Social inequality before farming?

Multidisciplinary approaches to the study of social organization in prehistoric and ethnographic hunter-gatherer-fisher societies

Edited by Luc Moreau
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with contributions from
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Preface

I write this preface from the state of Wyoming in the US, a state where COVID-19 has not (yet) struck as hard as it has struck other parts of the world, but where we nonetheless have been under stay-at-home orders. Those orders have given me plenty of time to think about where we went wrong, which in the case of the US is a long list. Coincidentally, I also recently re-read Machiavelli’s sixteenth-century book, The Prince, a manual of how to ruthlessly crush opponents while administering (apparent) generosity to acquire the ‘love’ of the masses.

It was in this context that I read the papers in this volume. In doing so, I was struck by two facts. First, inequality’s origin, development and operation are difficult to understand and yet the actions that lead to inequality are easy to implement. This shouldn’t surprise us: no American baseball player mathematically calculates the arc of a fly ball, but he’s still able to position himself in the right place to catch it. You can be utterly uneducated and still know how to manipulate a system to maintain exert, and abuse power. Many world leaders today are proof.

Second, I think that the papers in this volume could be some of the most valuable published in anthropology in many years. Philosophers and social thinkers have tried to understand inequality for a century; indeed, efforts to understand it precede Machiavelli. We bemoan its existence, and yet we have felt unable to grasp it, and, unable to grasp it, unable to do something about it. We muddled through the useless ramblings of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century evolutionists, who, reflecting their colonial environment, often thought that inequality was a good thing, and, if not good, an inevitable thing. Marx tried to shake them out of that complacency, but his brilliance was largely wasted during his ‘second coming’ in the second half of the twentieth century with so much hand-wringing about how a theory intended to explain early capitalism should also apply to hunter-gatherers (because, it must… right?), and so much politically correct posturing that led to no action – and all but disappeared when the Berlin Wall (thankfully) came down and the Soviet Union collapsed. ‘Intensification’ and ‘complexity’, words that should be stricken from anthropology’s vocabulary for their uselessness (and that are thankfully rare in this volume), masked what was really going on: exploitation, oppression, slavery… inequality in all its manifestations. Finally, I think, we have reached the point, through analyses of archaeological and ethnological data, that we might actually understand inequality.

We’ve passed a Rubicon. And this really matters.

The calamity that is COVID-19 has pulled back the curtain on modern society, exposing the weaknesses of its structure, laying bare the inequality between and within countries that Machiavellian leaders exploit and exacerbate for personal gain. Doing something about inequality is the challenge that will remain after COVID-19 dissipates.

These papers help by seeking the origin of inequality in a kind of society, that of nomadic hunter-gatherers, that we once considered ‘the original affluent society’, a classless society, or ‘primitive communists’. Some argue that inequality must be there (as Marxist analysts argued in the 1980s) since it is present in our closest primate relatives, and therefore is in humanity’s genetic foundation. Some see evidence of social and/or political inequality among Palaeolithic hunters, in the evidence for secret societies and in the violence of cave art. I am not convinced by this ‘grimdark’ vision of Palaeolithic society, and see an enormous gap between difference and inequality, between a situation where one person has more than another who nonetheless has enough and one in which society gives a person permission to enslave another.

Nonetheless, these chapters remind us that hunter-gatherers are not angels, and the same self-interest that guides an Inupiap man to become a umialik, or that gave privilege to those men allowed to gather in the torch-lit gallery of Lascaux, guides Machiavelli’s anonymous prince. People have different skills, and for some, those skills are political. Under the right conditions, those individuals can consolidate power, convince others to go to battle, and make their personal aggrandizement seem reasonable to the people paying its price. Palaeolithic society had its Hitlers and Stalins, its Caesars and Trumps.

But it didn’t have imperialism, or empires, or palaces, or wealth hidden in tax havens. So other chapters here look for the conditions under which those ‘selfish’ individuals can gain power. High population density (pressure), localized and hence controllable resources,
the ability to build a coalition, which requires a sufficient concentration of population and social institutions that are conducive to creating coalitions, lack of trust in institutions, including sharing networks, to provide in times of stress – these are the conditions that permit those with political skills to pursue self-interest through the manipulation of others.

