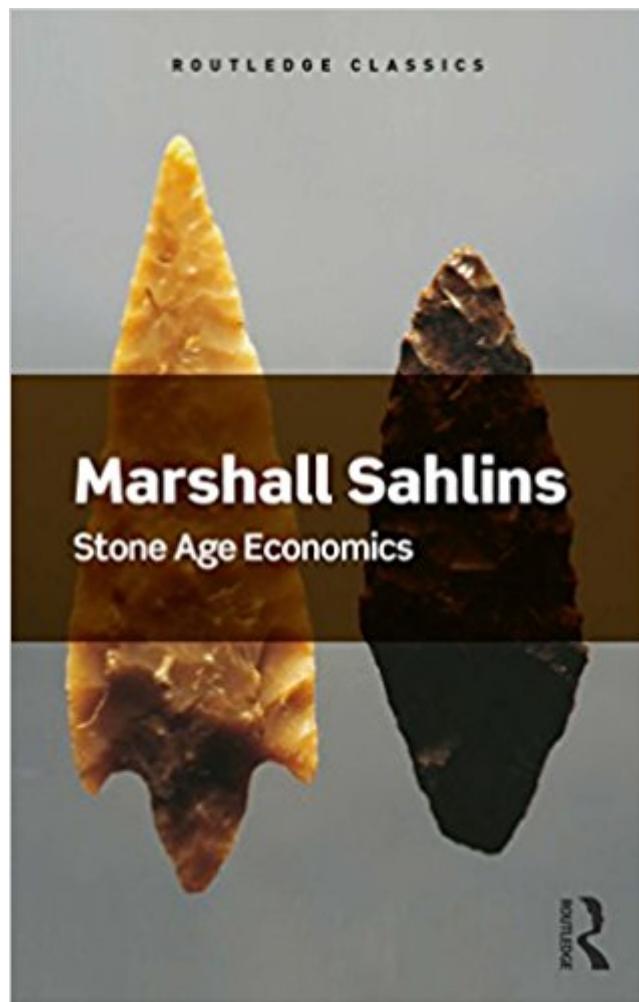


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Stone Age Economics (Routledge Classics)



Synopsis

Since its first publication over forty years ago Marshall Sahlins's *Stone Age Economics* has established itself as a classic of modern anthropology and arguably one of the founding works of anthropological economics. Ambitiously tackling the nature of economic life and how to study it comparatively, Sahlins radically revises traditional views of the hunter-gatherer and so-called primitive societies, revealing them to be the original "affluent society." Sahlins examines notions of production, distribution and exchange in early communities and examines the link between economics and cultural and social factors. A radical study of tribal economies, domestic production for livelihood, and of the submission of domestic production to the material and political demands of society at large, *Stone Age Economics* regards the economy as a category of culture rather than behaviour, in a class with politics and religion rather than rationality or prudence. Sahlins concludes, controversially, that the experiences of those living in subsistence economies may actually have been better, healthier and more fulfilled than the millions enjoying the affluence and luxury afforded by the economics of modern industrialisation and agriculture. This Routledge Classics edition includes a new foreword by David Graeber, London School of Economics.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A must read for any student, regardless of the field.

He takes a subject that could be dry and dull, and makes it interesting. The logical conclusion from this book is that we should figure out what we really need materially, calculate how many hours we have to work to supply these needs, and not work a minute more.

Probably not of interest to many people but a classic in the field.

This is a well-known and rather old (1972) classic work on the economics of exchange as a cultural phenomenon. I remember this book was quoted several times during my studies of economics (and that was in the early 80s). I always kept the idea that as an economist I actually should read it myself, and so now I finally did. The book is written from an anthropological angle and claims that stone age economies were the original affluent society. The claim is startling as it is original, as it runs counterintuitive; weren't people in early primitive (as defined by level of societal complexity) communities not always on the border of starvation and their needs much unfulfilled? Here the author points out that in the central concept of economics, scarcity, or the tension between wants and means, can be reduced either from the supply side (which is what modern production and exchange economies do) or on the demand side, the Zen way to happiness so to speak, by not having much of any demand. Within their own context such hunter-gatherer societies were therefore quite well-off and not on the brink of disaster. To have high wealth in the form of goods was simply not practical in this way of life as you had to carry all of it around hence slowing you down. Similarly, there was often an under-use of resources rather than a constant bumping against existence limits. Of course, there were very real Malthusian limits also as a result of the societal organization. Nevertheless, the point on scarcity is well made and can be seen as a (mild) critique of consumer society. It also brings the social and cultural context in which economics plays to the fore. At the same time, the author discusses the role of gift exchange in return for other goods as a social phenomenon next to the purely economic terms of exchange. Gifts and trade rather than war has a very real meaning in societies and is especially tangible in less complex groups, something he shows in true anthropologist fashion by referring to some interesting studies of several small societies in Africa and Polynesia. The same idea also of course holds for more developed nations, but here

the direct social relationships among and between much larger groups is much more anonymous and diffused. I am an economist, not an anthropologist, and found it very interesting to read this well-written and sometimes humorous book in order to realise once again how economics is a social science in the true sense of the word. Nothing to be ashamed about, and it is always good as a refresher to read from different angles on the fundamentals of your own profession. recommended.

I heard Sahlins speak, live, and it was fascinating. This book is fascinating, every bit the classic the main review says it is. It is still rather left brain. I will balance that by mentioning *Journey to the Ancestral Self: The Native Lifeway Guide to Living in Harmony with the Earth Mother* (Bk.1), which gives one quite a look at the indigenous mindset, by an author who dealt with native american, siberian nomad, australian aborigine, and wild wolf culture. He lived with wild wolves, even going out with the pack. *Inside the Neolithic Mind: Consciousness, Cosmos and the Realm of the Gods* gives you an idea of the mindset, also. *In Search of Ancient Ireland: The Origins of the Irish from Neolithic Times to the Coming of the English* covers some of the same material, in passing.

This superb work discusses the types of economic organization which currently exist and which have existed throughout human history (and into pre-history). It then shows the effect of such economic organizations on social structure. This book should be required reading for all students of economics, as it has major implications for our own societies today. *Stone Age Economics* is also a very interesting and readable text, not at all dry or boring. It is filled with information about various cultures and interesting details such as the fact that the hunter-gatherer Bushmen in the Kalihari desert spend only about 1 1/2 hours per day on staying alive, and spend the rest of the time singing, drinking and telling stories. This is a truly important work.

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