Article

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The Evolution of Inequality

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Learning Outcomes

After reading this article, you will be able to:

- Discuss the egalitarian nature of our hunter-gatherer ancestors before 5,000 years ago.
- Discuss the transition from egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies to the distinctive inequality that exists in modern times.

Humans lived as egalitarians for tens of thousands of years. As unequal society arose, its instability caused it to spread, argues anthropologist Deborah Rogers.

For 5000 years, humans have grown accustomed to living in societies dominated by the privileged few. But it wasn't always this way. For tens of thousands of years, egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies were widespread. And as a large body of anthropological research shows, long before we organised ourselves into hierarchies of wealth, social status and power, these groups rigorously enforced norms that prevented any individual or group from acquiring more status, authority or resources than others.

Decision-making was decentralised and leadership ad hoc; there weren't any chiefs. There were sporadic hot-blooded fights between individuals, of course, but there was no organised conflict between groups. Nor were there strong notions of private property and therefore any need for territorial defence. These social norms affected gender roles as well; women were important producers and relatively empowered, and marriages were typically monogamous.

Keeping the playing field level was a matter of survival. These small-scale, nomadic foraging groups didn't stock up much surplus food, and given the high-risk nature of hunting—the fact that on any given day or week you may come back empty-handed—sharing and cooperation were required to ensure everyone got enough to eat. Anyone who made a bid for higher status or attempted to take more than their share would be ridiculed or ostracised for their audacity. Suppressing our primate ancestors' dominance hierarchies by enforcing these egalitarian norms was a central adaptation of human evolution, argues social anthropologist Christopher Boehm. It enhanced cooperation and lowered risk as small, isolated bands of humans spread into new habitats and regions across the world, and was likely crucial to our survival and success.

How, then, did we arrive in the age of institutionalised inequality? That has been debated for centuries. Philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau reasoned in 1754 that inequality was rooted in the introduction of private property. In the mid-19th century, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels focused on capitalism and its relation to class struggle. By the late 19th century, social Darwinists claimed that a society split along class lines reflected the natural order of things—as British philosopher Herbert Spencer put it, "the survival of the fittest." (Even into the 1980s there were some anthropologists who held this to be true—arguing that dictators' success was purely Darwinian, providing estimates of the large numbers of offspring sired by the rulers of various despotic societies as support.)

Birth of Hierarchy

But by the mid-20th century a new theory began to dominate. Anthropologists including Julian Steward, Leslie White and Robert Carneiro offered slightly different versions of the following story: Population growth meant we needed more food, so we turned to agriculture, which led to surplus and the need for managers and specialised roles, which in turn led to corresponding social classes. Meanwhile, we began to use up natural resources and needed to venture ever further afield to seek them out. This expansion bred conflict and conquest, with the conquered becoming the underclass.

More recent explanations have expanded on these ideas. One line of reasoning suggests that self-aggrandising individuals who lived in lands of plenty ascended the social ranks by exploiting their surplus—first through feasts or gift-giving, and later by outright dominance. At the group level, argue anthropologists Peter Richerson and Robert Boyd, improved coordination and division of labour allowed more complex societies to outcompete the simpler, more equal societies. From a mechanistic perspective, others argued that once inequality took hold—as when uneven resource-distribution benefited one family more than others—it simply became evermore entrenched. The advent of agriculture and trade resulted in private property, inheritance, and larger trade networks, which perpetuated and compounded economic advantages.

It is not hard to imagine how stratification could arise, or that self-aggrandisers would succeed from time to time. But none of these theories quite explain how those aiming to dominate would have overcome egalitarian norms of nearby

communities, or why the earliest hierarchical societies would stop enforcing these norms in the first place. Many theories about the spread of stratified society begin with the idea that inequality is somehow a beneficial cultural trait that imparts efficiencies, motivates innovation and increases the likelihood of survival. But what if the opposite were true?

In a demographic simulation that Omkar Deshpande, Marcus Feldman and I conducted at Stanford University, California, we found that, rather than imparting advantages to the group, unequal access to resources is inherently destabilising and greatly raises the chance of group extinction in stable environments. This was true whether we modelled inequality as a multitiered class society, or as what economists call a Pareto wealth distribution—in which, as with the 1 percent, the rich get the lion's share.

Counterintuitively, the fact that inequality was so destabilising caused these societies to spread by creating an incentive to migrate in search of further resources. The rules in our simulation did not allow for migration to already-occupied locations, but it was clear that this would have happened in the real world, leading to conquests of the more stable egalitarian societies—exactly what we see as we look back in history.

In other words, inequality did not spread from group to group because it is an inherently better system for survival, but because it creates demographic instability, which drives migration and conflict and leads to the cultural—or physical—extinction of egalitarian societies. Indeed, in our future research we aim to explore the very real possibility that natural selection itself operates differently under regimes of equality and inequality. Egalitarian societies may have fostered selection on a group level for cooperation, altruism and low fertility (which leads to a more stable population), while inequality might exacerbate selection on an individual level for high fertility, competition, aggression, social climbing and other selfish traits.

So what can we learn from all this? Although dominance hierarchies may have had their origins in ancient primate social behaviour, we human primates are not stuck with an evolutionarily determined, survival-of-the-fittest social structure. We cannot assume that because inequality exists, it is somehow beneficial. Equality—or inequality—is a cultural choice.

Critical Thinking

1. In what respects were hunter-gatherers egalitarian before 5,000 years ago and why?
2. What have been the various theories of the past that have been put forth to explain inequality? What was the opposing theory developed by the mid-20th century?
3. How did agriculture perpetuate and compound economic advantages for some?
4. Why did inequality spread from group to group in spite of the fact that it is inherently destabilizing?
5. How do egalitarian societies contrast with those with inequality with regard to the process of selection?
6. What can we learn from all of this, according to the author?

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Internet References

Living Links
www.emory.edu/LIVING_LINKS/dewaal.html

Society for Historical Archaelogy
www.sha.org

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