



2014

The Creation of Inequality: How Our Prehistoric Ancestors Set the Stage for Monarchy, Slavery, and Empire. Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus. Reviewed by Kelly McKowen.

Kelly McKowen
Princeton University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McKowen, Kelly (2014) "*The Creation of Inequality: How Our Prehistoric Ancestors Set the Stage for Monarchy, Slavery, and Empire.* Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus. Reviewed by Kelly McKowen.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 41 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol41/iss1/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.



Book Reviews

Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus, *The Creation of Inequality: How Our Prehistoric Ancestors Set the Stage for Monarchy, Slavery, and Empire* (2012). Harvard University Press. \$39.95 (hardcover).

Today, when some still question if anthropology matters and others wonder if perhaps the discipline—embattled by a decades-long critique of its colonial roots—might be more at home as a branch of sociology, veteran archaeologists Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus have provided their own emphatic answer. *The Creation of Inequality* is an ambitious and impressive book, written for a general audience but laden with insights for academics of almost any conceivable background. Born of the seemingly encyclopedic knowledge of its authors, it weaves together salient pieces of the anthropological and archaeological record to take its readers on an edifying journey from Sumer to Samoa—and many places in between—to meet humanity's *dramatis personae* in the 15,000 year epic of social inequality. Fittingly, the authors begin and conclude their story in dialogue with Rousseau, whose famous 1753 treatise speculated that the end of human equality arrived with the unfortunate transition out of some idealized pre-society, Arcadia. Their approach, which marries archaeological evidence with anthropological interpretation reveals a complex and uneven development—there is no “state of nature” here.

At a hulking 648 pages, *The Creation of Inequality* is organized in 24 chapters that move more or less progressively from history's relatively egalitarian hunter-gatherer groups, such as the Caribou and Netsilik Eskimos and the !Kung of southern Africa, to the multi-level administrative empires of the Aztec and Inca. Along the way, Flannery and Marcus dedicate lengthy sections to discussion of the various “clues” which reveal how the “social logic” of more equal societies, manifested in practices such as meat-sharing partnerships, gift-exchange, and

Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare, March 2014, Volume XLI, Number 1

prestige-based, non-hereditary leadership (i.e., Melanesian “big men”), gave way to the logic of inequality in societies with—among other things—taxes, bureaucracies, separate burial practices for nobles and commoners, and, importantly, hereditary formal power. Key to their analysis is their conception of the unique role of the “sacred” in human societies. Looking to chimps, who compete and assemble themselves hierarchically into alphas, betas and gammas, Flannery and Marcus observe that even outwardly egalitarian hunter-gatherers preserve hierarchy by making their supernatural beings the alphas, their ancestors the betas, and themselves the undifferentiated gammas. Moving toward *institutionalized* social inequality has thus often involved certain gammas’ claiming power legitimated by special—and often hereditary—relationships to these sacred alphas and betas. Clearly, European kings were not the only ones who invoked the divine right to rule.

Aside from providing a grand overview of the numerous forms social inequality has taken throughout human history, *The Creation of Inequality* is most useful for scholars of social policy and welfare in two respects. First, it presents in a demotic way a veritable wealth of case studies. Particularly for those who have restricted their comparative analyses to contemporary Euro-American cases, the authors provide a starting point for thinking about inequality as a *human* issue, where current instantiations are not especially unique when viewed with the benefit of exhaustive archaeological and anthropological data. Arguably, there is much to be gained by placing inequality in this wider context while recognizing that human beings, long before Bismarck in the 19th century, devised various schemes for addressing social inequality. Second, the book illustrates effectively that inequality is not solely the effect of differences in income or resources. Rather, culture is returned to the conversation by highlighting its material, spatial, and symbolic dimensions. For scholars who have become enamored of the continuous variables which they feel best indicate the presence of social stratification, this book is a critical reminder that not everything is about how much money—or yams, copper valuables, skulls, depending the case—one has. How, after all, are we to quantify the various forms of “sacred life force” which have underpinned different systems of authority throughout history?

Both of these points—the straightforward presentation of numerous cases and the emphasis on culture—make *The Creation of Inequality* essential reading for scholars interested in developing a more expansive view of contemporary social inequality. That said, however, the book is not without its shortcomings. Sociocultural anthropologists, in particular, will chafe at what seems an outdated tendency to reify societies as bounded, agentive entities that can be categorized and set in an analytic trajectory. Flannery and Marcus, for their part, make no secret of their contempt for postcolonial, postmodern anthropology and rarely forego an opportunity to take potshots at what they perceive to be suffocating political correctness; the interspersed bits of family feud are somewhat distracting and should have been left at home. Further, despite its eminent readability, the book stumbles in its attempts to comment explicitly on present-day inequality in a more colloquial register. Flannery and Marcus have a knack for whisking their reader around the globe, and back and forward through the centuries. The passages that return the reader to the 21st century feel awkward and half-baked when juxtaposed with the textured descriptions of the book's fascinating cases.

These issues do not diminish in any serious way the quality of what is unquestionably an important and uniquely anthropological contribution to the social scientific conversation on social inequality. Synthesizing in a non-technical way a vast array of ethnographic and archaeological data, *The Creation of Inequality* furnishes its reader with a novel perspective for analyzing the growing social disparities in many places in the contemporary world. This perspective—developed through reaching ambitiously around the globe and far back through time—is the one that Rousseau, and countless others who have attempted to theorize rank, stratification, and hierarchy, lacked. For the general reader and scholar of social welfare alike, it offers an incomparable trove of empirical material for thinking about where social inequality came from and, critically, where it might be headed.

*Kelly McKowen, Department of Anthropology,
Princeton University*