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TEXT 08

MARK NATHAN COHEN,  
EXCERPT FROM  
*HEALTH AND THE RISE  
OF CIVILIZATION*

Mark Nathan Cohen is an American anthropologist. In his book *Health and the Rise of Civilization*, he examines the biology and health of early humans.

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There is evidence that primitive populations suffer relatively low rates of many diseases compared to the more affluent modern societies. Primitive populations appear to enjoy several nutritional advantages over our affluent modern societies that protect them from many of the diseases that now afflict us. These include high bulk diets, diets with relatively few calories in proportion to other nutrients, diets low in total fat (and particularly low in saturated fat), and diets high in potassium and low in sodium. These advantages are common to such groups and appear to help protect them against a series of conditions that plague the more affluent of modern populations. Diabetes appears to be extremely rare in primitive groups (both hunter-gatherers and farmers) as are circulatory problems, including high blood pressure, heart disease, and strokes. Similarly, disorders associated with poor bowel function, such as appendicitis, hemorrhoids, and bowel cancers are extremely rare. Rates of many other types of cancer — particularly breast and lung — appear to be low in most small-scale societies. This is true even when corrected for the small proportion of the elderly often observed. Even those cancers that we now consider to be diseases of underdevelopment may be the historical product of changes in human behavior involving food storage or the human-assisted spread of infections. The record of the skeletons suggests that cancers were comparatively rare in prehistory.

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Source

Mark Nathan Cohen, *Health and the Rise of Civilization* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1989) 138.

## TEXT 09

# JARED DIAMOND, EXCERPT FROM “THE WORST MISTAKE IN THE HISTORY OF THE HUMAN RACE”

Jared Diamond is a professor of geography at UCLA, best known for his book *Guns, Germs and Steel*. The main idea of this short article is clearly reflected in its title.



### THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

When you look at the texts from Cohen and Diamond, think about how they address health problems caused by agriculture. What kinds of evidence are used in their arguments? Do you believe this evidence?

How do you show that the lives of people 10,000 years ago got better when they abandoned hunting and gathering for farming? Are twentieth century hunter-gatherers really worse off than farmers? Scattered throughout the world, several dozen groups of so-called primitive people, like the Kalahari Bushmen, continue to support themselves that way. It turns out that these people have plenty of leisure time, sleep a good deal, and work less hard than their farming neighbors. For instance, the average time devoted each week to obtaining food is only 12 to 19 hours for one group of Bushmen, 14 hours or less for the Hadza nomads of Tanzania. One Bushman, when asked why he hadn't emulated neighboring tribes by adopting agriculture, replied, "Why should we, when there are so many mongongo nuts in the world?"

While farmers concentrate on high-carbohydrate crops like rice and potatoes, the mix of wild plants and animals in the diets of surviving hunter-gatherers provides more protein and a better balance of other nutrients. In one study, the Bushmen's average daily food intake (during a month when food was plentiful) was 2,140 calories and 93 grams of protein. This is considerably greater than the recommended daily allowance for people of their size. It's almost impossible to imagine that Bushmen, who eat 75 or so wild plants, could die of starvation the way hundreds of thousands of Irish farmers and their families did during the potato famine of the 1840s.

#### Source

Jared Diamond, "The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race," *Discover* magazine (May 1987) 64–66.

TEXT 11

# RICHARD LEE, FROM “WHAT HUNTERS DO FOR A LIVING”

Richard Lee is a Canadian anthropologist who has written a number of books and articles on hunter-gatherer societies in southern Africa. This excerpt describes the lifestyle of a Bushmen tribe.

