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The Invention of Equality: from original forms to beyond human egalitarianism

Introduction: the search for origins

It is a pleasure to have been asked to provide an overall comment on these stimulating, important and original papers focusing on the *Invention of Equality*. I write this comment in the second week of a lock-down caused by the Covid19 Coronavirus — when issues of (in)equality of access to health care and key resources are stark. But at the same time, the Covid19 pandemic has seen many acts of sharing and cooperation: a reminder of human potentials for such actions even in the most challenging of times.

The possibility of egalitarian forms of social organisation and the development of inequality is a subject of compelling historical and contemporary importance. It is therefore no surprise that it relates in slightly different ways to three of Kintigh's 'Grand Challenges for Archaeology': "*1. How do leaders emerge, maintain themselves, and transform society? 2. Why and how do social inequalities emerge, grow, persist, and diminish, and with what consequences? ... 4. How does the organization of human communities at varying scales emerge from and constrain the actions of their members?*" (Kintigh *et al*. 2014). Consideration of the origins and character of egalitarian forms of social organisation normally involves integrating four distinct fields of research: evolutionary models, primatology, archaeology and ethnography/anthropology. The last three of these are represented strongly in the papers here, with evolutionary models reviewed in depth by Butovskaya. Aligning these research areas is not always straightforward. This is clearly highlighted by the very different perspectives on the role of analogy in linking archaeological and ethnographic data presented in the discussion between Finlayson and Villeneuve & Hayden; by Artemova's closing comments on the relationships between archaeology and anthropology; and by the pessimistic view of Hayden that archaeology focuses on the social and economic aspects of society only. As will become clear in my review later, this latter perspective would make our accounts of egalitarianism sadly lacking.

Most of the papers use terms such as 'equality' or 'egalitarianism' with slightly different definitions, and Tutorskiy's focus on equality of *outcome* as one form of equality is important. But most describe forms of social organisation that fit within Townsend's definition: "a cultural ethos which encourages sharing, peaceful cooperation, and equality, while discouraging property accumulation, status-seeking, conflict, and authoritarianism" (Townsend 2018). This is also a popular understanding of the term, and in Artemova's words "is often perceived by Western scholars as the pattern of real personal freedom and spiritual comfort that one could only ever dream of". In fact, this vision of egalitarian hunter-gatherers is not just reserved to scholars, but is a powerful popular symbol of both our origins and our possibilities. Today, hunter-gatherers have been re-constructed and re-invented in popular culture as the antithesis, or even *antidote*, to the modern urban developed world (Lavi *et al*. in prep). Hunter-gatherers are argued to provide an evolutionary basis for our diet, our sleep, our posture, our engagement with the natural world and possible forms of social organisation amongst many other things. In many popular conceptions hunter-gatherers are frequently presented as the origin point for an evolutionary trajectory of increasing inequality: and recent critique of this assumption is important (Graeber, Wengrow 2018; Artemova 2016; also Artemova & Finlayson this volume).

In many of these accounts of our hunter-gatherer past, the moment of rupture is the appearance of agriculture, seen as a Fall of almost Biblical proportions from our true hunter-gatherer identities (Lavi *et al*. in prep). To take but one example, "...the Neolithic Revolution, the extended moment when our ancestors transitioned from being hunters and gatherers to farmers and in doing so gave birth to the 'economic problem' that has preoccupied us ever since" (Suzman 2017: 41). The Neolithic features strongly in discussion of the origins on inequality in the papers in this volume and many other accounts (Flannery, Marcus 2012), and I do not seek to downplay its significance. But given the outrageous inequalities that exist today it is perhaps surprising that the discussion of inequality is focused on events 10,000 years ago, and not on the conditions that have allowed neo-Liberalism and neo-Capitalism to thrive in the present (Lavi *et al*. in prep).

Egalitarian points of departure

The idea that we can somehow identify an egalitarian prehistoric point of departure for later developments sits uncomfortably with some aspects of recent challenges to our models of deep time humanity and our understandings of the relationships between *Homo sapiens* and other human species in the genus *Homo*. Twenty years ago, the dominant Out of Africa model suggested that we were all evolved from one, potentially small, population within Africa. In such a framework, an original form of social organisation is, at the least, plausible: a single point of departure, or a trunk for an evolutionary tree.

