

Oration for Professor Marshall Sahlins (LSE Presentation Ceremony, 14 December 2011)

Director, ladies and gentlemen, it is with great pleasure and conviction that I propose Professor Marshall Sahlins for the award of an Honorary Doctorate at the LSE. Professor Sahlins is a truly world-renowned anthropologist. His theories and insights into the cultural nature of human nature have not only crossed disciplinary and geographical borders but have, furthermore, had a positive impact on the lives of indigenous peoples who, positioned at the centres of their own world systems, have struggled to encompass the encroachments of a peripheral modernity.

The hallmark of outstanding achievement in the social sciences is to have developed analyses of human social being that become watersheds, insights that cannot be reversed, understandings that become common knowledge. We may continue to critique the terms and conditions of such knowledge, but we cannot proceed without taking it into account. There is no going back to a world in which we are not informed by these ideas. Over the course of an almost sixty-year career of iconoclastic and controversial productivity, Professor Sahlins has made precisely such an outstanding contribution to human self-understanding.

Before Professor Sahlins, history was acultural and culture was ahistorical. The social was simply the symbolic expression and manipulation of universal human biology. Since Professor Sahlins, we can no longer maintain these false dichotomies. He not only mediated French structuralism and the development of post-structuralism to the Anglophone world, his critical engagement with the French *Annales* School of history forever transformed history from random chance into meaningfully ordered and re-ordering events. Through his monumental historical studies of Hawaii and Fiji, he taught us that change and continuity are not antithetical, but two sides of the same diachronic process. If he made it impossible for anthropologists to ignore history, he also made it unwise for historians and archaeologists to ignore anthropology.

As he himself has put it, he has evolved from an evolutionary materialist to a cultural theorist and critic of biological determinism to a post-structuralist nondualist. Yet through all of these changes there has been intellectual and principled continuity. Professor Sahlins has consistently argued against the idea that nature and culture are ontologically separate domains—one real and primary, the other ideal and secondary. As early as his still-influential theory of the original affluent society, first published in the 1960s, he has challenged the Western Hobbesian narrative of ‘the war of all against all’—the picture of natural man as essentially atomistic, insatiably appetitive, and in want of social control. ‘Culture’, he has eloquently summed it up in a recent publication, ‘is the human nature’, not its antidote.

But, if there are few anthropologists of whom it can be said that their analyses have become part of human wisdom, there are perhaps fewer still of whom it can be said that their work has changed lives for the better and promoted social justice. The motto of the LSE is ‘to know the causes of things’. Professor Sahlins’s theory of history stands as a prime example of what this can mean for the social sciences. It powerfully models the causes of cultural transformation as the mutual co-conditioning of received cultural structures and contingent occurrences. This theory has been widely invoked to support the ongoing authenticity of indigenous cultural traditions despite the obvious impact of colonial and post-colonial forms of Euro-American modernity. Because it explains how change is the normal process of tradition formation, Professor Sahlins’s work has been used to challenge attempts to delegitimize the traditions-based claims of indigenous peoples to vital rights—such as claims to land, water, and hunting grounds—simply because their traditions can be found to be dynamic processes rather than ossified forms.

Professor Sahlins has, moreover, vigorously argued that the unwritten traditions of indigenous peoples are indicative of histories as influential and important to the shaping of global processes as those documented in the written records of other contexts. His support for ethnohistorical studies has earned him praise and gratitude from indigenous scholars for his acknowledgement of their cultures as vital and productive: neither static and incapable of innovation nor despoiled and displaced by modernity. An intellectual who has always been politically engaged, Professor Sahlins has lent the considerable power of his conscience, erudition, and polemical wit to controversial themes, from protesting against the Vietnam War to serving currently as Executive Publisher of the Prickly Paradigm Press, an outlet for provocative pamphlets at the intersection between critical theory and political principles.

Director, I request that by the authority of the Court of Governors, you admit Professor Marshall Sahlins to the degree of Doctor of Science (Social Sciences).