



The Other Side of Eden: Hunters, Farmers, and the Shaping of the World

Hugh Brody

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Hugh Brody crystallizes three decades of studying, learning from, crusading for, and thinking about hunter-gatherers in this profound and provocative book. Contrary to stereotype, he says, it is the farmers and their colonizing descendants—ourselves—who are the true nomads, doomed to the geographical and spiritual restlessness embodied in the story of Genesis. By contrast, the hunters have a deep attachment to the place and ways of their ancestors that stems from an enviable sense, distinctively expressed in thought, word, and act, of being part of the fabric of the natural and spiritual worlds.

The Other Side of Eden: Hunters, Farmers, and the Shaping of the World Details

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Nicole says

A fascinating and satisfyingly-detailed argument that occasionally gets a bit too sentimental. Still, I think it deserves a wider audience.

James McKenna says

I like this book a lot. Brody is curious about how people shape language and how language shapes them. On these topics he has smart things to say. He learns about people by living with them, and he goes in humbly. As a result, people want to teach him, so he learns about culture from the ground up. This informs his observations with lived experience, and insights and wisdom--not just factual information--based on his subjects' perceptions and challenges specific to their culture.

I share Brody's deep interest in hunter-gatherer life. People in these cultures live incredibly close to animals who share their world, to the land (and sea), the seasons, the weather, and they have beautiful, often spiritual things to say about them.

Brody writes well, and he has a good sense of narrative, character, and drama. His book blends narrative and analysis and includes illuminating asides. He's an interesting person who's had interesting experiences and has interesting things to say about them.

Catherine says

IMO the first two-thirds were five stars, but I found the last third a bit uneven. I was especially disappointed with how Brody discussed gender roles in hunter gatherer cultures; I thought in spite of his attempts to explain how women and men have "separate yet equal" roles, his explanation itself showed bias. I also thought his conclusion was on the perfunctory side.

On the whole, the book gave me lots to think about. Definitely worth a read.

Leslie says

This was among the best books I've read this year. Brody has the clearest picture of the relationship between hunting cultures and farming that I've seen. He writes compellingly weaving storied experience and broader theory.

Paul says

Some great passages in here on the different hunter-gather communities Brody has spent time living and working with. Unfortunately, for me, too often it gets rather bogged down in the intricacies of linguistic origins or the various belief systems. As interesting as these subjects are it felt much more disjointed and less satisfactory reading than his other work *Maps And Dreams* which I'd recently read and enjoyed far more. For a student of this particular field of anthropology it will doubtless prove extremely valuable.

Beck says

This book definitely changed the way I think about indigenous societies. I enjoyed Brody's writing because he presents his theories with typical anthropological anecdotes, but also gives some well-written religious meaning to the hunter-gatherer history and lifestyle.

Zac Ballin says

like ishmael, but better

Richard Reese says

Hugh Brody is an English anthropologist. His parents were Jewish, and a number of their relatives died in the holocaust. Brody spent three decades in Canada hanging out with natives raised in hunter-gatherer societies. He worked for the government, and made documentary films.

Brody was raised in a nutjob civilization. He found the hunter-gatherers to be fascinating, because they had many virtues that were missing in modern society. The natives were kind and generous people. They radiated a profound love for the land of their birth, the home of their ancient ancestors. They deliberately had small families. Nobody gave orders to others. Everyone made their own decisions. Children were never disciplined.

He described his experiences in *The Other Side of Eden*, an excellent book. It examined the vast gulf between farming societies and hunter-gatherers — the broken and the free. In many ways, it was a predator-prey game. Wild people were useless obstacles to the insatiable hunger of the powerful empire builders and soil miners.

Conquered hunters had to be broken — turned into educated, Christian, English-speaking wageworkers. They had to be made dependent on a farm-based civilization, and this required turning their lives and minds inside out. It was different in India, where the British colonized people who were already farmers. These folks were allowed to keep their language, religion, and culture. The empire simply skimmed off a portion of the cash flow and became a morbidly obese parasite.

Brody's family was Orthodox and Zionist. Later in life, his mind-altering experience with hunter-gatherers compelled him to reexamine his cultural programming. *Genesis* was essentially the creation story of western

civilization. Eden was paradise, and Adam and Eve were provided with everything they needed. There was just one simple rule to follow, and they promptly disobeyed it. God threw them out.