These conditions are as relevant to understanding the world of today as they are to an understanding of the Palaeolithic world. Today, however, conditions can be manipulated, for example ‘localized’ in off-shore bank accounts. Population pressure is high and will become worse as the world approaches the projected population of 11 billion by 2100. And competition is worsened by a capitalist economy that encourages ever-increasing amounts of consumption and conversion of needed resources, such as food, into higher profit margin items such as crisps and alcoholic beverages. Information is a resource, and technology makes information more available but less trustworthy. Unbelievably expensive displays of potential force – multi-billion-dollar aircraft carriers, atomic weapons, a Space Force – signal a lack of trust in non-violent institutions to resolve the inevitable disputes that arise when people, or countries, pursue their self-interests with little regard for others. Building trust in institutions – in the UN, in voting, in the media, in government itself! – is an integral part of stopping and even reversing the arms race before it drives the world to the poor house.

Inequality is an old story, and one that we understand much better due to the efforts of anthropologists and archaeologists. It hasn’t been easy to arrive at this point. But the really hard work – implementing our knowledge – still lies ahead for us. This volume, and our prehistoric hunting and gathering ancestors tell us what needs to be done. And it is the most important work anyone could be doing in the world today.

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Chapter 13

Naturalism: a marker of Upper Palaeolithic social inequalities?

Emmanuel Guy

It is usually considered that Upper Palaeolithic populations were devoid of any form of inequality or hierarchy. This assumption is based on two main arguments. First, the beginning of a socio-economic divide among individuals is usually attributed to the Neolithic period. The transition towards a sedentary lifestyle induced by agricultural practices and livestock farming may have led to individual ownership of land and excess wealth production. Furthermore, the privatization of those resources by a minority may have caused the gradual establishment of hierarchical societies dominated by casts of hereditary lineages. Traces of the first defensive systems around settlements and of increasingly numerous massacres implying territorial rivalries also date to the Neolithic. The second argument in support of an egalitarian Palaeolithic society relies on ethnological work on numerous Australian, Southern African or Arctic Circle hunter-gatherer societies that show no structural hierarchy. If this egalitarian model is widely agreed upon in the field, it seems to us, on the contrary, that the Palaeolithic artistic data decisively points towards strong social-economic inequalities during that period (Guy 2017).

An art made by specialists

The motivations behind the realism of Palaeolithic representation, their ‘naturalism’ – according to art history terminology – are seldom questioned. Where does such a desire for fidelity in the depiction of the visible come from? Even if this mimetic preoccupation seems to concern animal representations exclusively (human figures being both scarce and usually reduced to a far more schematic expression), it is nonetheless robust since it runs throughout the Upper Palaeolithic. This naturalism could be seen as a sign of the probable inequality of Palaeolithic societies for at least two reasons (Guy 2017). The first is that such a level of virtuosity in craft and knowledge is far from self-evident. It seems reasonable that the extremely masterful and complex figurative art in the caves of Chauvet, Lascaux or Niaux bear witness to the long-term practice of drawing, with an artistic education probably started at an early age and necessitating some form of daily practice (Fig. 13.1).

In other words, the high technical level of Palaeolithic figurative representation probably implies some degree of individual specialization. Even on a part time basis, specialization necessarily means inequalities of knowledge. However, differences in ability and skill do not necessarily translate into differences in access to the critical resources for survival, which is key to non-egalitarian social structures (Kelly 2013). Just because one has spent time learning a craft, be it flintknapping or drawing, this does not imply non-egalitarianism in terms of a hierarchy of statuses within the group.

The issue of specialization has been raised previously regarding some artefacts of extraordinary expertise such as Solutrean laurel-leaf points or Magdalenian blades. Jacques Pelegrin argues that the expertise of flintknappers results from a life-long accumulation of knowledge and experience rather than individual specialization (Pelegrin 2007); there is no need to be specialist in order to become an expert. This argument may be asserted for flintknapping, an activity directly linked to the daily quest for means of subsistence, but no economic necessity calls for the act of drawing for which a high level of skill can only be explained by a dedicated training.

A recent study about the manufacture of Aurignacian ivory or soapstone beads emphasizes the great standardization of these productions (Heckel 2017). The author suggests that the uniform aspect of personal ornaments can only be explained by a limited number of production centres and craftsmen. These criteria
can be used to define specialization of craftsmen in agricultural societies.

