On the Feasibility of Subsistence Economics

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Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the fields, and lodge in the villages.
—Song of Solomon 7:11

I would like here to explore the possibility that subsistence economics may be viable today. Rather than offer a somewhat idealistic image, full of bucolic bliss, backyard vegetable gardens and chicken yards, I am interested in the specific economic structure of what may be called subsistence survival. For that economic analysis, my focus is ancient southwest Asia, the larger context in which ancient Israel (southern Levant) was found, and thereby the context of the production of the Hebrew Bible. In fact, given that the southern Levant was always politically, culturally, and economically marginal,
subsistence survival was the normal and dominant economic form for much of its history. In order to develop my argument, I draw on material across ancient southwest Asia for two reasons: first, it indicates the context in which ancient Israel functioned; second, it draws together relevant evidence for an area—the southern Levant—that is notably short on concrete data concerning economic forms. I also refer from time to time to biblical texts where they are relevant, but we should be perpetually wary of reading them as simple references to reality. Biblical material is notoriously slippery when it comes to such matters. For this reason, I also rely on recent archaeological material from the territory where ancient Israel rose briefly, before it became an imperial province. The following analysis outlines, first, the nature of subsistence economics in the ancient world, with its crops, weeds, kinship, and household structures. Then, after indicating the persistence and temporal range of subsistence survival, I ask whether it is viable today, and, if so, what may need to be adapted to make it work.

Before proceeding, I should say a few words on why the focus on subsistence economics is less common in biblical scholarship than it should be. The reason lies as much with specific methods of analysis as it does on the socioeconomic—and thereby ideological—context in which we do our work. It is no accident that the dominant way of analyzing the ancient world is a neoclassical one. By neoclassical I mean the approach to economics that derived from the classical economists such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and Thomas Malthus. Neoclassical economics removed the political and social concerns of the earlier classical economists and focused on reducing economics to a "science." That is, it sought to de-historicize, de

socialize, and individualize economics, so that it merely explained the world through the eyes of dominant powers. It is no accident that such an approach arose first in Europe and then North America. The result is a method now refined to three assumptions concerning economic activity and indeed human nature: economic systems naturally achieve equilibrium ("crisis" then needs to be explained); individuals are rational actors that seek their own advantage (homo economicus); the market is a mechanism to itself, outside social and political forces. It is obvious that such assumptions arise from an ideal as to what capitalism should be rather than what it really is. But what happens with this reductionism is that it enables what is called economics imperialism. Having excised matters of class, institutions, history, and even religion from economic analysis, this redefined neoclassical economics then engaged in colonizing these and every other area of the social sciences and humanities—and continues to do so vigorously today. Particularly from the 1980s onwards (with the "fall" of communism) the extraordinarily narrow principles of rationality and equilibrium became a "universal grammar" for analyzing human behavior, institutions, history, geography, neural networks (neuroeconomics), and even religion. This economics imperialism has also been applied to reconstructing the economies of ancient Israel within the context of ancient southwest Asia. My essay


5. I have counted at least four such projects: the International Scholarly Conference on Ancient Near Eastern economies (coordinated by Michael Hudson); the Vienna START project the Ne6.
is then written as a resistance to this kind of economic analysis, which stretches its imperialism to argue that even in ancient Israel, human beings were "partly capitalist."

**Subsistence Economics**

Le premier point est que la communauté de village existe encore comme élément essentiel d'une structure économique (et politique). Crops and herds—these are two economic components of subsistence survival. As for the crops, their variations depended on rainfall patterns and soil types, but in the southern Levant they included gluten wheats (emmer and einkorn), barley, and lentils, while minor crops included various types of peas, chickpeas, grapes, figs, dates, olives, and nuts. There is nothing particularly stunning here, for these are high-yield crops with a range of benefits. But what is most interesting is the way labor was organized to grow such crops. Did farmers own their own fields, passing them on as an inalienable inheritance from generation to generation? No, for the situation was quite different, especially in what Soviet-era Russian scholars called the pattern of field shares in the village-commune, a technique that Dutch "Economy of Ancient Mesopotamia" groups and odd coterie from Stanford University inspired by Ian Morris.

