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Wisman, J. (2022). *The origin and dynamics of inequality: Sex, politics and ideology*.
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When I first started reading Jon Wisman's work, I recalled a long-forgotten pseudo-joke about British people that I heard when I was growing up in Australia. Remember, Australia is a country born of colonialist origins but whose irreverent citizens pride themselves on possessing a well-developed sense of humour and having cast off the vestiges of birthright-derived privilege. The joke was this: what would be the first thing three British immigrants would do to survive if they were marooned on a desert island? Answer: invent a class system! I think the book reminded me of this form of stereotype because its author hit on something that is so fundamental that only intelligent people could miss it – and, indeed, very intelligent people have mostly missed it (but not the one who wrote the book). The message is: status, hierarchies and inequality did not arise from modernity nor from economics *a la* capitalism. I am unaware of anyone who has better prosecuted this case – or even really tried – than Jon Wisman, and it is case that – in key ways – renders defunct (or at least marginalises somewhat) much modern penmanship from the likes of Krugman and Piketty.

At nearly 500 pages and with few words wasted, *The Origins and Dynamics of Inequality: Sex, Politics, and Ideology* argues that the struggle over inequality has been the driving force of human history, right back to the beginning of our species. It is a classic in the making. As its title indicates, it is about the perennially elusive malaise of inequality, broadly conceived. Although written by a leading American economist, it is really a book about philosophy. It pulls back the lens on a phenomenon which has endured – not just from the dawn of human civilisation – but arguably everywhere where two or more creatures of any kind coexist. In this lens-pulling-back exercise, we get a rare sense of how a mature and reflective scholar conceives of a problem that perhaps touches on their discipline but, at the same time, ranges across disparate domains of intellectual curiosity. Wisman, of course, has a distinguished reputation as a critical social economist and historian. I well knew this before I read his book and, frankly, it worried me a little. I thought, the tome might just have been a “me-too” Piketty-type dissertation. Such a rehashing would not have held my attention and, in my view, would not have been necessary. However, what I ended-up digesting was a book about human nature – one which, quite simply, brings the game together. Moreover, when the book arrived it looked daunting – perhaps also the title is a bit off-putting for someone who just wants to kill some time. However, soon after I started it, I was transfixed. The book is absorbing and a lesson in how to combine data, evidence, quotes, anecdotes, and narrative. It is now a touchstone for me (and my graduate students) when I think about certain of our current projects – or just want to think.

As alluded to, Wisman is a rare example of someone who has transcended his discipline. Chapter by chapter – and mostly using the long arc of human history to provide a storyline – he guides the reader in their development of understanding about how inequality instantiated itself into consequential areas of civilisation (and pre-civilisation). Most of this odyssey occurs prior to the industrial revolution. It examines topics such as sexual attraction and selection, the shift from hunter-gathering to agricultural-based forms of human organisation, the rise of the state and extreme inequality, the role of religious institutions, the new zeitgeist that came with the enlightenment and, of course, industrial, and post-industrial manifestations of exclusion and marginalisation. Each of the work's 14 chapters is compelling. Each is patently based on a career's worth of research, deep reflection, and conservative reasoning (by which I mean the author prioritises data and evidence over interpretation and habitually draws conclusions only in circumstances where a threshold case exists).

Wisman's book hasn't well taken off yet. I think this could be largely the fault of Oxford University Press and the fact that the author himself is unduly self-effacing. In light of such context, I consider that I have something of a responsibility. Unambiguously, this work gets to the heart of a problem in a way that the likes of Thomas Piketty, Branko Milanovic (with their statistical profiling work); Bos van Bavel and Carles Boix and Walter Scheidels (with their historical portrayals); as well as

more general accounts such as that of Wilkinson and Pickett just fail to do. As good as these latter tomes are (and they are each impressive), I realise now that they tilt too much toward description. Frustratingly – and relatedly – they each also mostly only address one piece of the problem. By contrast, Wisman gets underneath the crucial issues – he is more interested in the roots than the leaves and branches. Because his emphasis is on explanation, his content scope is enlarged. His theorising is disciplined and arises naturally from a well-rounded appreciation of philosophy – especially the more ethereal elements of Darwinian-based natural selection (which crop-up regularly and in well defended and interesting ways throughout the book).

When reading Wisman's book, I contemplated the idea that much modern scholarship is technically well executed but says little that is either new or interesting. In other words, we as a community place undue emphasis on execution at the expense of creativity. Of course, there are exceptions. When these occur, they tend to reflect the aforementioned implicit trade-off; that are plagued by problems of sloppy reasoning and/or poor execution. Wisman's book breaks out of this dysfunctional paradigm – it is iconoclastic, a genuine contribution to philosophy without any sense that the reader is being short-changed when it comes to thorough research or logic fallacies (and, frankly I have spotted a few of the latter in well-known rival works). Please use social media to promote *The Origins and Dynamic of Inequality*. I have no dog in this fight or conflict of interest. However, what I do believe is that, on those rare occasions when one runs in to an undiscovered masterpiece, one has an obligation to its creator – as well as those who are yet to have access to it.