplus. Sahlins solves the puzzle by suggesting that the domestic mode of production embeds “an antisurplus principle”: “[g]eared to the production of livelihood, it is endowed with the tendency to come to a halt at that point” (*ibid.*: 78). The “rule” outlined in the 1920s by Russian economist Alexander Chayanov in his studies on traditional peasant economies tells us that “in the community of domestic producing groups, the greater the relative working capacity of the household the less its members work”. How can this – which an economist would consider a paradox – be explained? Sahlins refers to a life strategy which is typically adopted in primitive societies, which he called the “Zen strategy”. In other words, the organization of production in primitive economies stems from hunter-gatherers’ ability to reproduce themselves while limiting their needs, or restricting their material desires. In Sahlins’s words:

[T]here is ... a Zen road to affluence, departing from premises somewhat different from our own: that human material wants are finite and few, and technical means unchanging but on the whole adequate. Adopting the Zen strategy, a people can enjoy an unparalleled material plenty – with a low standard of living. (*ibid.*: 2).

Due to a general tendency to under-production, Sahlins noted, the domestic group might prove unable to produce its livelihood. However, this scenario is averted by means of social rules. On the one hand, kinship relationships foster solidarity and cooperation. On the other, chiefs’ generosity, to be considered as “a kind of constraint”, is but a “higher form of kinship”, and therefore of “reciprocity and liberality” (*ibid.*: 118).

The Zen strategy and the reciprocity of gift-giving are the two fundamental pillars on which the functioning of primitive communities rests. Chapter 4 of *Stone Age Economics*, entitled “The Spirit of the Gift”, discusses the political philosophy of Marcel Mauss’s *Essai sur le don*. Sahlins argues that the gift is “the primitive analogue of social contract” (*ibid.*: 153). Like Mauss before him, Sahlins takes up the legacy of the great humanistic tradition of Michel de Montaigne (in his *essais* “Des Cannibales” and “Des coches”) and Denis Diderot (in the chapters of Abbé Raynal’s *Histoire des deux Indes* which are attributed to him). Primitive peoples – the *sauvages* – are “revisited” on the basis of the “ethnographic” material provided by “travellers’ accounts”. The vision that emerges is radically alternative to the four-stage theory of the evolution of human beings which formed the ideological basis of Smith’s political economy – one that economic science has re-loaded, re-proposing it under different forms, on several occasions during its history (see Meek 1976 and Marchionatti and Cedrini 2017).

It comes as no surprise that Sahlins’s book, with its powerful critique of the market mechanism as natural, has been the subject of extensive debate. Since the early 1980s, a considerable body of ethnographic fieldwork has repeatedly questioned the validity of the empirical data used by Sahlins to support his “original affluence” argument. Still, after decades of discussion, there is broad consensus on Sahlins’s argument. As Elizabeth Cashdan (1989) wrote in a survey of economic research on hunter-gatherers, “although later research has shown [the affluent society idea] to be an overstatement, it remains true that among many hunter-gatherers subsistence work is intermittent, leisure time is abundant and nutritional status excellent” (Cashdan 1989: 22-23). But Sahlins’s ideas found wide acceptance, well beyond the circle of anthropologists: they encouraged critical reflection on today’s society, as shown by John Gowdy (1998) and Jacqueline Solway (2006). Sahlins’s alternative approach to economic issues – the anthropological-economics approach, as against the reductionism of economic orthodoxy – has had an enduring impact on anthropologists and social scientists.² At the same time, several lines of research have been developed that, while recognizing that the data assembled by Sahlins were reliable, were conducive to competing explanations compatible with formalist economic interpretations. Ethnological facts are thus considered as the result of “rational” behavior, consistently with theoretical assumptions of neoclassical economics. In particular, limits on the validity of Sahlins’s work have been

² In his introduction to the new edition of *Stone Age Economics*, Sahlins [2017 (2003)] wrote: “Stephen Gudeman, Richard Wilk and other leading scholars of the old school are bringing us into a new era of ‘cultural economics’. I would like to think of *Stone Age Economics* as an early contribution to that desirable end” (p. xx).

suggested by so-called behavioral ecology (see for example Winterhalder 1992), which stems from an attempt to combine economics with sociobiology. As the authors of this introduction have recently argued (Marchionatti and Cedrini 2017), such attempts to bring Sahlins's work into line with neo-classical economics have not been successful: his anthropological economics retains its conceptual and interpretative autonomy.