But this is not how we now understand our origins. Recent reviews suggest as many as seven species of *Homo* as recently as 100kya (Galway-Witham *et al*. 2019). We know that *Homo sapiens* interbred with at least two of these other species. Some of these species may have been living apart for 100,000s of years before they met, and presumably were characterised by different forms of behaviour. Kuhn and Stiner have argued that forms of behaviour characteristic of modern hunter-gatherer adaptations can be identified consistently from c 20kya, appearing only occasionally

during the Middle Palaeolithic because of demographic and other constraints which meant that innovation only appeared sporadically, and was not sustained (Kuhn, Stiner 2018). Recent reviews suggest that the nature of Neanderthal demography meant that they were not characterised by the same kinds of social forms as modern hunter-gatherers (Spikins *et al*. 2017; French 2019). Peterson and Butovskaya's contributions in this volume clearly highlight the importance of gender and demography in different forms of egalitarianism. If different types of humans had different forms of social organization (Spikins et al. 2017), then egalitarianism must have been sustained through different forms of practice. There is no simple point of original equality here — unless it is to say that egalitarianism is as wide as the genus (see below).

Egalitarianism and hunter-gatherers: sharing worlds

Contributions to this volume also make clear that egalitarianism is not the sole preserve of particular types of hunting and gathering adaptations; from Finlayson's convincing account of PPNA egalitarianism through to Tutorskiy's observations of egalitarianism during fishing trips within an agricultural society (Evgeniy Vdovchenkov's contribution to the conference which is not included in this volume highlighted aspects of egalitarian behaviour among pastoral communities). This is, of course, not a new observation, Gibson and Sillander have previously identified egalitarianism amongst the 'orderly anarchies' of horticulturalists and sea nomads of SE Asia (Gibson, Sillander 2011). Scott has argued that many of the organisational principles of these SE Asian societies can be understood as active attempts to avoid integration into forms of state oppression, and as expressions of "social and historical choices" to live outside of this control (Scott 2009).

Breaking the link between hunter-gatherers and egalitarianism can reframe our considerations of egalitarianism. In many models, especially evolutionary ones, egalitarianism is a consequence of hunter-gatherer adaptations. Thus, optimal foraging and behavioural ecological models often see egalitarianism and sharing as a form of risk reduction or mitigation amongst mobile hunter-gatherers (for summary of range of models see Townsend 2018). In such models, egalitarianism is a result of the constraints provided by mobile hunting and gathering lifestyles: subsistence determines social relations. Given that egalitarianism also exists within other subsistence strategies, it is useful to reverse our considerations of causation, and explore the ways in which the choice to be egalitarian may have determined aspects of the mobile hunting and gathering lifestyle — a position much more in keeping with Artemova's arguments in this volume and elsewhere that this is not an original condition of humanity (Artemova 2016). Such an approach is also more aligned with Woodburn's original emphasis that egalitarianism is *asserted* (Woodburn 1982).

Woodburn's seminal presentation of *Egalitarian Societies* (*Ibid*.) made clear that equality was asserted through a variety of forms of social practice, from mobility, through mechanisms for distribution of materials, prohibitions around accumulation, *etc*. This means that far from being an origin point which is assumed to be in place where we cannot demonstrate inequality — a wholly negative evidential construction of egalitarianism (Artemova, this volume) — we should instead focus on identifying those forms of social practice. Peterson's and Tutorskiy's contributions here both showing the delicate interlocking of practices that sustain egalitarianism, structured around kinship, belonging and shared participation. Recent advances in

our understanding of hunter-gatherer sharing are an important parallel here (Lavi, Friesem 2019). Observed ethnographically, sharing is not simply the sharing of food or other material things, but encompasses the sharing of space, of intimacy, of attention, pleasure and care (Hewlett *et al*. 2019; Lewis 2019; Sillander 2019), often within communities of very small size bound by kinship (Bird-David 2019a; 2019b); sharing is understood as shared *presence* and of extended selves (Widlok 2016; 2019). Sharing in this broader sense is nearly inseparable from egalitarianism, and identifying sharing becomes a useful proxy for identifying egalitarianism. This also marks a very clear distinction from the free-market or 'scramble' pseudo-egalitarianism characteristic of woolly monkey groups and referred to briefly by Butovskaya.

From a deep time perspective, and taking Artemova's caution about negative assumptions into consideration, the critical question is when we can evidence these broader patterns of sharing behaviour. The oldest direct evidence for food sharing — in the form of dismembering and distributing a carcass to different areas — is only c 13kya (Enloe 2004). Some researchers argue that the broader definition of sharing allows us to recognise this throughout the Pleistocene: Spikins argues that care for the injured and sick is evidence of 'sharing through generosity' (Spikins 2019) and Barkai argues that hunting of elephants shows the sharing of large amounts of game, but also the evidence of a distinctive hunter-gatherer world view that sees animals and humans as bound together, with the former to be treated with respect by the latter (Barkai 2019). Both attempt to push the origins of this broader concept of sharing to the origins of the genus *Homo*, coincident with a shift to a reliance on large game and mobility (Townsend 2018). Kuhn and Stiner argue that a key change occurs c 400–450kya, when residential camp sites appear in the record for the first time, but they are explicit that these were not like modern hunter-gatherers in terms of social organisation: "...there is reason to think that, although Middle Pleistocene hominins were highly social and cooperative, they organized their sharing somewhat differently than contemporary foragers" (Kuhn, Stiner 2019: 309). Regardless of the differences in timing, the emphasis in these accounts on the priority of hunter-gatherer social organisation is valuable, especially as it potentially extends beyond just humans.

