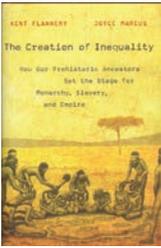


REVIEWS



General



Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus, *The Creation of Inequality: How Our Prehistoric Ancestors Set the Stage for Monarchy, Slavery, and Empire*

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012. 648 pages.
Hardback, \$39.95/£29.95/€36.00. ISBN 978-0-674-06469-0.

THE CREATION OF INEQUALITY is a stunning achievement and a milestone in the study of the development of cultural complexity. The book is a comprehensive overview of the evolution of inequality from egalitarian foragers through emerging chiefdoms to highly stratified kingdoms and empires. It is also the culmination of Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus's life's work on this subject. At over 550 pages of text, not including footnotes and an index, this volume may seem daunting. Yet it is surprisingly well written and often fascinating. This is because the authors, both archaeologists, did not write the book for specialists. Rather, they wrote it for "the general reader who is curious about his or her prehistoric ancestors, but has neither the time or inclination to wade through the social science literature" (xi).

Although written for the general public, *The Creation of Inequality* is also a scholarly work relevant to archaeologists and cultural anthropologists. Indeed, Flannery and Marcus emphasize that archaeology and cultural (or social) anthropology work best when they work together. Integrating archaeological and ethnographic materials, the authors illustrate their argument with a large number of cases from across the globe. As a cultural anthropologist, I found their use of ethnography sensitive and well informed.

The authors employ data from earlier generations of ethnographers who are little known today, including Philip Drucker, Robert Rattray, Hilda Kuper, Audrey Richards, Paula Brown, Kaj Birket-Smith, and Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, as well as better-known figures like Raymond Firth and Edmund Leach. Their ethnographies are used because they provide information on forms of inequality that

are vanishing or have already vanished and because they also provide information on the processes of transformation from one form of inequality to another.

Of course, Flannery and Marcus use many cases from their own sub-discipline spanning the past 15,000 years. They argue that analogies between past and present societies can be drawn because material representations of inequality, such as burial sites and men's houses, are found in both ethnographic and archaeological contexts.

The authors' argument about the creation of inequality is complex. Different forms of inequality emerge from different processes. The "social logic" of a particular society, a kind of cultural DNA according to Flannery and Marcus, both constrains and offers possibilities for the development of inequality. Thus different forms of inequality based on military organization, trade and economic specialization, or ritual specialization, may develop along different lines. Moreover, "cycling" between different forms of inequality can occur, as among the Konyak Naga and other Asian societies.

The authors are very attentive to social organization, religion, and ideology—aspects of inequality that are sometimes neglected in studies of cultural evolution. On the other hand, population pressure and technological development play a less important role than might be expected. Flannery and Marcus carefully document multiple paths in the creation of inequality; to use Julian Steward's terminology, they would be considered "multilineal evolutionists." But these paths are not infinite. As the authors note, over the past 15,000 years, "five or six ways of organizing people work so well that strikingly similar societies have appeared in different regions of the world. We recognize these societies in the archaeological record, whether they arose in Africa, Asia, or the Americas" (562), and they appear in the ethnographic record too.

The authors' general argument is articulated throughout the book and briefly summarized in a concluding chapter. There is no theoretically explicit chapter with systematic comparisons to other theoretical works such as JOHNSON and EARLE's (2000). Yet, as the authors state, "there are limits to how much theory ought to appear in a book for the general reader. There is probably no bigger 'buzzkill' than a long ponderous chapter on competing hypotheses" (xiii).

There are other concerns that readers may have about the book. Because this work is general and synthetic, ethnographers and archaeologists with expertise on particular cultures may disagree with Flannery and Marcus on some of the finer points of their analysis; this is almost inevitable in a work of such scope. The authors could also discuss the development of gender inequality in more detail; feminist anthropologists may wish for further explication on this important subject. Lastly, the concluding chapter offers a hypothetical discussion about mitigating contemporary American inequality; the authors favor putting hunter-gatherers in charge! For some readers, this humorous foray into social commentary may not do justice to the seriousness of the topic.

One of the most significant issues that Flannery and Marcus address is the relationship between archaeology and cultural anthropology. They clearly want cultural anthropologists to work with archaeologists on broad issues, like the creation of inequality, that occur over long periods of time. Yet they recognize that the relationship between the two sub-disciplines is an uneasy one at best and that many cultural

anthropologists do not regard archaeology as important. The authors also criticize cultural anthropologists for viewing “the past as a ‘text’ that we can interpret any way we want” (xii). And they briefly comment on what they see as anthropology’s “love affair with political correctness” in the analysis of inequality. These remarks may rub some cultural anthropologists the wrong way, but Flannery and Marcus want a more productive relationship with cultural anthropology, not a less productive one. In an age of hyper specialization, they encourage us to keep the big picture in mind, and this is one more reason that *The Creation of Inequality* deserves a wide audience.

REFERENCES

JOHNSON, Allen W., and Timothy EARLE

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