

The Origin of Inequality. Origini 3.***Edited by Andrea Cardarelli, Alberto Cazzella and Marcella Frangipane***

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The difference between rich and poor in the modern world is increasing at a frightening and presumably unsustainable rate. According to Oxfam (2016), the richest one per cent of the world's population has more wealth than the rest of the population combined. The 40-fold difference in field ownership between rich and poor in the Uruk state in the fourth millennium BCE (Liverani 2017: 15–16) is not far off from the 30-fold difference in salaries between the average 1960s United States Chief Executive and the lowest paid worker in the same company, whereas today the same salary measure is not a 30 but 300 times difference (Davis and Mishel 2014). From this perspective, understanding the origins, nature, institutionalization and dynamics of social inequality has never been more relevant: it is indeed one of the 'grand challenges' confronting archaeologists (Kintigh et al. 2014: 8). During the 2014–2015 academic year, three archaeologists at Rome's La Sapienza University, Andrea Cardarelli, Alberto Cazzella and Marcella Frangipane, organised a seminar series on the origins of inequality, looking at the phenomenon in different parts of the world and in different periods of the past. The essays were published as a thematic issue of the journal *Origini*, which was formally presented at the university in May 2017 as the focus of a discussion of its theme by a philosopher (Giacomo Marramao), economic historian (Monika Poettinger), cultural anthropologist (Ales-

sandro Lupo), ancient historian (Luigi Capogrosso) and archaeologist (myself). The following is an edited version of my reflections on the book.

Just over 20 years ago, Feinman and Price (1995) edited another series of essays on the origins of social inequality, in which Feinman summarised the research agenda as he saw it then (1995). He described what he identified as the five major theoretical breakthroughs achieved by archaeological research in recent decades: firstly, the decoupling of the emergence of inequality from the emergence of agriculture; secondly, the acceptance that there was no simple mechanical progression from sedentism to surplus to high population densities to social differentiation, as processual archaeologists had sometimes argued; thirdly, the broad relationship between community size and societal complexity; fourthly, the contemporary perspectives questioning the existence of truly egalitarian societies and questioning the need for research on the internal and external mechanisms in such societies that prevented or facilitated inequities and inequalities from becoming institutionalised; and lastly, the broad division in chiefdoms observed ethnographically between ‘network-based’ systems in which leaders were dependent for their authority on the external exchange of portable wealth items and ‘corporate-based’ systems dependent on the control of land, labour and food production; and the evidence of archaeology that pathways to inequality broadly divided into these two, though combinations of the two could be recognised as in the ethnographic record.

Feinman concluded his chapter by emphasising that the major challenge facing the next generation of archaeologists who were interested in the origins and early history of inequality, would be to advance the research agenda without falling into two opposing intellectual traps: ‘narrow environmental-demographic determinism’, on the one hand, and ‘idiosyncratic particularism’, on the other. “If over the next decades we can concertedly avoid these two intellectual extremes...then I suspect that the next generation of data and ideas will yield a more marked increase in our understanding of these issues than ever has been achieved over the past quarter of a century” (page 274). So, two decades after Feinman’s review, how does *The Origin of Inequality* measure up to his challenge? I take his five themes in turn after commenting on

whether his critique of earlier archaeological thinking as explicitly or implicitly ‘progressivist’ applies to the papers in the present volume.

Progressivist Unilinear Models

Several authors begin by echoing Feinman’s warning that we have to avoid the assumptions of linearity that so easily underpin debates about the origins and early history of inequality (Earle: page 209; Lesure: page 217; Liverani: page 19; Pollock: page 40). Four of the chapters provide informative case studies of ‘reverse change’. A combination of ecological and internal social factors is proposed to explain the Balkan and Po Valley reconstructions (Carderelli; Müller et al.), whereas the direct involvement of newcomers is identified as a likely key factor in the case of Neolithic Malta on the basis of Cetina ceramics and peninsular Bronze Age Italy from the appearance of Mycenaean artefacts (Betelli; Cazzela and Recchia). The contrast between nomads and settled communities in the Near East mentioned by Liverani (page 20) also mirrors the illuminating Mesoamerican case study by Lesure, in which variability in how ancient societies organised themselves had a spatial and chronological dimension at the regional scale.

Inequality and Agriculture

The *Origin of Inequality* has little to say about the possible correlates between early agriculture and forms of social organisation. The editors acknowledge in their Introduction that all societies have social differences, such as those associated with gender, age or status within kinship systems, reflecting more-or-less horizontal differences in tasks and roles. However, they decided to focus on later prehistoric and early state societies as the contexts in which, in their view, the social categories or corporate groups of (earlier) kin-based societies “acquired social, political, or economic privileges and special prerogatives, giving rise to a process in which those societies were really transformed into hierarchical structures” (page 13). The result is a coherent collection of essays dominated by questions relating to the nature of inequalities (or inequities, as McMahan calls them) in Chalcolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age societies in Europe and the Near East, but their definition contrasts with Earle’s comment (page 202) that “the origins of inequality...probably were

grounded in our deepest ancestry”. None of the chapters deal with hunter-gatherer or early farming communities, a significant weakness of the book given recent re-thinking about these societies, as I comment later.