3. The minimum rainfall for dry farming is 250–350 mm per annum, although this varied according to region, from wetland niches and well-watered floodplains to areas with an annual rainfall as low as 150 mm. David Hopkins offers a full survey of rainfall and climate matters for the Levant, along with a judicious assessment of water conservation techniques (Hopkins, *The Highlands of Canaan: Agricultural Life in the Early Highlands* [Sheffield: Almond, 1985], 79-108, 151-87).

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has also been called *mushar* farming. In fields as private property, the land around the village was divided into field-shares, usually non-contiguous with one another. These were often long, rather narrow strips, able to be plowed in long furrows. But the...
key was that they were periodically reallocated, every one or two years. Members of the village would therefore find themselves with different land shares on each occasion. In the same way that the land shares were regularly reallocated, so also was the produce, for it went into the common pool of the village, there to be threshed and ground, sorted and cleaned, dried and preserved. From there it was reallocated to members of the village-commune.

How were these processes decided? It may have been by lot, but more often it was determined by a village mayor, or council of elders, or all the able-bodied men. Here we encounter what is ultimately


12. This process was part of the wider pattern of customary law, for which see the comprehensive study by Knight, Law, Power, and Justice in Ancient Israel, 115–56.


14. Even in its most representative form, the process of decision making involved the able-bodied men. More often, and especially in the southern Levant where the Hebrew appeared late on the scene, the reality was more often a council of elders (or “fathers”), along with a village headman.
plants for their own survival. The brittle stalks of wild grains became thicker and stronger, thereby able to germinate better, ripen longer,  
and produce larger yields. “Naked” seeds developed, the easier to  
thresh, and two-row barley became six rows.

By the time of the fourth millennium, through a long process of  
trial and error, the nature of herds became stabilized. Across varied  
times and places, the herds were invariably comprised of one-third  
goats and two-thirds sheep, with pigs used in more well-watered  
areas. Why? Both types of animals are versatile, providing milk,  
fibers, meat, hide, and bones. Goats especially are able to eat almost  
anything and manage extreme heat and cold, as well as shortage of  
food and water, extremely well. Sheep are not quite as flexible, but  
they too can travel far from water resources and eat pastures that goats  
do not need. A further reason is risk aversion. If disease afflicts one  
of the species, the other part of the herd will survive. And due to  
the high breeding rate of both animals, herd size can be restored in a  
few seasons. Analysis of bone remains indicates that sheep and goats  

17. Pigs are limited to the 250 mm isobase, much higher than that required by sheep and especially  
Chalcolithic of the Northern Negev,” in Shiqmim I, ed. Thomas E. Levy (Oxford: British  
Archaeological Reports, 1987), 210–21. Remains of pig bones indicate  
 fermentation in the use of pigs over time, with abundant distribution across the Chalcolithic,  
declining to a low in the Late Bronze Age, re-emerging for a while in the early Iron Age in a few places,  
until hill resurgence in the Hellenistic era (Brian Heese, “Pig, Livestock, and Pig Harvests Patterns  
“Archaeological Perspective,” 468–70; Brian Heese and Paula Wapnish, “Can Pig Remains Be  
Used for Ethnic Diagnosis in the Ancient Near East?” in The Archaeology of Israel: Constructing  
Ethnicity in the Ancient Near East, ed. William M. L.chooser (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997)]:  
Rather than blaming this patchy pattern on an emerging ideological aversion to  
porcine products (and investing wasted energy on using such data to determine ethnic  
survival awareness), it is better to focus on the limited possibilities of pigs within subsistence  
framework. They may provide good quality meat, but they do not cope well with temperature extremes.  
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18. Abraham Sussman provides a detailed and sophisticated zooarchaeological study of the  
remains of animal bones in “The Role of Cattle and Economic Strategies in the Bronze and Iron  
Age at Tel Beer-Sheva, Israel,” in Archaeology and the Near East II: Proceedings of the  
Sixth International Symposium on the Archaeology of Southwestern Asia and Adjacent Areas,  
ed. Hjalmar R. Reisinger and Lyle R. York (Groningen: Centre for Archaeological Research  
and Consultancy, 2000).
were called regularly to maintain a healthy herd, with females living longer due to breeding. All parts of the animals were used, rather than select portions characteristic of luxury consumption and breeding for commercial reasons. As for the bovines, remains indicate that they were few in each village and that they lived to a relatively ripe old age, when they were finally slaughtered for a repast of tough old meat at a festival or two.29 Once again, careful use of resources is the key, for cows consume an extraordinary amount of water and fodder.29 These animals were therefore used for traction, being shared around in the village for plowing and hauling heavy loads.31

