

Ancient Wisdom and Modern Theory

Archaeological field tests for the Marxist paradigm

Fred Harrison

THE WAY we perceive the past may often tell us more about ourselves than about our ancestors. The danger is that we may be misrepresenting the past, and therefore distorting the range of options for our future. Identifying misconceptions about the past may enable us to eliminate the flaws in theories that shape current policies and institutions. Examining the intellectual biographies of influential scholars may lead to the identification of ways of improving social organisation and public administration.

V. Gordon Childe was one of the most distinguished archaeologists of the last century. He used the Marxist paradigm as a tool to explain the social significance of artefacts excavated from the sites of temples and palaces in the Near East, and the Neolithic henges of the British Isles. But his intellectual route into the past led him into diagnostic errors.

Marxist theory distorts the social realities of the first civilisations. Exploitation was assumed to characterise the earliest surplus-producing societies that were based on functionally differentiated groups. This, in turn, encouraged people in the belief that the communist project was a historically valid experiment in social engineering.

Fred Harrison counters that the surplus production on which civilisations were originally built was willingly shared in systems that delivered mutual benefits. Specialisation of economic, spiritual and administrative functions did not automatically lead to exploitation.

IN THE pursuit of a deeper understanding of our human potential, how do we retrieve a vision of the lives of the earliest farmers who produced the surplus that liberated people to become priests, astronomers and craftsmen, the people who were to lay the intellectual and economic foundations of the first civilisations?

V. Gordon Childe applied Marxist theory to the remnant artefacts of ancient peoples. Did he commit suicide on a mountain top in Australia because he realised that his world-view was being challenged by the accumulation of hard evidence?

Childe was born in 1892 in New South Wales and educated at Sydney University, before studying Classics and Philosophy at Oxford in 1917. Linguistics took him into anthropology, through which he hoped to trace the origins of European civilisation. The outcome was *The Dawn of European Civilisation* (1925) and *The Aryans* (1926). He established a reputation that led prominent American archaeologists to praise him as "the most renowned and widely read archaeologist of the 20th century".¹

In 1957 he returned to Australia, went for a walk in the Blue Mountains on October 19, and jumped off a 1,000 ft. cliff near Katoomba. The reason for his suicide remains controversial. According to one account, he was

depressed by a growing awareness of the inadequacy of his typological methods for dealing with the problems of societal analysis and prehistoric knowledge that were now of major interest to him.²

In a suicide letter, Childe outlined the complex reasons for his decision.³ One was that he favoured the compulsory retirement of academics. Even when retired, "their prestige may be such that they can hinder the spread of progressive ideas and blast the careers of innovators who tactlessly challenge theories and procedures that 10 or 15 years previously had been original and fruitful".

While Childe was also depressed about his financial status, more serious was the profound psychological crisis associated with the doctrines that he had cherished all his life. He reported that "new ideas very rarely come my way". But it was worse than that.

In a few instances I actually fear that the balance of evidence is against theories I have espoused or even in favour of those against which I am strongly biased.

As the evidence accumulated from scientific advances (such as the ability to date ancient sites with great accuracy) and from the archaeological digs around the world, something began to happen to Gordon Childe: "I have lost faith in all my old ideals".

**Marxism as
an account
of change**

THROUGHOUT his working life, Childe employed the Marxist theory as the tool that guided his interpretation of the evidence garnered from archaeology. He was drawn to this doctrine because Marxism was the only historical model that offered an approximate account of the nature of reality as a self-sufficient and constantly changing process. The other models derived from religion, magic and anthropology were not perceived by him as providing adequate accounts of the changes that could be traced in the archaeological record.

Since "means of production" figure so conspicuously in the archaeological record, I suppose most pre-historians are inclined to be so far Marxists as to wish to assign them a determining role among the behaviour patterns that have been fossilised.⁴

His acceptance of Marxist theory was to cause him considerable psychological tensions, as he grew aware of the shortcomings of Soviet archaeology. In the 30 years to 1950, the problem lay mainly with the school in the USSR associated with N.Y. Marr, one of the most prominent post-revolutionary archaeologists who promoted evolutionist rather than diffusionist notions of cultural development. Still, despite the theoretical tensions, "he understands that scientific truth is in the socialist camp and is not ashamed to call himself a pupil of Soviet archaeologists".⁵ The pupil did not remain uncritical. At the end of his lifetime he was to write a serious critique of Soviet archaeological techniques. He failed, however, to apply similar scrutiny to Marxist theory.