Sedentism, Surplus and Population Pressure

This is a theme on which *The Origin of Inequality* has little to say, in part due to the focus on later prehistoric agricultural societies, but it also indicates how archaeological theory has progressed from the extremes of processualist thinking that Feinman could look back to in 1995. On the other hand, the role of demography as a critical component in understanding the nature of prehistoric inequality features in several of the papers, as discussed below.

Community Size and Social Complexity

Feinman cites cross-cultural anthropological research in this section of his chapter, indicating that communities larger than 2500 +/- 500 generally featured significant organizational complexity. Interestingly, 2500 +/- 500 is around the limit where information can still reach everyone in a community by word of mouth. Our inability to estimate the number of people in a house, settlement, landscape or region is one of the largest and most intractable ‘elephants in the room’ in many archaeological research contexts. In this light, one of the impressive aspects of three of the chapters is the close analysis of excellent contextual data to put numbers on household and community sizes. Müller et al. calculate that the eight hectare Late Neolithic Balkan tell Okolište had an average population of 3000 +/- 1000, whereas the c.30 Chalcolithic Tripolye mega-sites of the Ukraine, measuring 200ha or more, had hundreds of houses occupied for similar duration and grouped in a series of compounds, indicating total village populations of 5000–15,000 people. The organisational arrangements underpinning the construction of Malta’s temple complexes are all the more baffling given the estimates of just 500–1500 people for the total population of Gozo Island (Cazzella and Recchia: page 99). Unless the whole population of the Maltese Islands was mobilised, it is a remarkable example of communities smaller than 2500, which Feinman mentions as having a diverse range of organizational forms, including hierarchical and unequal ones. Some form of cross-community mobilisation must also have been

needed for the construction of the extraordinary managed and densely settled agricultural landscapes of the terramare, where individual communities are estimated at consisting of only a few to several hundred people, but with an overall population in Emilia of 100,000 (Cardarelli: page 167).

Were There Ever Egalitarian Societies?

From his reading of Kroeber's ethnographic studies (1925), Childe was well aware that institutionalized inequality was a feature of the historically-recorded, maritime-based forager societies of the North American Pacific Coast and noted that it might well apply to similar prehistoric communities (1942: 53–54). His arguments have since been proven. Resource abundance sustained structured inequalities among early Holocene ('Mesolithic') populous and sedentary hunter-fisher-gatherer societies on the seaboard of Atlantic Europe and Japan, for example, among whom behaviours likely included competitive feasting and the mobilisation of labour for communal tasks by leading individuals (Barker 2005; Hayden 2001). These well-known case studies are likely to be only part of the story given the recent transformation in understanding of the complex behaviours of many Late Pleistocene and Early Holocene hunter-gatherer societies. Gamble's 1999 review of the evidence for Palaeolithic social structures in Europe concluded that, by the Upper Palaeolithic, "special occasions with rituals and resources now structured the [hitherto assumed] unfettered life of the Palaeolithic person" (1999: 415–416). Coward et al. (2015) present evidence among different Upper Palaeolithic societies for differential access to traditional knowledge, expert to novice transmission of technical knowledge and change of women's social roles in group alliance building.

In this volume, Pollock provides an illuminating study of Late Neolithic agricultural societies in southwest Iran in the sixth and fifth millennia BCE and the likely complexity of the mechanisms involved in the apparently unremarkable 'continuity' of these and similar more-or-less egalitarian societies in the Near East. "Egalitarian relations", she writes (2015: 40), "are neither simple nor automatic; rather, they require continual effort to maintain and reproduce". Pollock's approach is situated within concepts of habitus and everyday practice, making use of elegant contextual analysis, especially of the role of built space and craft production. Indoor

activities included cooking and eating, food storage and perhaps receiving guests, though some eating and socialising occurred in public spaces. There were rigid restrictions on innovation in pottery production and of images of living beings that “seem to have helped prevent the emergence of substantial inequalities between people, as did the emphasis on the open and visible performance of many daily tasks and interactions” (page 59). In Early Chalcolithic societies, in contrast, daily commensality was restricted to family compounds, craft innovation held high value and bodily decoration became more important. Pollock is less clear on how Late Neolithic social relations transitioned into those of the Early Chalcolithic, beyond suggesting that intra-communal differences likely grew over time despite the constraints of Late Neolithic sociality.

