Review Essay

Inequality and More

Henri J. M. Claessen
Leiden University

A review of Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus, *The Creation of Inequality. How our Prehistoric Ancestors Set the Stage for Monarchy, Slavery, and Empire.* 2012, 631 pp., illustrations. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts – London, England.

Let me make it clear at the outset: Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus, both well-known archaeologists and social anthropologists at the University of Michigan, have written a good and important book. Though the text is based upon data from social anthropology and archaeology, it is clear that their first interest lies with archaeology for in many places they wonder what an archaeologist would find of a given situation or point out that there are no archaeological data available.

They start their analyses with a discussion of the famous essay *A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality among Men*, written by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1753 in an essay competition proposed by the Academy of Dijon. They admire the insight of the author in the factors that made the development of inequality possible, notwithstanding the paucity of data available to him at that time. In a way they will follow his example and look for the origins of inequality, using the collected knowledge of modern social anthropology and archaeology for this task. To bring together this enormous quantity of data into one volume is an ambitious undertaking – but Flannery and Marcus succeed remarkably well in this task. What is more, they state in the introduction that the book is 'designed for the general reader' and therefore the book is written in a clear and con-

vincing style; it reads as a lively story book – though they do not neglect the many complicated and difficult problems of the developments.

It is clear from the outset that the book has been written in an evolutionistic vein – but nowhere this approach is defined nor made explicit. Is this done to evade the typical American rejection of evolutionistic views? Maybe that this attitude also explains why the title of the book is not 'The Evolution of Inequality' but 'The Creation of Inequality'.

Flannery and Marcus demonstrate an impressive knowledge of the relevant literature. Interestingly, they often make use of slightly older works, because – as they say – of the detailed knowledge of the traditional anthropologists – the fieldworkers – of the peoples they describe. In no less than 47 pages they present their documentation in 542 often detailed footnotes. Here, however, one of the shortcomings of this book comes to the fore: there is no list of references. This makes it practically impossible to locate the works consulted. It is true, in the footnotes all relevant data of these works are given – but, how to find an easy way to a specific work in this jungle? Moreover, there is another shortcoming in this admirable book: there are a lot of charming illustrations (mostly based upon old photographs), but there are very few maps included. And, as many of the peoples and sites described lived in quite unknown parts of the globe, maps could have been helpful to the 'general reader' to find them.

Though Flannery and Marcus present an impressive number of peoples and places, there are also a number of peoples and places not included. I fully understand that the authors have had to make a selection – but some regions are better represented than others. Indonesia, Japan, or China, are not found in the book, and neither are the nomads from Asia. The data from Africa (Zulu, Bemba, Asante, Swazi, *etc*.) are sufficient, but neither Dahomey, Buganda, Kuba, Benin, or the Interlacustrine kingdoms are mentioned. On the other hand, there is a large number of cases from Latin America – which is, given the specialism of the authors – not surprising.

In order to distinguish the many societies they discuss, they introduce the terms egalitarian, ranked, stratified and the state. These are clear concepts, and are used in a convincing way. But, as this same typology was developed already long ago by Morton Fried

(1967) it is strange that this author is not mentioned by Flannery and Marcus. They introduce the term 'achievement-based' as an equivalent for 'ranked' societies; which is not only original, but also quite descriptive. In this type of societies there exists certainly some ranking: people no longer are equal. The higher status of some of its members is not hereditary, however. They have earned their status position themselves, by hard working, by success in agriculture, by raiding neighbouring groups, or other achievements. This status ends with the death of the owner.

In their discussion of hunters and gatherers they discuss several interesting points. For instance, the importance of sharing. With the help of this phenomenon these groups make connections with neighbouring groups, which is most useful in times of shortage, or when in their own group no brides for the young men can be found – which is rather common in view of the limited size of these groups. Another interesting aspect of the chapters on hunters and gatherers is the explanation of the development of religion (p. 56 ff.). They postulate that their cosmology is couched in myths, which explain how things came into being. In these myths the natural and supernatural are described as connected. Behind the known world do exist 'high beings', and the mere humans need their help. From this type of beliefs religion developed, leading to the development of specialists and rituals.

Another important aspect of life in this type of societies was gift-giving. Gift-giving implies the expectation of a return gift of more or less the same value. This simple mechanism, however, can become a system of suppression: one gives such large gifts that the receiver cannot reciprocate them. This places him (her) in a disadvantaged position, which in some cases even can lead to debt slavery. This, of course, was not the only way to get slaves. Often also prisoners of war were made to work as slaves for the victors. Both these forms were found among others among the Nootka of the Northwest Coast (p. 74 ff.). It is an omission that Flannery and Marcus do not refer here to the fundamental work of H. J. Nieboer, *Slavery as an Industrial System* (The Hague, 1900), in which a number of the basic conditions for slavery are formulated.

