Chapter 7

Richman, Poorman, Beggarman, Chief: The Dynamics of Social Inequality

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1. INTRODUCTION

Trafficking with the origins of inequality is a daunting undertaking at the beginning of the millennium for both prehistorians and ethnologists, but it also is an exhilarating foray into the origins of contemporary societies. There is a bewildering array of very different conceptual approaches to the issues, and there is no lack of published material. The goal of this chapter is to briefly outline the archaeological evidence on the origins of socioeconomic inequality, characterize the diversity of approaches to the issue, and then to explore in more detail the general approach that seems to have the most potential for future productive research. The main problem that is addressed is simply how and why socioeconomic inequality emerged in previously egalitarian communities.

From all the indications that prehistorians have gathered (discussed later), it appears that humans have existed for well over 2 million years in a state of relative equality. It is possible to perceive the glimmerings of some changes toward socioeconomic inequality around 50,000 years ago. These changes became more pronounced in some areas around 30,000 years ago, and then became especially dramatic and widespread after about 15,000 years ago.

The shift toward socioeconomic inequality is not tied to food production, but occurred well before agriculture emerged. At the end of the Pleistocene, these changes occurred independently in a number of different areas of the globe. Thus the emergence of significant inequality followed a pattern that is strikingly similar to the emergence of food production, but preceded it by many millennia. Why these changes took place at the times and places that they did is an intriguing question that goes to the heart of understanding culture. The answers that scholars propose have important consequences for our understanding of how cultures operate, what makes them change, as well as why socioeconomic inequalities characterize virtually all contemporary societies.

It also is worth noting that, like domestication, the problem of the origins of socioeconomic inequality is fundamentally an archaeological question that must ultimately be resolved with archaeological data. There simply are no egalitarian societies in the world today that are in the process of becoming transformed into nonegalitarian societies under

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pristine conditions. Observations of contemporary nonegalitarian societies are certainly relevant to understanding and modeling what early nonegalitarian societies may have been like, but the tests of competing models must come from archaeological data.

1.1. Definitions and Concepts

Wason (1994:36–37) bases his study of social inequality on Berreman's (1981:4) cross-cultural analysis of the topic, and this seems like a good starting point for defining key concepts. Berreman uses the term "inequality" to refer to the relative value placed on "whatever differences are regarded as relevant in a given society or situation." The term "social inequality" adds the important element of dominance. Unfortunately, social inequality has no precise *operational* definition in any of the social sciences that I am aware of—nothing to indicate at what point differences in wealth or social importance pass from an equal distribution to inequality.

In the past, "egalitarian" simply meant any society that did not have classes or pronounced social stratification. Thus many groups were described as egalitarian that, in reality, had important differences between families or lineages in power and wealth, including the Neolithic societies of the Near East (Cauvin, 1994:160) and the New Guinea big-man societies, some of which may have even had slaves (Feil, 1987:118; Strathern, 1971:204–205). Many people have overreacted to this glib use of the term "egalitarian" and have turned the table upside down, claiming to find social inequality in even the most extreme egalitarian societies, inequality based especially on age, sex, ritual knowledge, and kinship. Although these distinctions certainly do exist, they seem to constitute a common baseline of inequality (with some variability in traditional societies) from which more pronounced developments should be measured. When comparative social scientists use the term "social inequality," what they usually have in mind are institutionalized hierarchies that go beyond age, sex, personal characteristics, and family roles (Berreman, 1981:9). These more developed socioeconomic dominance hierarchies exist in transegalitarian societies and can be extremely important for understanding the organization and functioning of past and present societies. The differences between societies without significant socioeconomic inequalities and those that have nonstratified forms of inequality should not simply be glossed over or dismissed by referring to all these societies as egalitarian; nor should their importance be trivialized by pointing out that inequalities exist in all societies.

To avoid these misleading generalizations, I and others (Clark and Blake, 1994; Hayden, 1995a) refer to societies with widespread sharing but without significant private ownership as egalitarian societies (even though inequalities may exist based on age, sex, family position, and personal characteristics). We refer to societies with private ownership of resources and produce, low levels of sharing, and institutionalized hierarchies based ultimately on wealth (but also including ritual, kinship, and political dominance) as transegalitarian societies. These are essentially societies between the more egalitarian generalized hunter–gatherers and clearly stratified chiefdoms. Transegalitarian societies also are characterized by the production and transformation of food surpluses, economically based competition, the use of prestige goods, and a range of specific feasting patterns. Transegalitarian societies are the focus of this chapter, since it is within these that significant inequalities first emerged. Because cultural ecology postulates that basic social characteristics are intimately linked to the nature and use of resources, I use the term "socioeconomic inequality" as a