The painful assessment of Soviet field work was documented in a letter dated December 16, 1956. The letter remained a secret in Moscow until May 1992.⁶ Then, two months before his suicide, in August 1957 Childe affirmed his disenchantment with the work of his colleagues in the Soviet Union by declining to write a book with the title *The Pre-history of Russia*.

**The eclipse
of the
Near East
paradigm**

DURING THE 1930s Childe had dominated the field of archaeology by deploying the Marxist paradigm to facilitate his exposition of Neolithic and urban revolutions. Two generations of students absorbed his theoretical framework before embarking on their own expeditions among the sand dunes of the Near East.

By the end of the Second World War Childe was forced to come to terms with the fact that hard evidence that was accumulating was undermining some of his cherished teachings. One theory that was being challenged was that the advanced culture first emerged in the Near East, and was then diffused to other parts of the globe. In the book first published in 1925, he described how

Seasonal shifts of pasture or hunting expeditions would guarantee sufficient

intercourse between the several groups for the transmission of ideas. Such transmission is established for the period of the fully differentiated Battle-axe and Steppe cultures. Perhaps it should be postulated earlier to explain the association of wheeled vehicles with chieftains funerals and the spread of plough cultivation in Central Europe.⁷

In print, in the later editions of his works, he remained emphatic that

[T]he primacy of the Orient remains unchallenged. The Neolithic Revolution was accomplished in South-Western Asia; its fruits cultivated cereals and domestic stock were slowly diffused thence through Europe, reaching Denmark only three centuries or so after the Urban Revolution has been completed in Egypt and Sumer.⁸

In *Social Evolution* (1951), he emphasised that "Inventions can be transmitted from one society to another, and that is precisely what diffusion means". He remained dedicated to this view up to the Second World War.⁹ But this thesis, as an explanatory hypothesis, was contest by a new generation of archaeologists. One of them, Colin Renfrew, was to synthesis the evidence in *Before Civilisation* (1973). The invention of radiocarbon dating meant that many chronologies had to be revised; and this forced archaeologists to rethink the emergence of the Neolithic culture in Western Europe.

The origins of the earliest megaliths, for example, were found to be about 800 years older than had originally been thought. So instead of being the creatures of the Early Bronze Age tombs of the eastern Mediterranean, which were once believed to be their ancestors, the European megaliths were discovered to have even preceded the earliest cities of Mesopotamia.¹⁰

But Childe, while admitting that "diffusion is hard to prove archaeologically",¹¹ clung to his theory by asserting that "The archaeological refutation of diffusionist dogmas is by no means equivalent to a denial of diffusionism".¹²

CHILDE'S MARXIST paradigm caused him to commit serious diagnostic errors. One of these stemmed for his belief that material progress was contingent on the accumulation of what he called 'capital' **Confusion in the word**

Marx's category failed to differentiate between man-made artefacts (*capital*, yielding *interest*, in the formulation of classical economists) and nature's resources (*land*, yielding *rent*). Because Childe was wedded to the Marxist paradigm, therefore the concentration of the social surplus had to be located in the hands of "the masters of this concentrated wealth", and the ensuing Urban Revolution had to impose a "repressive discipline" characterised by "suffering [and] the irrevocable class division it

entailed".¹³ This may have been a fair account of what was to transpire, in classical antiquity and 19th century western Europe, but does it offer a faithful rendition of the origins of complex urban societies? The question needs to be posed, because the outcome may not have been an inevitable one of the kind that would necessarily consign craftsmen, "the pioneers of material progress, to the lower class". Childe's mind-set drove him to this conclusion, which consequently coloured his views on the earliest surplus-producing communities. Thus, he asserted that the farmers of Skara Brae, on Orkney, eked out a "miserable existence on a sea coast". In fact, that Neolithic community was the site of "a very special group", whose spiritual and astronomical skills depended on the ability of the surrounding community to produce a sufficient surplus.¹⁴

I would argue that Childe was visiting on to the earliest civilisations a characterisation that originated with Marx's prejudice against 19th century English bourgeois society. In doing so, Childe not only refracted the archaeological evidence; he coloured people's views on what was possible in social organisation and human behaviour today.

