

# ***The Creation of Inequality*** ***How Our Prehistorical Ancestors set the Stage for Monarchy, Slavery, and Empire***

by Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus (Harvard University Press, 2012)

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In most American universities archaeologists and anthropologists are typically housed within the same department. Yet, as archaeologists Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus write in the preface to their new book, *The Creation of Inequality*, the relationship between archaeology and social anthropology “over the years has been uneasy at best.” Reconstructing past societies from scant physical remains is a tough job, and surely it can be made easier by using ethnographically attested societies as models. But when archaeologists make comparisons between ancient and recent societies, they usually do it in an haphazard, anecdotal way. And if archaeologists at least realize that they need social anthropologists, the reverse is often not true. “Many social anthropologists ... cannot imagine that there is anything to learn from archaeology.”

The basic premise of *The Creation of Inequality* is “that archaeology and social anthropology contribute more when they work together.” Flannery and Marcus’ ambitious, and in many ways ground-breaking book practices what they preach. However, I should warn the reader that, despite its title, the main focus of the book is really on the evolution of complex societies. Flannery and Marcus want to understand the hows and whys of major evolutionary transitions in human history: from egalitarian to achievement-based societies, from those to chiefdoms with hereditary inequality, and subsequently to states and empires. Inequality is certainly part of the story (and the authors periodically come back to it), but it seems to be a consequence of the growth of complexity and sheer scale of human societies, rather than one of the causal mechanisms.

The book has four parts. The first deals with egalitarian societies, and the following parts each with one of the three major transitions. Flannery and Marcus typically start by reviewing empirical patterns in a number of ethnographically attested societies. These data are then boiled down to a set of general principles: “social logic” governing the dynamics of these societies. As they explain, “for social anthropologists and archaeologists, the printout of any society’s logic would be analogous to having its DNA profile.” Once such general principles have been deduced, the authors used them to make sense of evolutionary transitions in the past, illustrating their approach on societies for which we only have archaeological data.

One well-developed example in the book is the investigation of the role played by the men’s house in achievement-based societies. Such societies permit ambitious individuals (often called ‘Big Men’) to attain leadership positions and accumulate high prestige and social status. However, the authority of Big Men is limited and is ultimately based on their ability to persuade others. Additionally, they cannot pass high social status on to their sons, who must qualify for leadership roles through their own efforts. Flannery and Marcus discuss in detail such ethnographic case-studies as the Ao Naga of Assam, the Mountain Ok of New Guinea, and the Siuai of the Solomon Islands. One of the most widespread institutions in these societies was the men’s house. These ritual buildings had certain features, such as “benches for sitting or sleeping, curated skulls and skeletal parts, sunken floors, white plastered surfaces” that were not shared with residential houses. Remarkably, ancient societies in the Near East, Mexico, and Peru built very similar structures. It stands to reason that their form probably reflected their function. An

approach melding social anthropology with archaeology, thus, yields insights into how ancient societies might have worked.

Perhaps the best part of the book is the one that addresses the transitions to state-level societies. Again, the authors begin by reviewing the rise of early states in recent societies: the unifications of Hawai'i by Kamehameha, of the Zulu by Shaka, of the Hunza (northern Pakistan) by Mir Silim Khan, and of Madagascar by Andrianampoinimerina. In all these cases the main sources for transitions to state-level societies are historical, rather than ethnographic. This review suggests to Flannery and Marcus the following general principle:

*In the four cases we examined, not one kingdom was the offspring of a rank society that simply got bigger. ... Instead, all four kingdoms arose through the forced unification of competing rank societies. It would seem that competition among chiefs ... was one of the engines driving the process.*

*In many parts of the ancient world, including Alabama and Panama and Colombia, such chiefly competition continued indefinitely. In Hawai'i, Natal, Madagascar, and the Hunza Valley one of the competing societies eventually gained an advantage. The advantage could be new weaponry, new military strategy, a new irrigation system, or thousands of new rice paddies.*

I think this is right as far as it goes, but what happens after the unification? The problem with initial advantages is that they eventually dissipate. Military technologies and strategies can be copied, and what would prevent other societies from building new irrigation systems and rice paddies? How does the center counteract centrifugal tendencies of the subordinate units once the initial advantage is gone? What prevents kingdoms from splitting apart into a congerie of squabbling chiefdoms? In fact, kingdoms that didn't outlast their founders were a common occurrence in history.

The answer, I believe, lies again in competition – not between chiefdoms, but at a higher level of social organization, between kingdoms (each a conglomerate of chiefdoms). In other words, it is the outside threat that counteracts the centrifugal tendencies within a kingdom. As Flannery and Marcus point out (following American anthropologist Robert Carneiro), “most societies do not surrender their autonomy willingly.” But smaller-scale societies are much more likely to submit to the authority of a chief or king when they are threatened by hostile neighbors.

It is unclear whether Flannery and Marcus treat this observation as a general principle, but if not, it amply deserves such designation. In fact, in sociological literature the proposition that external conflict tends to increase internal cohesion is known as the Simmel-Coser principle (after German sociologist Georg Simmel and American sociologist Lewis Coser). What is particularly interesting is that in at least two archaeological cases, which Flannery and Marcus, there is clear evidence supporting the role of the Simmel-Coser principle in enabling the transition to state-level societies.

In the Oaxaca Valley the rise of the Zapotec state, with the capital at Monte Albán, put pressure on neighboring Mixtec societies, which “nucleated and fortified themselves to keep Monte Albán at bay; the resulting political consolidation allowed them to create embryonic kingdoms of their own.” Monte Albán itself was probably in military competition with an even larger state of Teotihuacan to the north.

