Excerpted from “Back of History (Man in the Beginning) by William Howells

This brings us . . . to the meaning of the so-called Neolithic revolution. If you generalize, and take the typical effects on culture of hunting life on the one hand and of farming life on the other, you can see that something stupendous took place . . . it was a breaking of one of nature’s bonds, the freeing of man from the limits of the natural supply of food.

…simple hunter-gatherers . . . have a few crude ideas about conservation and some . . . exerted themselves in pious rites\(^1\) to make the game more plentiful. But that is wishful thinking; nature is in control, not they. Nature goads them about from spot to spot like howling monkeys, and there is nothing they can do about it. They cannot stockpile their food: when they have eaten, it is high time to start thinking about the next meal. Around any camp there are only so many wild animals and so many edible plants, because of the balance of nature. When these have been hunted or picked beyond a given point, the supply becomes too short and cannot recover, perhaps, for that season. What do the people in the camp do? They pick up and move on, to a place where the game is untouched. So this band must have enough territory to keep rebuilding the supply, it must preserve the supply against poachers, and it must move, move, move.

What about the numbers of people? Since they are actually part of the balance of nature themselves, they will be limited to a number which their territory can support in its worst (not its best) years. So the whole human population must be relatively sparse and spread out.

And the size of the band? Actually the simplest family can carry on this kind of a life, the man to hunt and the woman to collect vegetables, insects, water and firewood and to tend to odd jobs. But this leaves them with no help if they have need of it, while larger groups may not only protect themselves better but hunt more effectively, whether by co-operating in a rabbit drive or by multiplying the chances of finding and killing a large animal on which all can feed. However, the size of the band soon reaches a point at which it presses too hard on the food supply. There will simply not be enough food within their radius of action around the camp, or the band itself will not be able to move fast enough and far enough to tap the resources it needs. Only once in a while can bands come together in tribal meetings, and then perhaps when a natural crop—a cactus pear or a kind of grub — comes into season, and for a while creates plenty for everybody. The rest of the time the bands must keep their distance, and the number of each will be something like fifty souls, more or less.

These laws of nature have teeth in them: many such peoples accept the necessity of killing some of their infants at birth because the mother already has all the young children she can cope with on the march; and most of them ruthlessly abandon the sick or the helplessly old to freeze or starve. If, rarely, they put forth efforts on the aged one’s behalf, these efforts are visibly strenuous. Such action is not subhuman callousness. Even though they may appear to take it calmly, the people have no choice at all in what they do, or even the face they put upon it.

We see, in fact, human beings like ourselves trapped, without knowing it, in a life which prevents them from having higher material inventions and social combinations. Small nomadic bands can hardly become civilized if they cannot even set up substantial households. They must find some escape from nomadism first, and from isolation and the limits of small numbers. They must find some escape from the tread-mill of food-getting, which has them almost always either hunting or getting ready to hunt, and so keeps them from having any specialization of their energies, and makes the only division of labor that between the animal-hunting man and the plant-hunting woman. This escape was found with domestication, when the ordinary balance of nature was broken and food was made to grow not by nature but by man. Camps changed to villages, and dozens of people to hundreds.

\(^1\) I.e. religious rituals designed to increase the amount of animals to hunt.