I close this brief account of the structures of subsistence economies with a question: why did human beings gather in settlements, in village-communes in the first place? The usual answer focuses on security: human beings preferred the support of others, the reality of more regular food supply, and collective defense against marauding bands. However, this misses a crucial incentive, especially in light of the many problems connected with collective life—intensive labor, new diseases from the refusé of settled communities and the vermin they encouraged, and a lower life expectancy (about thirty years). That incentive was alcohol, an item often neglected in accounts of the origins of human collective living. The products may loosely be termed “beer” and “wine,” for the intoxicating liquids produced were far from what we would associate with such terms.22 Some have argued persuasively that the first human communities gathered not purely for the production of grain for bread, but also for alcoholic beverages. Early archaeological material from ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt points to the possibility that it was the production of beer from barley and wheat that enticed human beings together in more settled social forms.33 In Mesopotamia, approximately 60 percent of the total cereal crop was barley, and up to 40 percent of the whole cereal crop was used for brewing.34 Extensive data from the third millennium to the Persian era indicates how important alcohol really was, with sacred drinking clubs (marzili), payment of rations for ancient estate workers including beer, with extra portions for pregnant women in the celebration of the completion of a building stage.33 So crucial was the supply that the brewers themselves are


19. The story of the Golden Calf (Gen. 32) contains a trace of the value of such bovines.

20. The species of cow in ancient southwest Asia had five times the body mass of a sheep or a goat, yet is saddled up to twenty-five times the amount of water. A cow needs approximately fifty liters of water per day, more in hot weather, while a sheep or a goat needs two to three liters. For this reason, a cow can range 200 to 300 kilometers from a water source, while sheep and goats can be up to thirty kilometers away.

21. Sasson estimates that a village of one hundred people would need three hundred sheep and goats, and only twelve bovines (Sasson, Animal Husbandry, 56).

22. For instance, šēkē,a in Hebrew was a fermented drink somewhere between beer and wine, a kind of brandy, as found in Lv. 10:9; Deut. 29:22; Prov. 21:1 (Michael M. Homann, "Beer, Wine, and šēkē,a in the Hebrew Bible," in Le-David Maysal: A Birthday Tribute for David Nevo Freidman, ed. R. E. Friedman and W. I. L. Propp [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004], 25–26; Michael M. Homann, "Did the Ancient Israelites Drink Beer?" Biblical Archaeology Review, 26, no. 5 [2000]: 78; Lawrence F. Stager, "Ashkelon on the Eve of Destruction in 604 B.C.,” in Ashkelon. 3: The Seventh Century B.C., ed. Lawrence E. Stager, Daniel J. sire, and J. David S lo [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011], 6) stories of wine and even beer abound in the Hebrew Bible, revealing its crucial role. Noah’s vineyard and drunkenness is perhaps the most well-known (Gen. 9).


named, the beers and wines distinguished between ordinary and
good quality, and the high volumes of these blessed liquids recorded.
In early Mesopotamia and Egypt, bakeries and breweries or wineries
were not separate affairs, but parts of the same building that was itself
the central installation in a town.26 The reason was that yeast (crucial
for beer, wine, and bread) appears naturally in some areas in higher
concentrations. People soon found that some containers attracted
this strange substance that made beer or wine ferment and bread rise, so
they kept using those same containers. And since yeast is a living
organism, it stays and multiplies. In short, the production of alcoholic
beverages is inseparable from the production of bread. This makes
profound sense, for why else would humans exchange the relatively
light and efficient work of hunting and gathering for the much more
labor-intensive cultivation of crops? It is not for nothing that the way
of referring to food and drink, even from the early days of Sumer and
Akkad, was “beer and bread.”

Is This Viable?