Another, and even more striking example of the Simmel-Coser principle in action is the consolidation of the Moche state in Peru. Around 2,400 years ago the coastal valleys of Peru came under increasing raiding pressure from highly aggressive highland societies. During the first two centuries A.D. the highland raiders caused the abandonment of a number of coastal population centers. However, in one of the valleys the pressure from the highlands helped to consolidate indigenous population. The new Moche state succeeded in driving out the highland

invaders and expanded to dominate fifteen coastal valleys. It seems likely that the external threat from the aggressive highlanders was a key factor in holding the Moche state together between 200 and 600 AD.

These two examples suffice to illustrate the value of an approach integrating social anthropology with archaeology, which is advocated by Flannery and Marcus. Their book contains many other insights and will reward a reader who is not afraid of some work. Naturally, one must be careful in making inferences from recent to ancient societies. Still, as the authors note at one point, “when one sees people doing the same thing at 8000 B.C. and A.D. 1900, one probably has identified a behavior that arose repeatedly in world history.”

I would add that it goes without saying that many things changed between 8000 B.C. and 1900 A.D. But it does not prevent us from using the comparative method – what we need to do is take into account these changes. For example, when making inferences from ethnographically attested hunter-gatherer societies, it is important to keep in mind that recent hunter-gatherers have been largely pushed out to more marginal and less productive environments by expanding complex societies. 15,000 years ago, of course, hunter-gatherers exploited the complete spectrum of ecological productivities.

Another, and less obvious (or, at least, often ignored) factor is that most ethnographic data come from small-scale societies that were in various ways pacified by states. Flannery and Marcus are, of course, aware of this complicating factor. In their discussion of how leadership is achieved in the Solomon Islands and New Guinea they emphasize that the path to renown based on success in warfare and headhunting is no longer one that could be directly observed by anthropologists, because of suppression of warfare by colonial authorities.

I suspect that most criticisms aimed at *The Creation of Inequality* will come from those anthropologists who don't share the commitment of Flannery and Marcus to social evolution. The organization of their book exposes them to the charge that they view human societies through the lens of fixed evolutionary stages. Such a criticism would be unfair, because the approach favored by these authors is explicitly dynamic and multidimensional. They are interested in processes that cause societies to change, and they explicitly consider how different mechanisms – ideological, economic, military, etc – interact to bring such changes about.

My own critique of the conceptual foundations of Flannery and Marcus' approach would be the opposite – in my opinion, they did not go far enough in pursuing the logic of their approach. After all, the basic assumption underlying any comparative study is that there exist meaningful general principles governing the dynamics of human societies. But to extract such principles from the chaos of data we need theory. Yet it is on the theoretical front that *The Creation of Inequality* is curiously deficient. Early in the book the authors state, “We trust that the theory in this book is just a dab behind the ear.” But theory is not a perfume – an adornment that can be easily dispensed with; it is an integral part of the scientific method.

Their atheoretical stance leads Flannery and Marcus to adopt what is essentially an inductive approach: analysis of several recent cultures suggests general principles (or “social logics”) that they next employ to make sense of ancient societies. This approach forces the reader to do some heavy plowing through multiple ethnographic case-studies. I generally found such material illuminating and rewarding of the effort, but it is not a book for a general reader. Atheoretical, purely empirical induction, moreover, is a highly inefficient way of getting at general principles (in fact, most philosophers agree that it doesn't work as a general scientific method).

*The Creation of Inequality* is not, of course, entirely devoid of theory. The ideas of the eighteenth-century thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau provide the authors with a starting point for their narrative, and they return to his ideas on numerous occasions later in the book. With all respect to the famous Genevan philosopher, however, science has not stood still during the last

two centuries. In the last 10-20 years, in particular, a new theoretical framework – cultural group (or, better, multilevel) selection – has been developed by Peter Richerson, Robert Boyd, David Sloan Wilson and many others. In fact, I would argue that Flannery and Marcus are cultural multilevel selectionists at heart, they just don't use this theory's language. Earlier I have already discussed their focus on social logic as cultural DNA and their emphasis on the importance of competition between societies. The latter is a recurrent theme in the book (“competitive interaction is one of the most important forces driving social and biological evolution”).

Another set of theoretical ideas, which recur though much of the book, is the three sources of chiefly power as proposed by anthropologist Irving Goldman, generalizing from his study of 18 Polynesian societies. These sources are *mana*, *tohunga*, and *toa* (roughly, sacred authority, political and economic expertise, and military force). Yet sociologists have made a lot of progress in understanding the sources of social power. Probably the most useful and broadly accepted is the theory of four kinds of power networks (ideological, economic, military, and political) developed by Michael Mann in the book, appropriately called *The Sources of Social Power*. Mann's is a universal theory that attempts to understand all kinds of human societies, not just the 18 Polynesian ones, studied by Goldman. Furthermore, it has already been employed with a great effect by anthropologists (for example, by Timothy Earle in *How Chiefs Came to Power*).

I'd like to end my review on a more positive note. Although I may wish that the authors were more up to date on social and evolutionary theory, I acknowledge that in this day of specialization nobody can be a master of all trades. Understanding the past is an extremely difficult task. It requires a multidisciplinary, indeed *transdisciplinary* approach that brings together social and cultural anthropology, archaeology, history, sociology, evolutionary science, climatology, historical linguistics, and many more other disciplines, than I can list here. Flannery and Marcus have done a remarkable job synthesizing the two key disciplines of social anthropology and archaeology, and their book represents a significance advance in our understanding of the evolution of complex societies.