

The deep roots of economic inequality

May 23 2014, by John German

A special issue of *Science* explores the origins of human inequality, drawing on research by SFI Professor Sam Bowles and collaborators.

The cover article, "[The ancient roots of the 1%.](#)" traces the development of economic disparity back to Natufian hunter-gatherers in the Eastern Mediterranean more than 10,000 years ago, where—new evidence suggests—individuals and families might have begun taking "ownership" of choice fishing spots and plentiful forest patches, storing surpluses of food, and amassing the accoutrements of wealth. This predates previous estimates of the age of [wealth inequality](#), which had been linked to the advent of agriculture, by a few thousand years.

Research by Bowles and collaborators, the article notes, have examined the origins of another piece of the rich-get-richer puzzle: wealth inheritance. "Using historical and ethnographic data on 21 populations around the world, the team examined three kinds of wealth: material riches such as real estate, embodied wealth such as physical strength, and relational riches such as the number of people in a person's social network...[They found] that just having domesticated crops wasn't enough to fuel enduring inequality. Farmers who practiced intensive agriculture and boosted yields in regions where arable land was scarce readily passed down their [wealth](#). These farmers could control access to their fields, protect them, and leave them to their heirs, Bowles says." The findings suggest it was the concentration of resources—edible grains, crops, fish—rather than agriculture itself that led to ownership.

Another article, "[Our egalitarian Eden](#)," explores how and why early

egalitarian societies might have kept socioeconomic [inequality](#) in check. In part, "cooperation is self-reinforcing: Sharing the spoils promotes further cooperation and self-sacrifice (Science, 4 September 2009, p. 1196). 'Inequality may be the enemy of cooperation,' Bowles says."

A review paper by Johannes Haushofer and Ernst Fehr, "[On the psychology of poverty](#)," also draws on findings by Bowles and [collaborators](#) on poverty traps.

More information: The special section on human inequality is available online: www.sciencemag.org/site/special/inequality/

Provided by Santa Fe Institute

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