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A woman gathers on one day enough food to feed her family for three days, and spends the rest of her time resting in camp, doing embroidery, visiting other camps, or entertaining visitors from other camps. For each day at home, kitchen routines, such as cooking, nut cracking, collecting firewood, and fetching water, occupy one to three hours of her time. This rhythm of steady work and steady leisure is maintained throughout the year. The hunters tend to work more frequently than the women, but their schedule is uneven. It is not unusual for a man to hunt avidly for a week and then do no hunting at all for two or three weeks. Since hunting is an unpredictable business and subject to magical control, hunters sometimes experience a run of bad luck and stop hunting for a month or longer. During these periods, visiting, entertaining, and especially dancing are the primary activities of men.

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**Source**

Richard Lee, “What Hunters Do for a Living,” in *Man the Hunter*, eds. R.B. Lee and I. DeVore (Chicago: Aldine, 1968).



THINGS TO  
THINK ABOUT

With these texts we are looking more at daily life. What do you think about the lifestyle of the Bushmen? Does this look like an appealing way of life? What do you think about the different roles for men and women in Bushmen culture? Do you think Lee is making a statement about this society in general? What might he be suggesting?

## TEXT 12

# MARSHALL SAHLINS, EXCERPT FROM “THE ORIGINAL AFFLUENT SOCIETY”

Marshall Sahlins is an American anthropologist who is best known for his theory that hunter-gatherers were “the original affluent society,” which was first expressed in a symposium given in 1966. As a result, many anthropologists shifted their attitudes and changed their ideas about hunter-gathering societies, much in the way that new theories and findings led scientists to change their minds about topics like the size of the Universe and continental drift. Originally, many scientists looked at such societies as primitive and constantly near the edge of starvation. Sahlins suggests instead — using ethnographic studies of diet, work, and leisure time — that hunter-gathering societies were much more stable and prosperous than previously thought because they had few material wants beyond those necessary for survival.

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The world’s most primitive people have few possessions, but they are not poor. Poverty is not a certain small amount of goods, nor is it just a relation between means and ends; above all it is a relation between people. Poverty is a social status. As such it is the invention of civilization. It has grown with civilization, at once as an invidious [or unjust] distinction between classes and more importantly as a tributary relation that can render agrarian peasants more susceptible to natural catastrophes than any winter camp of Alaskan Eskimo [hunter-gatherers].

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### Source

Marshall Sahlins, “The Original Affluent Society,” *Stone Age Economics* (Hawthorn, NY: Aldine de Gruyter, 1972). <http://www.eco-action.org/dt/affluent.html>



### THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

As you read the Sahlins text, consider the information given in the introductory note as well as the text itself. What was the main idea expressed by Sahlins? Why do you think this may have been controversial at the time? Compare Sahlins with other scholars we’ve seen in big history, like Hubble or Wegener. How did they get their peers to change their minds?

## TEXT 13

# KEVIN REILLY, *EXCERPT* *FROM THE WEST AND* *THE WORLD: A HISTORY* *OF CIVILIZATION*

Kevin Reilly is a professor of humanities at Raritan Valley Community College and was the cofounder and first president of the World History Association.

The most obvious achievements of the first civilizations are the monuments — the pyramids, temples, palaces, statues, and treasures — that were created for the new ruling class of kings, nobles, priests, and their officials. But civilized life is much more than the capacity to create monuments.

Civilized life is secure life. At the most basic level this means security from the sudden destruction that village communities might suffer. Civilized life gives the feeling of permanence. It offers regularity, stability, order, even routine. Plans can be made. Expectations can be realized. People can be expected to act predictably, according to the rules.

The first cities were able to attain stability with walls that shielded the inhabitants from nomads and armies, with the first codes of law that defined human relationships, with police and officials that enforced the laws, and with institutions that functioned beyond the lives of their particular members. City life offered considerably more permanence and security than village life.

### Source

Kevin Reilly, *The West and the World: A History of Civilization* (New York: Harper Collins, 1989).



### THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

What does Reilly seem to be saying about agricultural societies? How is his approach different from the arguments of Sahlins or Diamond? Which do you prefer? Which lifestyle do you think best matches up with your own ideas of quality of life?