At the age of 50, *Stone Age Economics* is now admittedly a classic – one that, like any classic, not only is, but *needs* to be reinterpreted. It is an “open-ended” book, that never finishes saying what it has to say, to borrow from Italian novelist Italo Calvino. One of the most important works in economic anthropology ever, the book had a profound critical impact on various social sciences: the surprising modernity of *Stone Age Economics* never ceases to provide social scientists with inspiring ideas and approaches, whose continuing relevance is beyond dispute. Contributions to the special issue hosted by the *Annals of the Fondazione Luigi Einaudi*³ do not propose a new critical investigation of Sahlins's 1972 classic – specialized journals in anthropology will undoubtedly bring new perspectives to revisiting *Stone Age Economics*. Rather, leading scholars and experts from various social science disciplines (anthropology, sociology, economics, philosophy, history and political science, often crossing disciplinary boundaries) here offer evidence not only of the interest that Sahlins's work excites in today's theorists, but also, and primarily, of the fertility of his way of reasoning, of his refreshing desire to challenge received views and reductionist approaches to complex issues.

Thus, Chris Gregory argues that Sahlins' anthropological economics can help us reimagine an economics of the future, while John Gowdy brings Sahlins's insights into how hunter-gatherer economies functioned as social systems to today's world, showing their relevance for today's environmental and social policies. Not least, this is because, as Nicholas Xenos demonstrates, Sahlins's *Stone Age Economics* (or rather, his “Zen road to affluence” argument in particular) helps us concentrate on the culture of scarcity as intrinsically intertwined with the production of new needs, as against the vision whereby capitalism would in the end lead us towards freedom from material concerns.

More focused on Sahlins's contributions to economic anthropology as a discipline, also in critical terms, are James Carrier's “situating Sahlins” article and Philippe Chanial and Ilana Silber's reflections on Sahlins's reading of Mauss's *The Gift*. Pol Llopart concentrates on Sahlins's “continuum of

³ The symposium includes both invited articles by leading scholars in anthropology and other social sciences, and peer-reviewed papers from a call *the Annals* launched in 2019.

reciprocity” and shows how the recent debates around human-animal sociality can relate to Sahlins’s model. In their articles, Karen Ho and Osvaldo Raggio take *Stone Age Economics* as sort of implicit challenge to posterity, and discuss the possibility that Sahlins’s theorizing can be instrumental in achieving a better understanding and even rethinking of today’s (“Global North”, Ho would say) culture.

Articles by Sacha Bourgeois-Gironde, Sergio Cesaratto and Stefano Di Bucchianico and Giuseppe Danese all address economic behavior in the light of Sahlins’s work, and engage in cross-disciplinary ventures stimulated by the debate on *Stone Age Economics*. While Bourgeois-Gironde focuses on monetary exchanges with the general aim of anchoring modern economic behavior in natural history, Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico concentrate on economic surplus to reflect upon the necessary bridges, some of which are yet to be built, between anthropology and economics. Giuseppe Danese explores the firm as potential ground for the study of how the ritual and the symbolic affect economic decision-making.

Lastly, an obituary and a testament. Veronica Barassi gives us a fresco of “one of the most radical and interesting intellectuals of our times”, David Graeber, engaged in deconstructing, like Sahlins, our western-centric understandings of human nature, economic life and anthropological processes. Marshall Sahlins’s own contribution to the symposium was written between the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020. We leave readers the pleasure of being introduced by Sahlins himself to the reflections which inspire his latest and last works (Sahlins 2019), and in particular his forthcoming book on *The Enchanted Universe*.

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