The role of ideology in history

CHILDE visited the USSR for the first time in 1935. This reinforced his commitment to the language that led him to teach generations of students that Neolithic communities were based on exploitation. The ruling elite forcefully extracted the surplus from the farmers. He was to cling to this view at least until December 1956 when he wrote his letter to prominent Soviet archaeologists "in which he gave vent to his disillusion, bewilderment and grief".¹⁵

Childe contended that history belonged to, and was a record of the deeds and interests of, the ruling class. In this, he was on firmer ground; liberal historians of the past 20 years have come to share this view. In *History* he wrote:

The first Sumerian clerks were drawn from the temple priesthood and servants of the city god, who was also the largest landowner in each city-state. The clerks of the Middle Ages were in much the same position as Sumerian scribes. Even in contemporary Britain the principle market for history-books is formed by the ruling class and its favoured dependants and imitators in the middle classes.¹⁶

This fleshed out Marx's statement that "the ideas of the ruling class are in every age, the ruling ideas: i.e. the class which is the dominant *material force* in society is at the same time its dominant *intellectual force*".¹⁷ Childe emphasised that the selection of facts which constituted the study of history was conditioned by the social environment of the historian, and in particular, the historian's social class. This class-based knowledge creates the need to examine the objectivity that a scholar brings to his work.

But while this may have been the *outcome* of social evolution in the cases studied, how can we be sure that this was a predetermined result? Could what happened in history have been different? Was what happened in history different, in its origins, when the written records either did not exist, or failed to provide us with an accurate account of the texture of peoples lives?¹⁸

The errors in Childe's Marxist methodology need to be carefully analysed, and a primary source of evidence is the profuse literature that he has bequeathed us. In *What Happened in History* (1942), for example, Childe argued that the function of ideology is to hold society together. This was an acknowledgement that society was driven by ideas as well as material needs.

Even the student of material culture has to study a society as a co-operative organisation for producing means to satisfy its needs, for reproducing itself and for producing new needs. He wants to see its economy working. But the economy affects and is affected by its ideology.¹⁹

Childe did provide important insights into pre-history – his was certainly a more appealing treatment of the subject than that provided by the mere chroniclers of facts – but his assessments and authorities need to be treated with care. For example, he cited Stalin as his authority for the claim that ideology could be progressive and therefore aid technological development and therefore “they facilitate the progress of society”.²⁰ But his account of technological progress, because it was based on Marx's formulation on *capital*, was insufficiently illuminating. What does it mean for ideology and technology to be *progressive*?

- Is it possible that the seeds of destruction are being nourished even as the economy and society appear to be progressing? If so, what is the source of the internal tension that ensures the ultimate defeat of this progressive tendency?
- The relationship between ideology and technology needs to be radically re-appraised. Ideology can distort technological development. Is this in the profit-maximising interests of capitalists, or in the interests of another class of people in society, one that was primarily concerned with extracting rather than adding value to the wealth of the community?

CHILDE'S THEORY serves to confuse. This is illustrated by *The Pre-history of European Society*. Noting that the Urban Revolution was a momentous event in social evolution, he declares:

The social origins of poverty

The Revolution was indeed the pre-condition of all future progress in science and technology ... [T]he Urban Revolution created poverty as well as

prosperity; the capital required for urbanisation, like that used for industrialisation in the nineteenth century, was accumulated by the compulsory savings of the masses and that is just a euphemism for exploitation.²¹

Childe assigns primacy to accumulated capital, attributes blame for poverty to the concentration of people in the urban location, and asserts that people's savings were the result of compulsion. This is consistent with the Marxist theory of history, but hardly rings true even with his own account on the following page:

The cultivators of the alluvial river valleys *willingly* handed them ["the tiny surpluses"] over to an incarnate god or the representatives of an imaginary deity. [Emphasis added]

It appears, then, that the cultivators were not, after all, being exploited. This suggests that they derived benefits from the accumulation of capital; and that they worked with the authorities who received their "savings". This does not sit well with the Marxist model, but it is likely to be more consistent with social reality.

Childe described how the mechanism of accumulation in Sumer was spiritually based, in which "the surplus produce of the peasantry was concentrated first in the temples of imaginary deities, not in the granaries of a conquering monarch".²² It appears that this spiritually-based relationship served a functional purpose which assisted the cultivators and was consummated in the recognition of a mutual obligation. The decipherable texts reveal that the temples were "organised as a sort of divine household, gods own the city's land which they are reputed to have created, though it was really created by the citizens own labour in digging channels to drain swamps and convey water to sandy desert".²³ Childe was evidently disturbed by the fact that the Sumerian cultivators were imbued with a theological doctrine, in contrast, of course, to the materialistic ideology which he had acquired from Marx.

