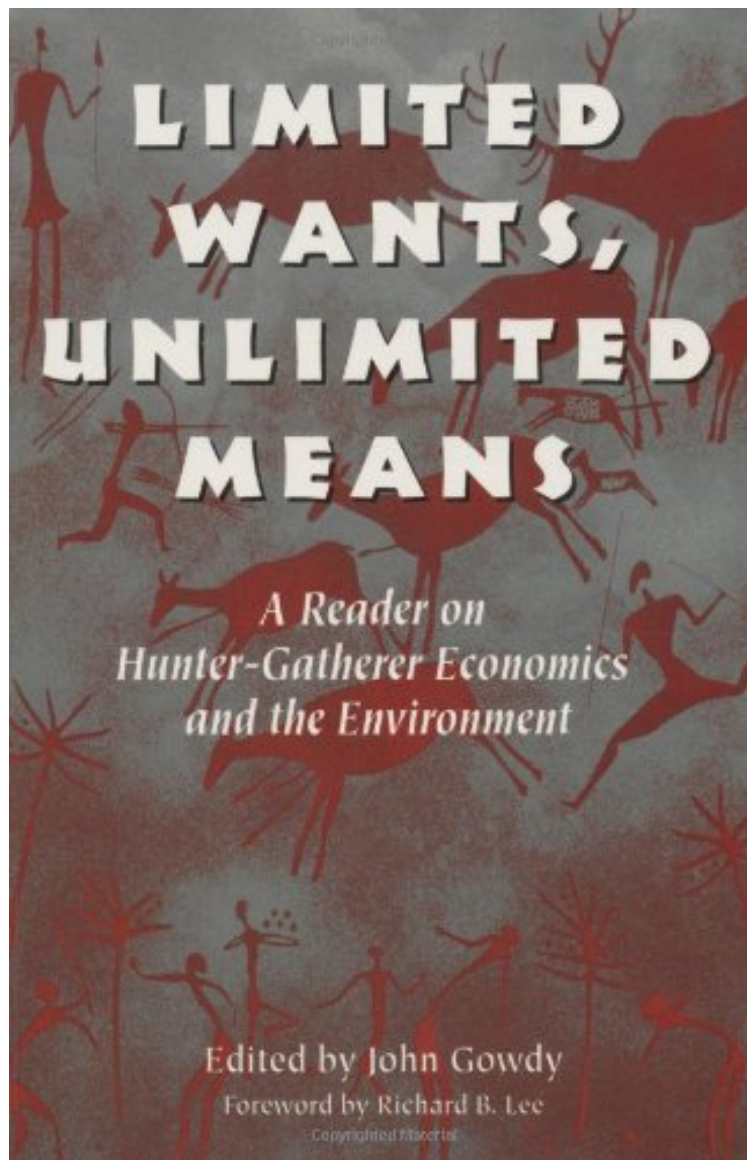


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Limited Wants, Unlimited Means: A Reader On Hunter-Gatherer Economics And The Environment

John Gowdy

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Modern civilization has a tendency to congratulate itself as it exhales a heavy and self-aggrandizing sigh of relief that we are so blessed to live in this wonderful day in age, rejoicing, "No more are the brutish days of 'survival of the fittest' and the never-ending toils of struggling to find food, battling disease, and fending off invaders and predators!" But as clearly demonstrated in this book, the pre-agricultural lives of our ancestors were comprised mostly of leisure time, because food was generally plentiful, requiring only a few hours of "work" per day. People were generally healthy and happy, largely in part because their only "work" was enjoyable communal activities that strengthened social bonds and strengthened one's connection to nature. And while there certainly were occasional famines and other hardships, this book paints a pretty clear picture that, for all our "progress" over the last few millennia, in many (or most?) regards we are worse off now than when we started. Some of modern civilization's most lamentable qualities are often casually written off as human nature, as we collectively shrug our shoulders and concede that our species is "naturally" and unavoidably selfish, materialistic, hierarchical, male-dominated, warlike, etc., touting the modern pervasiveness of these qualities as evidence of their inevitability. But modern civilization comprises only a tiny sliver on the timeline of human existence, and by closely examining the first 99% of human history (as this book does), we see that in fact the most consistent human qualities were peacefulness, sharing, sexual equality, social equality, equal distribution of "wealth" (in terms of food), and so forth. Notably absent are the repression and shame that dominate the cultures of today. The life of a hunter-gatherer sounds, to me at least, quite enviable and enticing. I should point out that this book is academic/scientific in nature, and as one might reasonably expect of such material, it generally lacks things like humor, wit, personality, etc., thereby making it a potential snooze fest for many readers. But I don't hold that against the book, because it never promises or pretends to be a thrilling read, and what it lacks in pizzazz it more than makes up for with fascinating info regarding the true nature of humankind, and where we (modern humans) came from. This book is a collection of essays and papers by different authors, and as such the voice and the writing style is inconsistent. That in itself does not detract from the book, but the reason why I docked one star is because a few of the essays used writing styles that didn't jive with me for one reason or another (choppy word flow, convoluted sentences that could have been greatly simplified, intense usage of the passive voice, etc.). But overall, I would definitely recommend this book to anyone who is interested in anthropology, with the one caveat mentioned above: what makes this book worthwhile is not its flair, but its implications regarding our understanding of human nature.

For roughly 99% of their existence on earth, Homo sapiens lived as small bands of hunter-gatherers in societies that appear to have solved problems of production, distribution, social equity, and environmental sustainability that our own culture seems incapable of addressing. *Limited Wants, Unlimited Means* examines the hunter-gatherer society and lifestyle, providing a brief introduction to the rich literature on non-agricultural societies. It examines the economics of traditional societies and presents a multifaceted investigation of how such societies function and what that can teach us in our own quest for sustainability and equality.

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About the Author John Gowdy is Professor and Chair of the Department of Economics at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York.