Preface

In the autumn of 1753 the celebrated Academy of Dijon proposed an essay competition. The prize would go to the author who best answered the question "What is the origin of inequality among men, and is it authorized by Natural Law?"

An iconoclast from Geneva named Jean-Jacques Rousseau took up the challenge. His entry, "A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality among Men," did not win, but 250 years later it is the only one still remembered. So influential was Rousseau's essay that many historians believe it provided the moral justification for the French Revolution. Still others consider Rousseau the founder of modern social science.

In less than 100 pages Rousseau presented a framework for the development of human society that preceded the writings of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer by more than a century. Rousseau's effort was all the more remarkable because he could not draw upon anthropology or sociology, two sciences that did not yet exist. Nor was he able to draw upon archaeology, since it would be another 120 years before Heinrich Schliemann created it.

To understand the origin of inequality, Rousseau argued, one had to go back to earliest times—to a "state of nature" in which the only differences among human beings lay in their strength, agility, and intelligence, and individuals worked only to satisfy their immediate needs. Rousseau believed that all the unpleasant characteristics of the human condition derived not from nature but from society itself as it developed. Self-respect, vital for self-preservation, was the rule at first. Unfortunately, as society grew, this attitude gave way to self-love, the desire to be superior to others and admired by them. Love of

property replaced generosity. Eventually, a growing body of wealthy families imposed a social contract on the poor, a contract that institutionalized inequality by providing it with moral justification.

What makes the influence of Rousseau's work all the more impressive is to consider how few reliable facts he possessed when he wrote it. His entire description of "natural man" was based on the anecdotal accounts of travelers. Rousseau had heard of "savages of the West Indies" who were superb archers and "savages of North America" who were celebrated for their strength and dexterity. He had heard of the natives of Guinea, the east coast of Africa, the Malabars, Mexico, Peru, Chile, and "the Magellan lands." He knew of the Khoikhoi people of the Cape of Good Hope but referred to them by the politically incorrect term "Hottentots."

It would be easy to list all the details Rousseau got wrong, but that would be like criticizing Gregor Mendel for not knowing about DNA. More useful is to build upon Rousseau's essay by using two more recent sources of information. One source is the vast archive of archaeological information on ancient peoples. The other source is the archive of anthropological information on recent human groups. In a nutshell, here is what those two bodies of information tell us.

Anatomically and intellectually, modern humans were already present during the Ice Age. By 15,000 B.C., they had driven their closest competitors to extinction and spread to every major landmass on earth. Our Ice Age ancestors typically lived in small foraging societies whose members are believed to have valued generosity, sharing, and altruism. As anthropologist Christopher Boehm points out, hunting-and-gathering people usually work actively to prevent inequality from emerging.

Not all of our ancestors, however, continued to live that way. Slowly but surely, some of them began to create larger societies with greater levels of social inequality. By 2500 B.C., virtually every form of inequality known to mankind had been created somewhere in the world, and truly egalitarian societies were gradually being relegated to places no one else wanted.

Evolutionary biologist Edward O. Wilson has compared the appearance of complex human societies to hypertrophy, the exaggerated overgrowth of structures, such as the tail of the peacock or the tusk of the elephant. The growth of complex human societies, however, did not require genetic change. It involved changes in a unique social logic that characterizes every human group. We learn the details of this logic through social anthropology, and we discover the long-term results of its changes through archaeology.

In the pages that follow we document our ancestors' creation of inequality by drawing on both archaeology and social anthropology. Several widespread regularities become apparent. First, out of the hundreds of possible varieties of human societies, five or six worked so well that they emerged over and over again in different parts of the world. Second, out of the hundreds of logical premises that could be used to justify inequality, a handful worked so well that dozens of unrelated societies came up with them.

For whom did we write this book? Not for our fellow archaeologists and social anthropologists, although they contributed much of the information we use. Instead, we wrote this book for the general reader who is curious about his or her prehistoric ancestors but has neither the time nor inclination to wade through the social science literature.

Because the book is designed for the general reader, we give the dates of ancient events in two familiar and accessible forms. In the case of remote periods, for which dates can never be more than approximations, we give them in "years ago." For more recent events, dated by Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Maya, or European calendars, we present our dates in the familiar "B.C." or "A.D." system, with which all readers of newspapers and news magazines are familiar.