But the gods, it appears, were very practical, and the cultivators were willing to pay for the benefits that they received.

Part of each gods land is parcelled out among his people, who owe him rent in kind and labour services.²⁴

The rents paid to the temple are used "to pay for the importation of raw materials metals, timber, stone not available on the alluvial plain, and to feed specialist craftsmen who may also have held lots in the temple lands". The rents are the gift to the gods, and those rents appear to be put to good use in enriching the urban civilisation. Childe, however, could not resist colouring the free exchange a freedom which he himself had noted with the word "extracted", which prejudices his readers' minds.

Something that is extracted is evidently done under some form of duress.

This process of biasing the reader's mind proceeds under the spell of the Marxist paradigm. The priesthood, for example, "could be termed a ruling class. But its members remained the god's servants, as much as peasants and artisans, and administered his estate on his behalf, not for private gain".²⁵ The priesthood *could* be so characterised; alternatively, however, if they were fulfilling their prescribed social functions, one might also designate them with a less hostile, ideologically self-serving, label.

This is not to say that priests were incorruptible. Indeed, the temple scribes apparently scrupulously recorded embarrassing facts, one of which was that "one high temple official at Lagash held a lot of 35.5 acres, fourteen times as big as the normal holding of a citizen".²⁶ *The accumulation of land (not man-made capital) was the mediating mechanism through which discrimination was to be inflicted on the farmers of Sumeria.*

Might Childe's analysis of the archaeological record have yielded more fruitful insights if he had adopted an analytical framework that distinguished between people's savings (investible capital) and land? That is a question for further scholarship. But what appears to be beyond doubt is that Childe's work was biased by the Marxist doctrine. His reading of the Urban Revolution was coloured by his prejudices, which would not allow him to recognise that the specialisation of labour was a personally emancipating phenomenon and a culturally enriching development. Thus, in Mesopotamia, the Urban Revolution

had liberated craftsmen from the food quest only to consign them to an exploited subject class; it supplied them with raw materials on which to exercise their skills, but no inducement to improve them; it guaranteed them security of employment, but no prospect of a superior status. That was the consequence of the cleavage of society into classes and the exploitation of the masses by a narrow ruling class.²⁷

In this account we see the pre-historian compressing the facts into a Marxist straight jacket. We know from the fine work on jewellery and pottery that the craftsmen did develop their skills to their highest potential (delivering achievements in art which, in many cases, have yet to be surpassed). And if they were secure in their employment and fulfilled by their craftsmanship, on what basis can we claim that they would feel deprived by the absence of a prospect of superior status? If the gods ordained that priests should be servants who fulfil a social function, what makes this differentiated status superior to the cultivators who supplied the food surpluses that freed the priests from working in the fields?

Such questions would not have troubled Childe. He had swallowed the inevitability of a history as elaborated by Karl Marx.

This class division and exploitation were historically necessary to amass the resources and evoke the personnel required to get a bronze industry established.²⁸

This perspective on the past implies a mean-spirited human nature and a depressing assessment of social relationships. If exploitation is an inevitable characteristic of complex societies, we can have little faith in people rearranging their communal affairs to achieve a happier outcome. But it seems that the weight of evidence as it was emerging from the archaeological digs throughout the Near and Middle East during the middle of the 20th century was beginning to overwhelm the theoretical apparatus on which Childe relied.

Land tenure: silence in the sand ONE PROBLEM for Childe was that "On land tenure archaeology has nothing to say".²⁹ This was a source of analytical difficulty, and yet Childe's studies of contemporary evidence of historically accessible communities did provide him with an accurate account of the laws and practices associated with the way people organised their access to land. Unfortunately, he then imposed this knowledge back on to early societies within the framework of Marxist language that was at odds with common sense.