Even with such a good incentive, the question remains as to whether
subsistence economics is viable in our day and age. Time and again I
have been asked this question in various ways, especially with a view
to the Bible’s normative role concerning economics. For example,
one person from a secular commune, which seeks to live in ways
different from capitalism, asked me what models are available for
them and others. Another mentioned that she has been considering
deply a way of living that is economically, socially, and
environmentally responsible. Another, from nothing less than a
Christian communist community, offered the wisdom of long
experience in living in such a fashion and asked for more information
concerning biblical economics. A younger person from an urban
environment gave me an insight into the way young people are
eschewing the pursuit of a “successful” career, with its empty
appearances of expensive cars, a big house, and 1.8 children.
Instead, they seek new ideas for modes of engaging communally in
a way that is informed by an agenda of widespread and fundamental
social transformation.

It would be easy to dismiss such a question as a theological one,
a dismissal based on the crude assumption that theology is either
“ideological” (the European variation) or a pseudo-discipline (the
North American variation). But such an objection is more the sign
of older or newer petty turf wars than any serious consideration of
theology should be obvious. The question may also be dismissed as
appropriate to the practice of primitive peoples in an ancient time,
inapplicable to the “advanced” economic structures of today. Instead,
with the global population well past the seven billion mark, we
need all that technology can provide in order to feed the world’s
population—fertilizers, genetic modification, intensive monocropping, and so on. Apart from the dubious nature of the claim
that these features of agro-business are really all that efficient and
necessary,28 it is also worth noting how persistent and widespread
the practice of subsistence economics is in very different modes of
production. It has been identified in medieval Europe, seventeenth-
century North America, pre-1873 Japan, Russia, the Maghreb, pre-

26. For instance, within capitalism the widespread production of beef is deeply wasteful and hardly
necessary.
Ottoman and Ottoman periods, Iraq until the revolution of 1958, and twentieth-century Greater Syria and Greece. 29

The reasons for the attractiveness of subsistence economics are not difficult to find: it functions at an optimal level, is all-inclusive, diverse, secure, and stable. First, it operates according to optimal rather than maximal (profit-based) engagement with nature, preferring modes of animal husbandry, crop management, and human population at well below the environment’s carrying capacity. As one example, this approach prefers animals that have minimal impact on their environment, rather than the bovines that suck up water and fodder as though they were nothing. Compare the daily provision of “ten fat oxen” to Solomon’s mythical court (1 Kgs 4:23), oxen that may well be illustrated by the Egyptian practice of fattening cows so much that they could no longer walk and had to be transported in carts. Yet Solomon provides but one of a number of images of patriarchal kings, and landlords with vast herds, including sheep, goats, oxen, donkeys, and occasionally camels, images that become simultaneously metaphorical signals of power and wealth

as well as images of unbelievable excess that may contain an undercurrent of disapproval (for instance, Gen. 12:16; 13:2-6; 20:14; 24:34; 30:25-43; Job 1:2; 42:12). By contrast, an optimal approach is not geared for the sake of prestige, power, profit, or greed, but to ensure survival in the lean time that is always just around the corner.

All of this has a direct bearing on the question of surpluses. If one follows the myth of Adam Smith, then the production of surplus for the purpose of trucking, bartering, and exchanging is supposed to be a basic, inescapable feature of human existence. 30 But is this true for subsistence economics? Not at all, for the production of small surpluses was a necessary feature of survival, a reserve to carry the group over a bad harvest, drought, burnt crops, animal disease, or any other untoward but all too common event that threatened survival (see, for example, Gen. 42:1). Planning for surplus is thereby a response to ever-present uncertainty rather than a strategy for profit. 31

Something is always left over for an emergency if one systematically under-utilizes pastureage, water, and resources. 32