In several regions, among which New Guinea, are found systems in which, based on achievement, ranked societies did develop (pp. 94–102). Men, successful in food production, especially

the raising of pigs, get great prestige. Among the villages of the Etoro, men are generally considered as being more virtuous than women. Here were not found real big men, though some of the men had a lot of prestige. Big men were found among the Marind Anim. This was a large Papua group, notorious for its head-hunting. Their wealth came to the fore in the large feasts and the high bride-prizes. Whole families contributed to the payment, and the bride-groom had the unenviable task to reciprocate these contributions. Here a reference to the work of J. van Baal (1966) on the Marind Anim had been in its place. It is interesting to note that, though big men do not have the power to enforce people to obey them, their gift of persuasion with words is usually sufficient to reach their goals. A good description of such a formidable orator is given by Douglas Oliver (1967) in his ethnography of the Siuai, living on the island of Bougainville in the Solomon Islands.

At the end of the Ice Ages population growth started and in several places nomadic groups of hunters and gatherers founded small settlements. Among the first village builders, some 10,000 years ago, belong the Natufians, living in the Near East. They developed agriculture by domestication of grasses into grain. Later they also domesticated goats and sheep. In their villages are found ritual houses (p. 128). According to Flannery and Marcus there are also found remains of defensive works, such as walls. This indicates, in their opinion, war or at least raids. True this may be, but there are hardly indications for actual fighting. The same holds for the walls of Jericho. Too often they apply terms as 'war', 'defensive works', 'struggle' and the like, without presenting evidence for such behaviour – which is not to say that violence did not occur, as appears from known cases such as the Yanomamö described by Napoleon Chagnon (1968), or the find in Wassenaar (the Netherlands) of a large grave into which a dozen bodies of murdered men and women were interred (Louwe Kooijmans 2005: 459 ff.).

The development of agriculture in the New World came considerably later than in the Near East, caused mainly by the lack of suitable plants to domesticate. Once a suitable type of maize had been developed, also here villages emerged and, according to Grove and Gillespie (1992: 25; *cf.* also Freidel 1995: 3) it soon appeared that the best soil was found on the river levees. Control of these grounds and its rich products gave the families who dominat-

ed them a lot of prestige – and power. This success in production became connected with interference of supernatural forces, and so the basis was laid for the development of sacred chiefship in these regions. In the village of San Jose de Mogote, with 150 inhabitants, a temple was found instead of a men's house (p. 140). Also elsewhere in Latin America the number of villages grew considerably.

While in Latin America hereditary leadership did develop, in the North a number of societies lived with achievement-based leadership which was not hereditary. Flannery and Marcus describe a number of pueblo settlements, and point to the fact that the ritual leaders here had a lot of prestige, but no power (p. 166 ff.).

Gradually did develop in several places on earth a hereditary form of leadership or stratification. Flannery and Marcus argue that such developments were only possible when groups or persons developed a sustained effort to be recognized by their compatriots as being better, higher, more capable *etc.* than others to lead the society (p. 188). This view presents an answer to the question: what is needed in a situation in which economic, demographic, and ideological needs are sufficiently covered to make a higher form of socio-political organization possible? Some years ago (Claessen 2004: 80–81) I suggested in this situation the need for 'some cause that triggers the development'. The ambitious group or person certainly qualify for such a cause and made a higher form of socio-political organization possible. There is, however, also the need of acceptance of their position by the group. Their new position should be considered as legitimate. Though Flannery and Marcus several times refer to this aspect (p. 206), they do not elaborate it. It is, however, an important requirement, and deserves more attention. Many rulers have paid a lot of attention to it, as appears from the work of David Beetham (1991), who distinguishes three aspects in legitimacy: the power should conform to established rules, these rules should be justified and shared by the dominant and the subordinate, and there should be evidence of consent by the subordinate.

In their description of the developments in early Mesopotamia Flannery and Marcus mention the existence of many villages which offered rich archaeological finds. They add that in some cases a village had authority over a number of other villages (p. 268). Though this most probably has happened in many cases,

they do not make clear how we can know this. What indications are there in the archaeological finds to warrant this statement?

To feed the growing population soon irrigation systems were needed. The existence of irrigation works suggests leadership, which could have been given by the headman or chief of the village. The finding of (the remains) of large, rich houses makes clear that at least some of the inhabitants of the villages were rich – richer than the commoners. There is no mention that the village chiefs were sacred, as was the case with chiefs elsewhere.