They had two sons. Cain was a farmer, and Abel was a herder. God was not a vegetarian, and he loved Abel's offerings of meat. Cain got jealous, and killed his brother. God condemned him to a life of endless toil. Eventually, God came to loath the troublesome humans, and decided to drown them all. Only a few were decent — Noah and his family were spared. God instructed the survivors to spread across the world, multiply, and subdue wildness.

So, the descendants of Noah were cursed to be wanderers, with no permanent home. Soil depletion, overbreeding, and belligerent neighbors forced them to keep moving. We think of hunters as being nomads, and farmers as sedentary, but the opposite is closer to the truth. Hunters tend to remain in the same territory for ages. Farmers commonly pack up and move when greener pastures become available.

Yes, hunters did eventually migrate to every corner of the planet, but the diaspora took more than 100,000 years. The new farming game grew explosively, and spread everywhere in a few thousand years. It was a huge and tragic change in the human journey, because it was thoroughly unsustainable, ravaged everything in its path, and created mobs of rootless broken people.

Over 200 years ago, Sir William Jones noticed that Sanskrit had similarities to other languages, like Latin, Greek, and German. Other linguists pursued this notion, and discovered many related languages. These are now known as the Indo-European family of languages, and they are spoken by half of humankind. They likely originated in the Fertile Crescent, and spread in all directions, as agriculture expanded.

Brody noted that Genesis made no mention of hunter-gatherers, it was a story told by the victors. This Hebrew creation myth was especially peculiar in that it described two-legs as being superior to all the other animals. In the stories of wild people, two-legs were often portrayed as the newbies — clumsy, comical, childlike critters who had much to learn from the older, wiser species.

The natives of northern Canada believed that they lived in the most beautiful place in the world. It gave them everything they needed. They treated their home with great reverence and respect. They were extremely lucky that their chilly Eden wasn't prime real estate for agriculture. With the exception of horrific epidemics, they were relatively unmolested until the twentieth century.

But then, hell rumbled into Eden. Obnoxious missionaries told them they were wicked devil worshippers. The government built permanent settlements for them, with churches, schools, and stores. Their ancestral land became the property of the state. Loggers, ranchers, and miners moved in. A large region of Eden became a training ground for supersonic low altitude NATO bombers. By and by, the natives became fond of the pain killing magic of oblivion drinking. The good old days were over.

The residential schools were sadistically cruel. Children were taken from their families and sent far away. The kids were beaten for speaking their language. Many were malnourished or sexually abused. Many died. The primary goal of school was ethnocide — eliminating wild culture. They weren't really creating improved people; they were breaking them, like ranchers break wild horses. The children were taught that they were primitive, and that everything they knew was wrong and stupid. After a year of English-only, they forgot their native tongue. It took years to relearn it, and many never did.

Control is the foundation of the farming mindset. Settlers ravage ancient forests with sharp axes and plows. They exterminate the wildlife and build sturdy fences. When Brody brought an Inuit elder to England, they

took a drive in the country. Anaviapik was stunned, “It’s all built!” The original ecosystem was gone. It was unbelievable.

On one project, Brody hung out with alcoholic natives in an urban skid row. He noted that white drinkers took great pride in holding their liquor while drinking heavily. It was uncool to stumble around or slur words. Respectable boozers remained in control. Natives, on the other hand, let go. “There is a welcome loss of self, a flight into another state of being, another kind of person” — a spirit journey.

Control is impossible in the hunting world. Fish, birds, and game go where they wish, and do as they please. Weather happens and patterns change suddenly without warning. Hunter-gatherers must continually pay close attention to the land and its creatures. A living ecosystem is not a predictable machine. Intuition and improvisation are essential for survival. Folks must be open to many states of mind. Dreams provided important information. “If there is a trail to be discovered, the dreamer must find it.”

“It is artists, speculative scientists, and those whose journeys in life depend on not quite knowing the destination who are close to hunter-gatherers, who rely upon a hunter-gatherer mind.”

Chris says

What of the books that shaped my thinking about the world.

Max says

Hey! Do you hate farmers? Then this book is for you.