In this book we refer frequently to both archaeology and social anthropology. One could liken their relationship to that of zoology and paleontology. By examining living amphibians, reptiles, and mammals, zoologists give us detailed knowledge of their anatomy and behavior. By examining the fossil record, paleontologists demonstrate to us that amphibians preceded reptiles and likely gave rise to them; that reptiles preceded mammals and likely gave rise to them; and so on.

Paleontologists are at a disadvantage because they usually have only the skeletons of ancient species to work with. Often, however, the bones reveal attachments for ligaments, tendons, or muscles that zoologists can link to specific behaviors. For their part, zoologists are at a disadvantage because they are limited to those creatures that still live among us. Often, however, paleontologists can fill in the blanks with the skeletons of creatures that lived long ago. Both fields are therefore empowered when there is feedback between them.

Archaeology and social anthropology also work best when they work together, but their relationship over the years has been uneasy at best. Archaeologists turn frequently to social anthropologists for help in interpreting prehistoric evidence. Many social anthropologists, however, cannot imagine

that there is anything to learn from archaeology. They consider it a form of manual labor.

One social anthropologist who understands the contribution of archaeology is Robin Fox. "Old-fashioned as it may seem," Fox once wrote, "archaeology is really interested in the *truth* about the past, however elusive this may be." That is because, he adds, archaeology "must always come back to face the brute facts of physical remains, its subject matter. This is a strength, not a weakness."

Social anthropologists are rarely forced to face the brute facts of physical remains. For many, this means that the possibilities of what might be true are limitless. Social anthropologists are free, if they wish, to believe that the past is merely a "text" that we can interpret any way we want. They can even believe, should they choose, that there were no repetitive patterns in the way that human societies developed over time, and that any attempt to detect order in the infinite variety of societies is misguided.

Archaeologists are denied this luxury. They must, for example, face the brute fact that there were no monarchies 15,000 years ago, and that when monarchies finally arose on different continents, they left behind some remarkable similarities in their physical remains.

Today's archaeologists are just as interested in social and cultural behavior as social anthropologists are. They are at a disadvantage because they have only the skeletal outlines of past societies. By reading the work of social anthropologists, however, archaeologists learn what to look for in order to reconstruct the perishable structures of society. At the same time, archaeologists must have the common sense to realize that not every theory developed by social anthropologists can be successfully applied to archaeological remains.

The anthropological and archaeological evidence to which we refer in this book is only a fraction of what we could have used. Out of the hundreds of social anthropological studies available, we chose those that could be most readily used to interpret the archaeological evidence. We also looked for studies that either captured an important moment of social change or made explicit the logic of inequality.

Given a choice, we turned to studies by the first social anthropologists to contact a specific society, that is, those who were able to describe it before it was hopelessly altered by colonialism or globalization. Many of those classic studies are currently underutilized, because they do not showcase the anthropological theories considered trendy today. What these early studies offer the archaeologist, however, are descriptions of indigenous behavior that can no

longer be observed. One day in the future many types of societies, despite having once been widespread, will exist only as archaeological remains. Perhaps when that happens, many of the writings by pioneer anthropologists will be rediscovered.

As for the archaeological studies we use, we have been just as selective. Out of the hundreds of possibilities, we chose those from which we could infer actual social behavior. Every archaeological site yields artifacts. Not every site, however, provides evidence of residences, public buildings, ritual features, or burials that show some aspect of inequality.

In the course of writing this book we were frequently made aware that it was not always the most recent studies that were the most useful. Good archaeological evidence can come from any decade. The same is true of the theories and explanatory models we encountered. This should not have surprised us. The theory of natural selection was published in 1859 and is still used today. The same could be said of the theory of relativity, first published in 1905. There is, in other words, no "shelf life" for a truly useful theory.

Theory is indispensable in science, because it makes sense out of disparate facts. At the same time, there are limits to how much theory ought to appear in a book for the general reader. There is probably no bigger "buzzkill" than a long, ponderous chapter on competing hypotheses.

We have been guided, in this regard, by a wise old archaeologist named Richard S. MacNeish. "Theory," MacNeish once told us, "is like perfume. Put on the right amount and the suitors will swarm around you. Put on too much and they'll think that you're covering up the smell of bad data." We trust that the theory in this book is just a dab behind the ear.