Alternative Pathways to Inequality

Perhaps the most significant contribution of *The Origin of Inequality* to the developing research agenda is its demonstration of the variety of ways in which social inequality manifests itself in the archaeological record of later prehistory. There are examples of Feinman’s ‘network-based’ and ‘corporate-based’ chiefdoms (to use the latter term loosely), combinations of these and forms quite different from them, reminding us importantly that there were forms of social institution in the past that have no parallels with contemporary ethnographic examples. Most chapters illustrate close contextual analysis of high quality sets of material culture, especially gained from new fieldwork. A glance through the book’s illustrations gives an immediate sense of the quality of the household, settlement and funerary archaeology that archaeologists interested in prehistoric social institutions can now exploit. To these McMahan adds the textual data from the fourth millennium BCE Sumerian archive of Iri-Saġrig that show how five different types of artefact—votive statues, amulets, eye idols, clay cones and bevelled rim bowls—represent the multi-layered ways in which status and power were manifested and legitimated in early urban Mesopotamia. In general, we might categorise these studies as being within a broadly substantivist perspective, though Harding and Earle argue for the utility of applying modern measures of wealth to developed hierarchical societies of Bronze Age Europe and pre-Contact Hawaiian chiefdoms, respectively. One interesting omission from the book is any explicit mention of commu-

nity-organised heterarchical structures of organisation, though this may be hinted at in the ‘compound societies’ illustrated in the remarkable geophysical plan of the Tripolye mega-site of Maidenetske (Müller et al.: page 75).

One of the most impressive contributions of the book is the evidence for the importance of ideologies in mobilising community actions, creating differential access to ritual knowledge and thereby promoting, legitimating and sustaining inequalities. The earliest convincing example of this currently appears to be Göbekli Tepe, but Jomon Mesolithic societies in Japan have others (Barker 2005). There are indications of similar phenomena in some early agricultural societies, though, in the case of Maltese temple building, Cazzella and Recchia rightly warn us against “projecting rigid cultic systems belonging to historic societies onto these Late Neolithic communities” (page 96), concluding that continuing open access arrangements at Tas-Solg North, combined with other evidence, indicate that social hierarchy was not necessary to build the temples. At the Formative site of Paso de la Amada in Mexico, lineage leaders initially officiated at communal rituals atop their platform houses, in the full gaze of their followers, surveillance that Lesure suggests “would have served as a levelling mechanism that circumscribed the powers and privileges of leadership” (page 232), whereas later elites conducted rituals in public plazas, as ideological control became institutionalised. (He is rather ambiguous about how the transition occurred). The importance of martial identities and ideologies throughout Bronze Age Europe comes across very strongly from the chapters by Harding, Cardarelli and Betelli, though the warfare seems largely to have consisted of competitive raiding, very different in scale from what is implied by the massacre site at the early urban site of Tell Brak in Syria (McMahon et al. 2011).

Conclusion

The Origin of Inequality inevitably does not provide all the answers to the ‘grand challenge’ of documenting and explaining the origins and early history of social inequalities, but its essays represent stimulating and often thought-provoking contributions to the debate. I was surprised at how little mention there is in the European papers about the potential role of herd animals as wealth on the hoof as an early stimulus of differ-

ential ownership, one of the most important status indicators in many early Neolithic societies (Greenfield and Arnold). The contribution of archaeological science is muted in many of the chapters, despite its potential to contribute to understanding social change in the deep past. Stable isotope analysis, for example, is proving hugely informative in what it can say about human and animal diets and mobility—how can we reconcile current thinking about local or community mobilisation for monument building in Neolithic Britain with the findings that some of the cattle slaughtered for feasting in southern English sites came from hundreds of kilometres to the north (Viner et al. 2010)? Similarly, ancient DNA analysis indicates that the millets at some Tripolye sites likely came from China thousands of years before the ‘Silk Road’ (Jones et al. 2011). In the coming decade, next-generation sequencing should allow aDNA studies to be applied to large collections of skeletal remains in order to test the ideas about kinship and familial relations, demographic mixings and replacements, and so on, that explicitly or implicitly underpin virtually all discussions of the history of social inequality in prehistoric societies.

I chose the word ‘history’ rather than ‘rise’ of social inequality because, as many of the authors comment, it is easy to fall into assumptions of linearity in the ways that prehistoric societies organised themselves. The essays convey the variability in time and space in which inequality was manifested, variability that raises fundamental questions about how it was maintained and reproduced, on the one hand, or transformed, on the other. The essays are generally better at addressing questions of maintenance and reproduction than ‘origins’ or change, but this is no bad thing. At the end of his study of small-scale change in one Mesoamerican regional centre, Lesure comments that it “should be regarded as merely a beginning of a larger project of interrogation of the progressivist narrative in relation to the origins of social inequality, a project that would require numerous detailed analyses at a variety of scales” (page 234). I suspect that the contributors in *The Origin of Inequality* will agree with the final comment that “numerous detailed analyses at a variety of scales” are the best way to advance our understanding of the origins and early history of social inequality, without falling into the trap of ‘idiosyncratic particularism’ cautioned by Feinman. As with other ‘grand challenges’, *deus ex machina*

prime mover theories invariably ignore the variability in the archaeological record that is our most important inheritance from our deep past.

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