Works of art, stone items or adornments therefore may well have been made by specialists. This division of activities might indicate a form of hierarchy among individuals if we assume that societies needed to be wealthy enough to economically support specialists during their training and their professional activity. Such a level of wealth is usually characteristic of hierarchical groups. These claims also speak to the recurring observation that the production of the most imposing Palaeolithic works (among them Lascaux) – which probably required several months of labour – depended upon the economic and material support of the artist by the rest of the group (Bon 2009).

However, it remains speculative whether Lascaux was completed in one effort and whether by being very skilled at an activity, Upper Palaeolithic specialists or experts were supported in the way that court artisans were supported in much later time periods. There are ethnographic instances of individuals who specialized in an activity – flintknapping, basketry, medicine production – in otherwise egalitarian communities (Woodburn 1982).

The second reason indicating the presence of inequality within at least some Palaeolithic societies is tied to the nature of imitation itself: it is not a condition for ritual. One could even say it is the other way around. In traditional societies, art usually presents forms that are much more overtly symbolic than mimetic. This tendency is linked to the fact that in such societies, what is called ‘art’ is mainly used to communicate with supernatural forces. It has no particular vocation to imitate the real world. When art tends towards illusionism it is generally in order to better serve the interests of an elite because, as Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote, to be able to imitate nature is to show that one can ‘compete’ with it (Charbonnier 1961). This ability to imitate reality is a source of prestige for both the author and the potential audience of the artwork. Yet, prestige always has a political function. It allows elites to set themselves apart from others and thus contributes towards providing evidence of their entitlements. Artistic imitation therefore represents added value which,
in addition to the ceremonial or religious function of images, corresponds to economic and political roles. Artistic naturalism is not the only mode of representation used by social elites to express their prestige. However, to my knowledge there are no illusionist artistic traditions in all of art history that are not the product of highly hierarchical societies. We do not see why the Upper Palaeolithic Era would be any different.

Unequal hunter-gatherers

In relation to these arguments, one can legitimately wonder whether distinct social inequalities may have already existed in Upper Palaeolithic societies. The hypothesis is all the more plausible given that the term ‘hunter-gatherer’ itself covers numerous different economic and social realities. In his work, Alain Testart demonstrates strong socio-economic inequalities among different groups of hunter-gatherers. His study shows that such a social hierarchy, far from being an exception, would instead tend to be the rule among hunter-gatherer groups (Testart 1982). Essentially, Testart believes that there are two categories of hunter-gatherers. The first category lives in desert or marginal resource areas. These groups are usually quite small and mobile, their migrations based on the exhaustion of natural resources. There are no marked inequalities among them and no specific social division. Their organization is close to those of Southern African San, Australian Aboriginal peoples or other groups of humans living in the Arctic Circle.

In contrast, hunter-gatherers from regions with a high biomass show far lower levels of mobility. This semi-settled way of life is enabled by the ability to store wild resources which produces wealth.

Thus, according to Testart, it is not food production itself that led to the emergence of inequalities but rather the storage and ownership of wild or domesticated resources by a minority (Testart 1982). The hunter-gatherer economy of the Northwest Coast Indians is one of the best-known cases. The abundance of seasonal resources, especially the profusion of salmon in the rivers and estuaries during the spawning season, enables the group to store such a great amount of food that they can live at the same site throughout most of the year. These groups are under the domination of a hereditary elite who possess all of the land and resources. Under them are the commoners who possess nothing, or close to nothing; finally, at the bottom end of the social ladder are the slaves who belong to rich dignitaries. The degree of hierarchy and inequality introduced by these stock-keeping hunter-gatherers is not unlike what can be observed in agricultural societies.

According to Testart, the desire to store resources is first and foremost a reaction to environmental constraints. Storage is enabled by seasonal resources; the alternation between abundance and shortage is what pushes human groups to keep stocks. The geographical nature of this factor could explain why the majority of hunter-gatherers known to store food are found at high latitudes that experience greater seasonality.

Limited signs of storage

Curiously, hunter-gatherers from regions with limited resources are usually those used as a comparison to evoke the Palaeolithic way of life. Davies (this volume) explicitly rejects the hypothesis that the environment in which Eurasian Palaeolithic groups evolved is comparable to that of complex hunter-gatherers of the American Northwest Coast.