An example is his description of the Bronze Age communities of Classical Greece, which emerged on the basis of a social surplus that was concentrated in the hands of "the new ruling class". That surplus was from land, so it was what we now call rental income, not the profits of man-made capital. Rent has a social not a private status and function, and its disposition tells us a great deal about the fabric of a community. Childe's language, however, gets him into a muddle. Thus, when farmers devote part of their labour to constructing public buildings, how do we characterise the relationships and obligations? The workers were

just as likely to have been recruited by the *corvée* from small peasants who owed customary services to the lord of the land. If so, it means already a form of class division and exploitation, even though the ruler who exploits is still accepted as representative of the community, and the workers, therefore, do not feel exploited.³⁰

Could it be that, as well as not *feeling* exploited, they actually were not exploited?

Ancient Egypt confronted Childe with similar difficulties. While admitting that people willingly constructed Pharaoh's temples – as god, he had "the moral right to the services of his people as well as to their surplus produce"³¹ – he had to round off his account by injecting the sense of exploitation in the relationship.

And yet, in his earliest writings, such as *New Light on the most Ancient East*,³² Childe identified the nature of the "social surplus" in a way that can leave no doubt that resources to which he was drawing attention could not be classified as "capital". They were, in the first instance, food that was used to maintain craftsmen who, relieved of the need to work in the fields, were free to produce pots and objects of metal that the farmers needed. In Sumeria, this surplus enabled priests to innovate writing which facilitated the development of complex social organisations which, in turn, further enriched the lives of people who grew the food. The surplus, then, was in the beginning - the means for a mutually beneficial advance in culture and social organisation.

HOW DO WE know that our theories are accurate reflections of what went before us? How do we know if these theories are interfering with our understanding of the past? Does it matter? Yes, if we want to be truthful to ourselves, and if we want to remedy those features of our personal and social behaviour that are less than what they might be. An understanding of the past is an essential part of the process of progressive change.

**The need
to
interrogate
the
questions**

The first task is to interrogate our questions. This is not just to improve our understanding of the past, but also to elucidate the relevant facts of the present. For example, it is one thing to deceive oneself by throwing back into time a vision of the past based on misconceptions about the present. It is another thing, for the distorted and distorting preconceptions, to be fathered by others; who have a private agenda that necessitates the blinkering of ourselves. We might not mind deceiving ourselves. But what if someone else is doing the kidding?

Understanding the past is an even greater challenge when early societies leave no symbolic records for us to interpret. When the record is mute, there is a risk of misusing or abusing our ancestors, to fulfil some psycho-social need that may not faithfully represent people's personalities or cultural aspirations. In other words our theories of the past may actually tell us more about the present than about the behaviour of our ancestors.

Marx's perspectives were driven by the belief that progress was the result of a dialectical process. The mode of producing the material means of subsistence, and the degree of economic development attained at any given time, "form the foundation upon which the state institutions, the legal conceptions, the art and even the religious ideas of the people concerned have been evolved",³³ to quote the summary by Engels.

Marx failed to offer a detailed exposition of his theory, but that did not deter scholars from adopting it and applying it to and through the arts and social sciences. The first account by Marx appears in *The German Ideology*, in which he wrote:

This philosophy of history rests upon the development of the real process of production, taking in fact its point of departure from the material production of immediate life, tracing the forms of social intercourse bound up and produced by this mode of production and conceiving civic society in its various stages as the foundation of the whole of history.

For Marx, how we feed our bellies is assigned priority over the way we feed our souls and our minds. His theory, he asserted in *The German Ideology*, "explains the origins and developing processes of the whole of its various theoretical creations and forms of consciousness, religion, philosophy, morality, etc". Ideas are formed out of material practice, rather than the other way round. Progress can only come about through conflict, through a dialectical process in which we may observe "the practical overthrow of the real social relations out of which idealistic fantasies have developed. It is not criticism but revolution which is the driving force of history".

In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx argues that there is a proportionate relationship between intellectual production and material production. The changes in the character of the former are synchronised to respond to changes in the latter. "The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class." The history of all past societies consisted in the development of class antagonisms. The forms of that antagonism may change, he wrote in *The Communist Manifesto*, but "one fact is common to all past ages, viz. the exploitation of one part of society by the other".

Marx restated his conception in his *Critique of Political Economy*. The outcome is an empiricist approach to knowledge about the past. Verifiable fact comes before arbitrary dogma. For Marx, retrieving the past, and therefore deepening our understanding of the present, cannot begin with an Absolute Idea, or an Eternal God. For him, the obvious fact about mankind is that he has to eat if he is to live. This truth is so simple that the visionary philosopher considers it beneath his need to contemplate the consequences. Yet it is, says Marx, the clue to the meaning of history.