Sacredness of leaders is a complex subject. In some regions, as for example Polynesia, the sacred quality was hereditary. The sons of a chief were sacred, and in case of succession there were no specific ceremonies needed to make the son a worthy sacred leader after his father. Though this principle is clear, in actual practice there were often heated fights over the succession, explained by Goldman (1970) with the term 'status rivalry'. A chief or king who had several wives had also usually several sons, and how to decide their respective rank in sacredness?

Polynesia offers several interesting examples of political societies where inequality was a dominant characteristic. Some of the island societies such as Tikopia (pp. 209–215) or Samoa (p. 315) had only limited political structures. Others, such as Tahiti (p. 314), Hawai'i (p. 323 ff.), and Tonga (p. 315 ff.), had more developed political systems. Especially Hawai'i grew into a kingdom, where the ambitious Kamehameha subjected the whole archipelago (be it with the help of some English beachcombers as gunners).

Flannery and Marcus pay a lot of attention to the Tonga Islands, where, since the 11th century, the Tu'i Tonga ruled as a king. They follow the traditional view, and ascribe to the Tongans the capacity to build a kind of empire by subjecting a number of islands, among them the Samoa islands, Tikopia, Futuna, Rotuma and Úvea. Though wars of conquest cannot be left out of consideration, a more efficient way of spreading Tongan influence was by means of 'strategic marriages', described by Elizabeth Bott (1981) and Patrick Kirch (1984: 235–236), as the system by which a young Tongan notable went out and married the daughter of a local chief. When the chief died this son-in-law became his successor – and so the Tonga influence spread. Sometimes this system led to considerable Tongan influence, and it is not surprising that at a

certain moment a Samoan chief drove some of the Tongans away – a happening that lives on in oral history as a battle. The historian Campbell (1992: 13) stresses the fact that the founding of a Tongan 'empire' was practically impossible for its military power was insufficient for conquests, and the possibility to control the distant parts from Tongatapu was non-existent.

Where the succession of a sacred ruler by a son, who was already sacred himself, as found in Polynesia, in Africa this was not so, as none of the sons (or nephews, or uncles) of the ruler was already sacred. The incumbent (selected by whatever means) had to be made sacred, which demanded a lot of ritual. Among the many rituals there were some in which the ruler-to-be had to trespass several rules of the society, such as committing incest, killing some men, or eating human flesh. As the ruler was supposed to guarantee fertility of women, cattle and land, his life was in danger when he grew too old to fulfil all required rituals – and thus, in several cases, the king was killed, so that the danger of losing fertility was averted (for details: Claessen 2015).

Interestingly, a similar fate befell the Egyptian pharaoh Pepi II when after a prolonged drought hunger and unrest hit the country. His fall meant the end of the Old Kingdom (Morris 2006: 60). This revolt is the more notable as the pharaohs were considered as 'divine kings' (p. 420 ff.). Now, the concept of divine king is rather complicated. The basic idea is that the pharaoh was a descendant of the gods. In an effort to maintain this divinity he often married a sister – who was supposed to be also divine. In this way their son – in fact all their children – would be divine, which made the finding of a worthy successor possible. However, how were these things arranged when a new dynasty came to power? One might expect that the large, powerful groups of priest would find an answer – but there remain a lot of questions unanswered, though not for the Egyptian believers. The question, posed by Flannery and Marcus (p. 420 ff.) how the pharaohs had become sacred (and later divine), was answered in fact already some time ago by Henri Frankfort in his fundamental book *Kingship and the Gods* (1965 [1948]: 33–35, 354, note 24). The basis for these beliefs goes back in his opinion to the general African custom that leaders were sacred, because of their successes, ascribed to their better relations with the spirits, forefathers, or gods.

Flannery and Marcus pay a lot of attention to the development of states. In the course of their book they describe amongst others the Zulu kingdom of Shaka, the Swazi kingdom, the Hawai'ian state of Kamehameha, the Mesopotamian state of Uruk, the state of Sargon, and the American states of the Zapotecs, Incas, Aztecs, Teotihuacan and several others. Generally speaking these descriptions are detailed and up-to-date. Yet comments are possible. I will limit myself to the realm of the Aztecs. In great detail they describe the state, its organization, and history. They end with the arrival of the Spaniards, who destroyed its capital, and slaughtered numerous people. I did miss here, however, the problems with the collection of human sacrifices, needed to keep the gods satisfied. It was Mocthezuma, the then tlatoani, who realized that the system of wars with neighbouring peoples, and making prisoners to offer, had come to an end. The peoples not subjected by the Aztecs had proved to be too strong, and the number of prisoners diminished considerably. How to solve this problem in an acceptable way? Before the ruler had found a solution, Cortes and his men ended the realm (Conrad and Demarest 1984).