Beyond human egalitarianism

Nurit Bird-David has observed that an unintended consequence of Woodburn's use of the term egalitarian was that the term's modern connotations of society being comprised of independent individuals was embedded into our discussions (Bird-David 2019b). From this perspective, it is important to highlight that none of the papers presented in this volume extend concepts of egalitarianism beyond relationships between individual *humans*: control of religion, spiritual belief or animals is seen as a mechanism for generating inequality (Finlayson, Villeneuve & Hayden, Petersen, Artemova this volume; Flannery, Marcus 2012), but the idea that egalitarian social relations might extend to different categories of persons is absent. This is important, because hunter-gatherer communities extend beyond humans to incorporate animals, spirits and other agents. In this context, Widlok argues that "For archaeology, this means that when trying to reconstruct sharing relations in any one place *the attempt has to be made to elicit as closely as possible the concepts and boundaries of personhood in the place and time one is dealing with*" (Widlok 2019: 29, my emphasis),

one well-known example being sharing that extends beyond human individuals into relationships with a giving environment (Bird-David 1990). Discussions of egalitarianism need to follow suit.

This is especially important given the focus on the Neolithic revolution in discussion of the origins of inequality. Changing human-animal relationships at this time are often configured as a move from wild to domesticated, or in Ingold's famous terms from trust to domination (Ingold 2000). The dominant agriculturalizing narrative blinds us to forms of human-animal (and human-environment) relationship that do not fit into the wild/domestic dichotomy (Lien *et al*. 2018). For example, Fijn demonstrates that Yolngu (Australia) relations with 'wild' dingoes emphasise 'dog autonomy and independence' (Fijn 2018: 80), and the "consubstantiality and extended kinship between themselves (Yolngu) and other beings, such as dogs/dingoes, and the ancestral being from the which they are both derived" (*Ibid*.: 87). Dogs are not the same as people, but their agency is respected. How relationships of inequality developed between humans and animals may provide important perspectives on how human-human inequality was enabled.

Although Artemova asks in an Australian context, "how can one reconcile the ideals of personal autonomy with the perennial fears of 'supernatural' intrusion and the unending secrets that are obligatory for some to keep and potentially malignant for others?" most of the papers here do not consider the place of the 'supernatural' in understanding inequality. This is unfortunate, because Sahlins and Graeber argue that there is no such thing as an egalitarian society because of the power of the supernatural: *"(e)ven the so-called "egalitarian" or "acephalous" societies... are in structure and practice cosmic polities, ordered and governed by divinities, the dead, species-masters and other such metapersons, endowed with life-and-death powers over the human populations"* (Graeber, Sahlins 2017: 24). In parallel with Bird-David's emphasis on correctly understanding the scale and kinship of foragers 'plural lives' (Bird-David 2017), this alerts us to the need to consider "a sociological complexity that defies the normal anthropological characterizations of their simplicity" (Graeber, Sahlins 2017: 39), i. e. one which understands beyond just the human.

Such a conception of inequality at the heart of supposedly egalitarian societies provides another key perspective on the archaeological elaboration of ritual and cult over time, also seen in the classic Near Eastern sequences. Sahlins and Graeber see hunting in an animist ontology as a continual negotiation of inequality — which in some interpretations ultimately develops into forms of sacrifice and domestication (Willerslev *et al*. 2014). Again, the need to understand different types of agency and personhood is clear if we are to understand egalitarianism and equality.

Equality and the other

The nature of equality and how to create the conditions under which it can be sustained is a compelling challenge. The vision of egalitarianism has been a powerful lens for consideration of hunter-gatherer societies, and part of the ways in which they have been constructed in popular discourse. These forms of society often seem like radical alternatives to the systemically unequal worlds in which we live. One of the important themes in many recent accounts, and shared in most of the papers presented here, is that egalitarianism is not just a base line, but is something which is asserted and created through practices that place emphasis on others and people's

relationships with others. Those others are not just people as we often understand them, but include the animals, plants and spirits with which we share our world and through which we experience that world. Treating these other beings with respect and recognising our mutually constitutive existence is an assertion of equality. It is also an important personal and political act in the present.

Acknowledgements

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