However, the richness of mid-latitude European ice age environments is incomparable to any analogous present-day region (Djindjian et al. 1999). Such a unique ecosystem would be closer to the African savannah than to the tundra or the taiga. Some studies show that the biomass of large mammals of the steppes was closer to the 31,000 kg per sq. km found in some savannahs than to the 300 kg per sq. km usually found in the tundra (Drucker et al. 2014). The environment would theoretically thus have been favourable to an intensive storing practice, but is there any material evidence of this?

There is some evidence but it is rare and difficult to interpret, the most convincing being pits dug in the frozen ground of Gravettian open-air sites located in the plains of Central and Eastern Europe (Pavlov, Dolní Věstonice, Kostienki, Mezirich, etc.). These pits dug close to occupation sites were probably used as pantries, suggested by bone remains of large mammals found inside. Tangible signs of food preservation are not as clear in Western Europe, either because people did not store or because the structures built for that purpose were made of perishable materials that have not preserved (platforms mounted on stilts, baskets, chests, etc.). Another factor is the difficulty in estimating the role of fishing, and more generally marine resources in those economies. Complex hunter-gatherer ethnology reveals that most of these groups are, in fact, fishermen and women. An explanation could be the limited number of steps necessary to preserve fish (gutting, heading, filleting), especially given how well it can be dried and smoked (Testart 1982). Was the coastline intensively exploited by Palaeolithic groups? Were the well-known Mesolithic fisheries first created at that time or had they been there since Palaeolithic times? It is currently impossible to answer.
this question given the rise in sea level at the end of the last glaciation that resulted in the submersion of the ancient coastline. Any Palaeolithic sites linked to the exploitation of marine resources would now rest a hundred metres below present-day sea level. However, fishing should not be seen as an absolute condition for storage. Populations are known for emphasizing storage of plant food, such as the acorn storing Indians (Pomo, Miwok) from central California. Furthermore, we must consider the possibility of food freezing. For populations living most of the year in temperatures below 0°C it would be the easiest and cheapest way of preserving food (Testart, 1982). It is thus impossible to exclude the fact that storage of game meat could have played an important role in Palaeolithic economies. Moreover, outdoor pits from Central and Eastern Europe seem to suggest it was the case, at least locally.

This brief overview points to the scarce evidence for storage during the Upper Palaeolithic, with the additional issue that these signs do not indicate whether the sites were used to preserve extra food for domestic use or as large-scale storing points that could generate significant economic disparities. However, an increasing amount of data indicates the permanent or semi-permanent occupation of certain large dwellings. In Central Europe, faunal remains found in Krems, Pavlov, Předmostí and Moravany-Lopata II show that animals were hunted throughout the year. Similar situations can be found in southwest Europe. The large Isturitz cave, in the French Pyrénées-Atlantiques region, seems to have been occupied throughout most of the year, with the same for Magdalenian sites in Gironde (southwest France) including Saint-Germain-la-Rivière, Moulin-Neuf and Roc de Marcamps. Such settlements would have been difficult to occupy without food storage, especially during the coldest time of the year.

**Ambiguous archeological data**

Storage and its consequences for the social organization of prehistoric groups could explain certain unanswered questions. Brian Hayden was the first to clearly defend the idea of the existence of inequalities during the Upper Palaeolithic. In his 2008 book, he points out the ambiguity of large amounts of data that could hint towards the emergence of hierarchy among members of a group (Hayden 2008). Besides signs of storage and sedentism, Hayden underlines the scarcity of burials (approximately 100) found for the whole period and, simultaneously, the richness of some funerary artifacts – such as the spectacular offerings found in the famous Sunghir burials. In elite societies, the burial of dignitaries contributes towards giving a sacred status to the lineage and underlining a family’s territory. Hayden also emphasizes the circulation of art objects and personal ornaments over very large distances as a practice usually specific to societies showing some form of hierarchy. The production of food surplus by hunter-gatherers does not only aim at building up a stock of food for winter, but it also creates wealth and reinforces the domination of the owners. From then on, part of the surplus produce, be it food or artefacts, will sometimes circulate over large distances since it allows the elite to buy services and exchange precious goods in order to maintain their prestige – in other words, their social position. Finally, there is a striking spatial overlap of graves and art objects with regions where the biomass was probably extremely rich (Hayden 2008; Guy 2017).

