
Tales from the Inequality Possibility Frontier: Equality, Production, Population and Climate in the Northern Pueblo (US) Southwest

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Résumé

We profit from the fact that for the central Mesa Verde region of the US Southwest we have relatively firm temporally anchored estimates of population size, climatically conditioned estimates of potential maize production, and estimates of "wealth" inequality (Gini coefficients) derived from distributions of house sizes through time. Our use of house size as a measure of wealth reflects our broad conceptualization of wealth as incorporating what have been called its embodied, relational, and material aspects. Using these ingredients we are able to estimate how closely the elites approach absorbing all the available productive surplus (beyond minimal subsistence needs) of their societies, and how that changes through time in these societies. This maximum feasible degree of inequality has been called the Inequality Possibility Frontier by Branko Milanovic. Now we can assess the ratio between the actual inequality and the maximum feasible inequality; this ratio is called the Inequality Extraction Ratio. Examining inequality in this way allows us to compare Pueblo societies (traditionally considered as relatively egalitarian) with other societies that have been analyzed in this way, which includes contemporary countries as well as historical entities including the Roman Empire, Byzantium, and medieval England and Wales. Measuring inequality in this way moves us toward the goal of reconstructing human experience, since it shows how exploitive the elites were in Pueblo societies through time relative to what they could have been. These are the first such estimates for any society known primarily through archaeology.

Mots-Clés: Neolithic, Pueblo, Inequality, Wealth

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