Ok, let me put that more diplomatically. If you're anything like me, at some point you have looked at all the terrible problems with our society, throughout its history (ruined environment, wars, colonization, christianity, etc) and have wondered what the f__k is wrong with white people. Hugh Brody's certainly has. And his answer is really interesting. He writes that the root of many of our problems may be with farming, and the way that farming organizes society.

In 'The Other Side of Eden' he retells the history of the world as an endless lopsided struggle between two kinds of societies. On one side are agricultural societies. On the other side are hunter-gatherer societies. The history of civilization has been the history of agricultural aggression toward and subjugation of hunting societies. He argues that it isn't actually hunting societies that are nomadic, and farming societies that are sedentary, but the reverse! Farming societies are nomadic, and hunting tribes are sedentary! I won't say any more, 'cause I could just go on and on and on.

An amazing, original, courageous piece of writing. Few books really have the power to change the way you think about the world. This one just might.

H Wesselius says

Excellent mix of the personal and academic perspective on hunter/gathers. And since most of the book focuses on Canadian hunter/gathers who occupy over half the country, it would have been nice for him to draw out the implications for Canada -- governance, identity etc.

Smiley Gyrus says

Brody explores the differences between hunter/gatherer and agricultural societies. He make a compelling argument about the source of many of civilization's shortcomings, using a parallel narrative of his experiences in Canadian Inuit communities. To me, this book had linguistic and philosophical depth that was engaging. At times he is overly sentimental and praises the concept of a "noble savage" a bit much for my tastes, but overall a great read.

Rocky Magdalena says

this might honestly be the best book i have ever read, and i've read a lot. if you can read this book and come away from it thinking there is nothing fundamentally wrong with civilization, then i probably want nothing much to do with you.

the text embraces cosmology, linguistics, natural history, ecology, anthropology, philosophy, sociology, history, and much more... but no simple list of areas of inquiry can do justice to its scope and significance.

here's a review i once wrote for it elsewhere: "do you think that the struggles and the fate of the world's remaining hunter-gatherer societies have nothing to do with your own? do you think anyone is really a willing conscript into a sedentary life based on the accumulation of capital? read this book for an unforgettable picture of the frontier of our world of farms and parking lots as it bleeds out ever further toward the ends of the earth. this breathtaking and heartbreaking text absolutely overflows the bounds of genre, science, discipline, and dispassion. if you want to see how the package deal of domestication, colonization, and commodification (described in its Middle Ages and early modern european dimensions in Silvia Federici's "Caliban and the Witch") might have wormed its way into being and glimpse the loss with which even the civilized are yet threatened... look no further. i can't think of a book that i would honestly say is better than this. astounding."

Corbrett says

This book is helpful for shaping one's perspective of different cultures and understanding one's ties to his/her own culture. It goes far beyond just telling the story of a few native tribes or people but really gives insight into differences between the hunter/gatherer way of life and the farmer way of life since European discovery of the Americas and its associated conflict. The comparison of these two ways of life is detailed and very engaging. There is no soap box preaching only a genuine attempt to convey a message of different but equal.

Bruce says

With varying degrees of anthropology, history, philosophy and theology Brody's work is at the very least thought provoking. With the idea that Genesis can be viewed as a history of the interaction between hunter-gatherers and farmers the author points out that farming societies are as nomadic, if not more so, than hunter-gatherers. As farming communities increase in size members have to leave for other places to make a living. Hunter-gatherers generally stay in the same relative geographic area. Reading this book one wonders who is the more 'civilized' the colonizers or the indigenous peoples they try to replace.

monika says

Insightful. Required reading for an anthropology class but as enjoyable as if I had picked it out myself. One of the few books that really changes the way you not only look at a culture, but the world as a whole.

Sherry says

One of the most enlightening books I have ever read. Puts nature and human beings into their proper perspective, that is to say that humans should survive in a manner similar to our ancestors, the hunters and gatherers, if we want to survive as a species and not wreck our planet's resources. Since the dawn of the age of farming, we have wreaked havoc on our planet, and Brody systematically and thoroughly shows us how this is so. He spent a lot of time with the natives of upper western Canada, where he learned more about about changing climate, respecting nature, and the land. The reader comes away with a sense of dire urgency for our future and a sense that one can make a difference in the future with the knowledge gained here.