All of these arguments tend to support the origins of a Palaeolithic elite who would have controlled land and resources, in a similar manner to the nobles of the American Northwest Coast.

**A heraldic function?**

Ethnological data indicate the power of the elite is based on sacredness. The mythic origin of the lineage is the root of any entitlement to land and other people. This idea of heavenly superiority is the basis of social hierarchy. The heroes of these origins stories are usually ancestors who embody the lineage itself.

On the Northwest Coast, the myths involve animals that are sacred ancestors of families of the elite. This animal typology is used to differentiate each noble family and their privileges. The same animals are represented, as on feudal coats of arms, to indicate an identity affiliation. They are sculpted and painted on heraldic masts, on house facades and on numerous ritual artefacts (Fig. 13.2). The use of such visual signs is a constant in this type of society. They allow the ostentatious affirmation of the social rank of dominant families.

If our hypothesis proves to be true, it is possible that Palaeolithic art was used as symbols of identity to communicate the power of elite, making them images of a heraldic nature.

General patterns seen in Palaeolithic art do not contradict this hypothesis, if one accepts their interpretation as follows:

- Primacy is given to the representation of animal species, which have historically been used as emblems.
- The selectiveness of the species represented, approximately 20 throughout the period, prove their symbolic or emblematic function.
- The animals are represented without natural backgrounds and surroundings (plants, mountains,
that the most accomplished (thus, theoretically most prestigious) representations are found in the largest halls, therefore were susceptible to hosting a significant number of visitors. On the other hand, the more schematic and rough works are usually located in recesses or areas that are difficult to access (Villeneuve et al. 2007). The presence of the works that demanded the most investment in the most accessible rooms can only be explained by a desire to flaunt. The partition of the works in the caves seems to express a desire to impress in line with prestige and distinction strategies that an elite usually employ. One could think that, during the Palaeolithic, families would gather in those richly decorated chambers to take part in ceremonies like the potlatch of the Northwest Coast. The concomitant existence of hidden works is not in contradiction with the existence of an art supposedly dedicated to the elite. Prestige expresses itself both through value attributed to a spectacular iconography and through the existence of confidential works whose private nature produces, by its exclusivity, the desired effect of power. That supernatural access needs to be controlled is precisely the key to the elite’s legitimacy.

Incidentally, portable art also displays rich decoration, featuring the same animal species as those represented in the caves. It is significant that the most likely sacred symbols one could see as belonging to the group as a whole can be found on personal objects. Personal ornaments can also be decorated with animal motifs similar to those found in the caves. This suggests a personal use of ‘religious’ symbols (Bon 2009) thus, perhaps, an appropriation of sacredness by a minority which is, again, specific to elites.

Finally, the studies I lead on Palaeolithic modes of representation lead us to recognize the existence of schools, in the sense of the strict repetition of ways in which things are represented from one site to another, across distances that exclude the possibility of their being produced by one individual (Guy 2011, 2017). In concrete terms, this means that the same representational conventions were shared by different artists (Fig. 13.3). This stylistic stability strengthens the hypothesis of an active teaching of image creation at the time. It is highly doubtful that this happened in a totally spontaneous manner. The immersion of artists in the same cultural environment would by no means enable such a unity of styles on its own. It would thus be interesting to question the nature of the thousands of engraved stone plaques found in sites such as the Spanish Parpalló cave, Enlene cave or La Marche in France. The partial and rough nature of the representations they bear could indicate their use as training material for apprentices (Fig. 13.4). However, the stereotypical nature of these representations reminds us
Figure 13.3. Same stylistic conventions shared in Western Europe around the twentieth millennium (drawing E. Guy).

Figure 13.4. Parpalló cave: apprentice exercises? (drawing E. Guy after Villaverde Bonilla).
of how important the message these symbols carried must have been at that time. Indeed, we know that the more the image answers a social necessity, the more conventional it needs to be in order to remain understandable for those who receive it. It could thus be considered that such a level of codification could be linked to the transmission of economic or political interests. We have mentioned earlier that long distance trade of objects or rare materials is often a sign of unequal societies in so far as its function is to increase the wealth of owners.

