

**Marshall Sahlins. *The Western Illusion of Human Nature*. Chicago, IL: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2008. Pp. 112. \$12.95 (paper). ISBN: 0979405726**

**Reviewer: Kevin Kniffin<sup>1</sup>**

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Each academic discipline tends to have its own primary stocks-in-trade. For anthropologists, various editions of the “nature vs. nurture” question provide regular sources of currency.

Emeritus professor Marshall Sahlins is a veteran of “nature vs. nurture” debates with well-known contributions that include his long essay *The Use and Abuse of Biology* (1977), which he published in reaction to the rise of sociobiology. As a fixture in the University of Chicago’s anthropology department for decades, Sahlins is also well-known for his characterization of hunter-gatherers as “the original affluent society” since his work on the topic is often excerpted from *Stone Age Economics* (1972) for introductory anthropology courses.

In his newest long essay on a similar set of topics, Sahlins traces the “Hobbesian” view of “human nature” to lots of people, many of whom predate Hobbes by more than one thousand years. In other words, Sahlins presents an argument that Hobbes did not originate the short, nasty, brutish view of humanity that is most closely associated with Hobbes’ name; instead, Sahlins focuses on the ancient Greek chronicler Thucydides as a prime mover of this view.

Throughout the course of 112 pages, Sahlins elaborates on his lengthy subtitle: “With Reflections on the Long History of Hierarchy, Equality, and the Sublimation of Anarchy in the West, and Comparative Notes of the Human Condition.” If this sounds like an ambitious topic to address in 112 pages, Sahlins warns his readers with a “Notice” before the book begins that “My justification is the Nietzschean principle that big issues

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