A more general problem is the development of the state, the pristine state, as seen by Flannery and Marcus. In their eyes all these states emerged by subjection of a number of ranking societies, and uniting their organizations into one. To reach this goal war was the inevitable means to success. Their examples such as the Zulu, united by Shaka, and the Hawai'ian state of Kamehameha are clear cases of war and subjection. Yet, however, this seems not to be the whole story. In his *Myths of the Archaic State* (2005) Norman Yoffee, who analyzes the development of the pristine states, does not give much attention to warfare. In a recent article (Claessen 2016) I described the development of a number of pristine states, and concluded that in most cases war lay not at the origin of these states, but was rather a consequence of their existence. Another interesting find was that in most cases pristine states emerged in a situation of wealth and trade, which made the buying of the leaders of neighbouring groups quite attractive (see, *e.g.*, Wisseman Christie 1995 on the seaborne state of Sriwijayja in Sumatra). The influence of trade and wealth on the evolution of socio-political organizations is underplayed a bit by Flannery and Marcus, I am afraid.

The critical comments presented in the above are mainly comments in the margin; they do not detract of the great impact this work made upon me. Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus can be congratulated with their achieving a book that covers the whole of human evolution – even though they called it modestly *The Creation of Inequality.*

REFERENCES

Baal, J. van. 1966. *Dema; Description and Analysis of Marind-Anim Culture (South New Guinea).* KITLV Translation Series 9. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Beetham, D. 1991. *The Legitimation of Power.* London: The Macmillan Press.

Bott, E. 1981. Power and Rank in the Kingdom of Tonga. *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 90: 7–83.

Campbell, I. C. 1992. *Island Kingdom; Tonga Ancient and Modern.* Christchurch: University of Canterbury Press.

Chagnon, N. A. 1968. *Yanomamö, The Fierce People.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Claessen, H. J. M. 2004. Was the State Inevitable? In Grinin, L. E., Carneiro, R. L., Bondarenko, D. M., Kradin, N. N., and Korotayev, A. V. (eds.), *The Early State, Its Alternatives and Analogues* (pp. 72–87). Volgograd: Uchitel.

Claessen, H. J. M. 2015. Sacred Kingship: The African Case. *Social Evolution and History* 14 (1): 3–48.

Claessen, H. J. M. 2016. The Emergence of Pristine States. *Social Evolution and History* 15 (1): 3–58.

Conrad, G. W., and Demarest, A. A. 1984. *Religion and Empire; The Dynamics of Aztec and Inca Expansion.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Frankfort, H. 1965 [1948]. *Kingship and the Gods; A Study of Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Freidel, D. 1995. Preparing the Way. In Guthrie J., (ed.), *The Olmec World: Ritual and Rulers* (pp. 3–10). Princeton: The Art Museum, Princeton University.

Fried, M. H. 1967. *The Evolution of Political Society.* New York: Random House.

Goldman, I. 1970. *Ancient Polynesian Society.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Grove, D. C., and Gillespie, S. D. 1992 Ideology and Evolution at the Pre-State Level: Formative Period Mesoamerica. In Demarest, A., and Conrad, G. (eds.), *Ideology and Pre-Columbian Civilizations* (pp. 15–36). Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.

Kirch, P. V. 1984. *The Evolution of Polynesian Chiefdoms.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Louwe Kooijmans, L. 2005. Bronstijdstrijd; Een groepsbeg-raving in Wassenaar. In Louwe Kooijmans, L. P., van den Broeke, P. W., Fokkens, H., and van Gijn, A. (eds.), *Nederland in de Prehistorie* (pp. 459–462). Amsterdam: Bert Bakker.

Morris, E. 2006. 'Lo Nobles Lament, the Poor Rejoice': State Formation in the Wake of Social Flux. In Schwartz, G. M., and Nichols, J. J. (eds.), *After Collapse. The Regeneration of Complex Societies* (pp. 58–71). Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Nieboer, H. J. 1900. *Slavery as an Industrial System.* The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Oliver, D. 1967. *A Solomon Island Society; Kinship and Leadership among the Siuai of Bougainville.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Wisseman, C. J. 1995. State Formation in Early Maritime Southeast Asia. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 151 (2): 235–288.

Yoffee, N. 2005. *Myths of the Archaic State; Evolution of the Earliest Cities, States, and Civilizations.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.