This same logic based on economic interest widely determines the rules of marriage. As Brian Hayden recalled in this conference, it means that matrimonial network exchanges were sometimes built and spread over very large distances. Yet, if long distance marriages can also exist in simple hunter-gatherer societies, they were less common and were not a particular cause of the circulation of goods and images. On the Northeast coast, marriages between sometimes very geographically distant noble families were arranged in order to increase their tangible and intangible assets. (Suttles 1990). Alliances were materialized by exchanges of crests between families commissioned from famous artists (Berlo et al. 2006). These long-distance commissions are the first indication of the geographical dispersion of family emblems. It seems to us that such alliance mechanisms which are specific to elite societies are the best hypothesis for how, during the Upper Palaeolithic period, similar style conventions may have sometimes travelled considerable distances.

Conclusion

In spite of earlier studies including those of Alain Testart, it is surprising to see that prehistoric archaeology still considers economic egalitarianism as the only possible form of social life in the Upper Palaeolithic. Yet, we undeniably know that socio-economic inequalities, at least as developed as the ones which appear in agricultural societies, can exist in hunting-gathering contexts. It is difficult not to see the persistence of a Rousseauist vision in this promotion of the ‘good savage’. All of the numerous and troubling pieces of evidence that we have noted above call for caution. Among those mentioned earlier is the artistic naturalism of Eurasian hunting populations, which without doubt, should raise the most questions. First, because their desire to imitate essentially symbolizes in itself the desire for the appropriation of nature which is specific to hierarchical societies. Second, because naturalism inevitably requires at least part-time training and specialization. This is a heavy and constraining investment that could only come from external economic support, which in turn possibly comes from the existence of long-term food storage.

Notes

1. One could oppose our reasoning with rock art from some shelters in the south of Southern Africa. The naturalism of those polychrome paintings is clearly very impressive compared to some masterpieces of the Upper Palaeolithic era. As mentioned before, the San are traditionally part of groups of high mobility hunter-gatherers and their social organization is described as largely egalitarian. However, the reality is maybe more complex than this. The supposed Neolithic age of these paintings also corresponds to burials discovered in the same regions which contain funerary artefacts (painted slabs, tools made of rare materials, ochre, etc.) that were unusual in the context of egalitarian groups (Lewis-Williams 1983). Furthermore, recent studies (Brian Hayden, comm. pers.) suggest that hunters who lived in the region at that time displayed marked inequalities as they occasionally raised sheep and regularly organized banquets for strategic alliances against a backdrop of territorial competition and economic rivalry (Sadr 2005).

References

Social inequality before farming?

Archaeological investigations over the past 50 years have challenged the importance of domestication and food production in the emergence of institutionalized social inequality. Social inequality in the prehistoric human past developed through multiple historical processes that operate on a number of different scales of variability (e.g. social, economic, demographic, and environmental). However, in the theoretical and linguistic landscape of social inequality, there is no clear definition of what social inequality is. The lifeways of hunter-gatherer-fisher societies open a crucial intellectual space and challenge to find meaningful ways of using archaeological and ethnographic data to understand what social inequality exactly is with regard to variously negotiated or enforced cultural norms or ethoses of individual autonomy. This interdisciplinary edited volume gathers together researchers working in the fields of prehistoric archaeology and cultural and evolutionary anthropology. Spanning terminal Pleistocene to Holocene archaeological and ethnographic contexts from across the globe, the nineteen chapters in this volume cover a variety of topics organized around three major themes, which structure the book: 1) social inequality and egalitarianism in extant hunter-gatherer societies; 2) social inequality in Upper Palaeolithic Europe (c. 45,000–11,500 years ago); 3) social inequality in prehistoric Holocene hunter-gatherer-fisher societies globally. Most chapters in this volume provide empirical content with considerations of subsistence ecology, demography, mobility, social networks, technology, children’s enculturation, ritual practice, rock art, dogs, warfare, lethal weaponry, and mortuary behaviour. In addition to providing new data from multiple contexts through space and time, and exploring social diversity and evolution from novel perspectives, the collection of essays in this volume will have a considerable impact on how archaeologists define and theorize pathways both towards and away from inequality within diverse social contexts.

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