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Polly Wiessner

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trol the ownership of the kill. Thus the institution developed in the first situation may be used for quite opposite purposes in the second. There is therefore a possibility that inequality may emerge even from “prototype” egalitarian societies through the interaction of agents, egalitarian structure, and exogenous events, though it may take a different path.

ANTON PLOEG

*Center for Pacific and Asian Studies, Nijmegen University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands.* 6 XI 01

Wiessner and Tumu’s (1998) book *Historical Vines* significantly advanced our knowledge of the recent prehistory of the New Guinea Highlands. Therefore it is fortunate that Wiessner now addresses some of the broader issues raised by the splendid body of data on which that book is based. Reviewing the past 250–400 years of the Enga past, she concludes that the Enga had taken important steps towards the institutionalization of inequality by the time European intruders arrived, despite the pervasive egalitarianism of their way of life. The period covered was one of far-reaching sociocultural change prompted in part by the introduction of the sweet potato.

In my view the trend towards institutionalization of inequality was less clear-cut than Wiessner makes out. Major institutions such as the Great Wars and the Tee emerged and blossomed in the period covered, and Wiessner makes it clear that they offered scope for social advancement and the consolidation of inequality. However, the Wars were discontinued, and the Tee had become unwieldy and seemed on the verge of breaking up. As far as the Great Wars are concerned, Wiessner points out that “in opting for the Tee cycle Great War leaders made a fatal error for the institutionalization of leadership.” In the Tee some men had far better access to information about exchange opportunities than others, but the breakup of the cycle may well have reduced the access differential and so have inhibited the consolidation of inequality.

Wiessner’s idea that social inequality is deeply rooted in human behaviour—given the hierarchy prevailing among non-human primates—and the corollary that what she describes is the re-emergence of inequality seem useful to me. Here too I would qualify her statement, pointing out that the ethnography of tribal societies shows the ubiquity of arrangements by means of which the great majority of men can marry and/or have legitimate offspring. Is there reason to suppose that these arrangements are recent in the evolution of human societies?

Her main point, that egalitarianism is not the product of simplicity, seems unexceptional to me. It is the notion of “egalitarian society” that seems questionable. It sets up a category of societies seemingly contrasting with inegalitarian ones, but, as she points out, none of the so-called egalitarian societies is undifferentiated, and she includes among “egalitarian” societies those harbouring

inequalities based on age, sex, and ability. The transformation of such societies towards more inequality may in part be based on those pre-existing differentiations. I am therefore inclined to analyse the institutionalization of inequality in terms of transformations of inequalities rather than as a shift from one category of society to another.

PAUL ROSCOE

*Department of Anthropology, University of Maine, Orono, Maine 04469-5773, U.S.A. (paul\_roscoe@umit.maine.edu).* 23 XI 01

Wiessner is quite right that recent theoretical developments concerning the emergence of inequality have paid insufficient attention to the recursive interaction of structure and agency. Perhaps, as she suggests, egalitarian society has been taken to constitute a “slate of simplicity,” but the poverty of detailed, long-term data on the subject is surely also to blame. Archaeology furnishes data that embrace long periods of time but are notoriously crude for gauging the intricacies and consequences of political action. Ethnographic fieldwork can provide the fine detail of these processes but seldom for more than a decade or two and never entirely “uncontaminated” by recent colonial and global processes. Wiessner’s project is important because it uses a remarkable, almost unique ethnohistoric data set to probe in considerable ethnographic detail more than two centuries of precontact Enga political process.

What Wiessner achieves is impressive. My main reservation concerns aspects of long-term political process that she leaves largely unconsidered. In depicting egalitarian and hierarchical institutions and ideologies as instruments for reducing transaction costs—as economic structures, in effect—she sidelines the *political* nature of the practices that generate inequality and overlooks a more fundamental process that underlies “surface” processes such as the appearance of the Tee and the Great Wars.

Wiessner’s principal focus is the managerial (or “voluntaristic”) aspects of the emergence of political hierarchy. Applauding the managerial model for its thesis that inequality can take root only when a population stands to gain real benefits from stronger leadership, she describes, for example, how Enga managers established their ascendancy by hitching their political wagons to institutions like the Tee and the Great Wars that reduced transaction costs to the benefit of all. Nothing to quarrel with there: any astute political entrepreneur will promote a socially beneficial innovation if it can be played to his or her advantage. It must be emphasized, though, that would-be leaders will seize on *any* resource that allows them to build power relations (inequality), including, to the extent that they can get away with it, innovations that do not advance—indeed, may disadvantage—public benefit. To the east of the Enga, contact-era Chimbu big-men had established cadres of henchmen