29. Granott, Land System of Palestine: Liverani, “Communautés de village”; Jerome Blum, The End of the Old Order in Rural Europe (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973); Adam, “Property Rights,” 1:14; Maria Liverani, “Communautés rurales dans la Syrie du 11e millénaire A.C.,” in Les communautés rurales 2: Partie: Antiquité Recuèle de la Société (Congrès de Versailles, 1976), Paris: Dessain et Tolla, 1983, 147-55; Hopkins, Highlands of Caucasus, 257-58; Roberts, Landscapes of Settlement, 15-57; McNutt, Reconstructing the Society of Ancient Israel, 67-72, 714; Tony Wilkinson, Archaeological Landscapes of the Near East (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003), Warren O. Aule, Open-Field Farming in Medieval England: A Study of Village By-Laws (London: Routledge, 2006 [1973]), Wilkinson, “The Tell”, Philippe Guillaume, Land, Credit and Crisis: Agricultural Finance in the Hebrew Bible (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012), 26-42. I would add here a recent personal experience in a village in Transylvania. In a part of the world—Eastern Europe—that has experienced the ravages of capitalism more than most since the “shock therapy” of the 1990s, old and ruined methods have returned. As we were walking through the village, my host and I came across a herd of goats and sheep. I inquired about their numbers and was told they were 1/3 goats and 2/3 sheep, with regular calls and an optimal size of about sixty. The ubiquity of this practice raises the question about its function in within very different modes of production. Here Marx’s observation is valid: specific components that are found in more than one mode of production have quite different functions in relation to the specific whole one is analyzing.


Second, subsistence economics seeks not choice portions characteristic of ruling class practices, not the luxury foods that seek to mark that class and those who aspire to it from the common herd. Rather, it is all-inclusive, making use of everything, whether all parts of animals, every possible part of a plant, or whatever else one makes or finds. Nothing is wasted, for if it can be used it will be, and then again. Third, diversity is crucial, for this provides security in the long term—diversity in terms of food, shelter, and minimizing the risks of disease. In my earlier discussion, diversity appeared in terms of animal species, but it was also a feature of the range of crops grown. Fourth, diversity ensures security by reducing risk; one does not suffer catastrophically when disaster hits, for another part of the herd will be there. Nonetheless, this way of phrasing the point is to focus on the security of human life in an environment that could at any time threaten that security. But that is to separate human beings from their natural environment in all its unpredictability. Rather, security is for the natural environment as a whole.

These features lead to the final point: subsistence economics is stable, through well-tried strategies. Indeed, this economic approach was the stable basis of ancient southwest Asia. That observation requires a revaluation of usual accounts of ancient economies (going back to Herodotus), according to which crisis and collapse are what happens when an empire falls, when a palatine economic system or one of tribute-exchange breaks apart, and when a supposed “dark age” ensues. These periods of supposed “chaos” were frequent and lengthy, the longest taking place in the third millennium, in the “dark age” of the sixteenth and early fifteenth centuries, and then the twelfth to tenth centuries BCE. But we need to ask, collapse and chaos for whom? From the perspective of the ruling class, it is indeed collapse and the ensuing period is a prolonged time of crisis.

The sources of wealth have been removed, the palaces and temples destroyed, the estate system or patterns of tribute and exchange have been dismantled, and power has been lost.

Yet, from the perspective of the subsistence economics of the village—communes, a “collapse” actually means a blessed relief from various means of extraction. We can hardly expect the peasants, laborers, and common people to sit back and wait for such much-desired collapses to happen (see Neh. 9:36—37). From the Habiru through to archaeological signals of urban destruction by the town’s own exploited class, these various groups were more than keen to hasten the demise. Indeed, in the Amarna Letters, the Habiru

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36. As an example, late Bronze Age Hazor shows signs of the burning of monumental structures in the lower city and on the “aprocopolis,” aimed at the symbols and reality of ruling class power (Nimrod Rimon and Sharon Zuckermeister, “Applying On-Site Analysis of Palace and Urban Complexes: A Case Study from the Lower City of Hazor,” in Household Archaeology in Ancient Israel and Beyond, ed. Asaf Yasur-Landana, Jeanne R. Eiting, and Laura B. Mazor [Leiden: Brill, 2011], 51–53).
become ever stronger and threaten town after town, making for heart-warming reading. Their slogans had wide appeal, as we find in the words of ‘Abdi-Asirta, one of their leaders:

Let us drive out the mayors from the country that the entire country be joined to the ‘Arum, . . . to the entire country. Then will (our) sons and daughters be at peace forever. Should even so the king come out, the entire country will be against him and what will he do to us? 38

In that light, I suggest that the statement that there was no king in Israel and that “all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judg. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25; see also 1 Kgs. 22:17; 2 Chron. 18:16) may be seen as a positive image. In response to such threats, a petty despot like Rib-Hadda did well to fear revolt: “I am afraid the peasantry will strike me down.” Semi-nomadic pastoralists too were ready to join in, for throughout Mesopotamian history, their annual and usually “peaceful” migration “could be transformed into aggressive campaigns if the power of the centralized state was weak.” 39 The outcome was highly desirable: no longer do the young men and women have to work periodically or permanently on the palatine estates; no longer does the despised usurer-merchant-tax-collector call with his thugs to collect a debt slave or take a portion of the herd or some of the girls for his sexual usage; no longer do the temple and palace sack away the foodstuffs needed for subsistence survival. I would suggest that the mythical accounts of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11) and Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18–19) embody such a perspective in their own way, as do the warnings of 1 Samuel 8, the parable of the bramble in Judges 9:3–15, the long account of the failings of the kings of Israel and Judah and the eventual punishment in 1–2 Kings, and the account of the resistance by the “people of the land,” and myriad other groups in Ezra–Nehemiah to the imposition of an imperial regime of plunder with the return of the exiles. 40 It is telling that during such times the records of loans, debts, and the obligatory labor tied in with loans, disappear. 41 This is not due to some “dark age,” lacking civilization, but rather another signal of the dominance and desirability of subsistence economies. The reality, therefore, is that during the long periods when despot and potentates were laid low, subsistence economies dominated. Always in the background during imperial times, subsistence economies would once again come into its own, much preferred by the majority.

Optimal, all-inclusive, diverse, secure, and stable—to these I would add an observation from Marshall Sahlins: “There are after all two roads to satisfaction, to reducing the gap between means and ends: producing much or desiring little.” 42 Subsistence designed for survival opts to desire little. No wonder this approach has been so resilient through human history. In our own day, terms such as environmentally sustainable and economically equal might be used for such an approach. I find it intriguing that in the marginal area of the southern Levant, or ancient Israel, this was the dominant economic form, being eclipsed from time to time (the brief period of the little kingdom and then under imperial control as a province) yet reasserting itself once again.

Yet, there is a problem. The social relations of subsistence economics were determined by the kinship-household (see earlier), relations that were not particularly favorable in terms of gender and age, and in relation to outsiders. I have yet to hear an argument in favor of kinship as a model of human organization. Kinship may provide some level of security and social cohesion in particular circumstances, but it is inevitably geared toward abuse of the young, of women, and of the elderly. Patriarchal and hierarchical, it is hardly a model for human flourishing. In our own day, “family values” ultimately means the all too present patterns of physical, emotional, and at times sexual abuse. Growing up means that one has to come to terms with the way one’s parents, siblings, and other relatives have damaged you.

In that light, I suggest that subsistence economics may be viable only if it dispenses with social forms that are hierarchical and abusive, that seek security at the cost of women, outsiders, and the vulnerable. It requires, not a return to some idealized and mythical earlier practice, when the world was a simpler and happier place, as the conservatives would have us believe. Rather, if it is to be workable, subsistence economics requires very different types of social organization and determination. It would be primarily collective, in a dialectical form of collective life that enables individual flourishing that in turn strengthens the collective. It would also have robust sanctions in light of the fact that human beings often seek to do the worst rather than the best to one another. In that way, subsistence economics may well provide a model for those seeking a different path. It would be one that is environmentally and economically sustainable, communal, optimal, all-inclusive, diverse, secure, and stable, but also one that has gender, ethnic, and sexual equality. A pipe dream in our day and age? Not at all, for many communities—both local and national—around the world have provided and continue to provide ample examples, seeking ways to make such an approach work.

\[^{44}\] It may be worth noting in passing that when Marx and Engels spoke of “primitive communism,” they never endorsed such a simplistic thesis, for they always tried to present against what they called the idea of a primitive ‘El Dorado’ and tirelessly insisted upon the fact that even in the most primitive societies, there would seem to exist at least three forms of inequality: between men and women; between senior and junior generations; and between retainers and foremen” (Maurice Goddard, The Mental and the Material, Thought, Economy and Society, trans. Martin Thom [London: Verso, 1986 (1984)], 78).