If this is correct, wouldn't it, in the first instance, give the whip hand to the growers of food? If so, why should they tolerate being exploited? And at the dawn of complex societies, where were the tools with which to exploit the producers of surplus food on a socially-significant scale?

We don't see conflict in the Neolithic Age FOR CURRENT anthropologists, especially of a Marxist inclination, the absence of evidence of conflict in Neolithic settlements creates an awkward problem. Pre-Neolithic tribal peoples could not produce a surplus. Is Marx saying that the dynamics that drove our ancestors in the pre-Neolithic stage were identical to those that shaped him when he first learnt how to

produce a surplus? This earliest phase is what Marx calls "Asiatic". This is the primitive communist stage, followed by the ancient, the feudal and the capitalist. Marx used this theory of history to argue that we were now capable of producing the fifth stage of social evolution, the era of mature communism.

The move into the second stage, that of the ancient world, Marx characterises as one of a "direct relation of dominion and subjugation" i.e., master and slave. The surpluses produced by communities augment the power of the elites until they own all the productive forces, including the workers.

On the strength of 20th century history, it would seem that the evidence favours Marx's view. Conflicts abounded, in the midst of material "progress". Try hard as people did to create peaceful, co-operative communities, the number of military conflicts continued to multiply. But that kind of evidence presents us with a superficial test of the theory.

A primary issue for all investigation of the past is to explain how the original peaceful and mutually beneficial social arrangements (which we postulate) were corrupted. The essence of the issue is this: how did the *social surplus* – the resources that were designated as social revenue, what we now call the rent of land – become perverted? It was privatised: what were the processes by which this was achieved, what were the psycho-social consequences, and do they account for the dysfunctional characteristics of subsequent societies? From the earliest phases of Sumerian temples and Pharaoh dynasties to the early feudal fiefdoms, the rent was willingly pooled by the producers in return for the personal benefits they received from social services and the shared (public) infrastructure of their communities. To what extent was the change in tenurial arrangements the medium through which the deterioration was executed which did, undoubtedly, lead to exploitation on a socially significant scale? Whatever the detail of the answers, it seems that we have to focus on land relations, rather than Marx's fixation on capital.

AS PART of this exploration into the social function of rent, we need to be alert to the intrusion of political prejudices into scholarship.

**Ideology as
scientific
hypothesis**

An example of the Marxist paradigm's influence on 20th century archaeologists is offered by Steven Mithen of the University of Reading, whose field work is concentrated on pre-historic settlements in Jordan. (*For an example of the influence in economics, see Box 1.*) Mithen believes that humans took up farming 10,000 years ago under circumstances in which "an element of compulsion must have been involved".³⁴ His authority for this assumption is Olga Soffer, whom he describes as the leading authority on the archaeology of the Central

Box 1 Social Scientists and the Marxist Paradigm

AN EXAMPLE of Childe's legacy is the way in which his Marxist language coloured the minds of social scientists in other disciplines. Robert Heilbroner, who taught many generations of students as professor of economics at the New School for Social Research, New York, is a case in point.

Heilbroner's *The Worldly Philosophers* (now into its 7th edn.), has been translated into two dozen languages and, according to his publisher, it has "become a standard introduction to economics in many colleges and universities". The author claims that ancient civilisations were not based on an economic process that can be treated by what we now call economics. He insists: "All societies, once they move from the level of hunting and gathering to that of Command, create categories of privilege and disprivilege, ranging from aristocracy to slavery, from class to caste, from the rights of property to the disadvantages of penury".¹

This abolishes from our mental landscapes the unique qualities of the Indus civilisation, which was not based on centralised power or of exploitation of the kind highlighted by the Marxist paradigm.²

1 Robert Heilbroner, *The Worldly Philosophers*, London: Penguin, p.318.

2 See Fred Harrison, "Civilisation Sans Discontents", *Geophilos*, Spring 02, pp.12-25.

Russian Plain. The evidence for compulsion is based on the interpretation of a tenuous piece of empirical evidence.

Once upon a time, Early Humans lived in small groups which were not socially differentiated by class structure. Then, modern humans developed complex forms of social organisation in which they accumulated food, which was buried in pits close to dwellings. Then, at some point in time, the arrangements for the storage of meat changed. Fewer pits were located near particular dwellings, which is interpreted as giving privileged access to the food to those who occupied what are deemed to be favoured dwellings. On the basis of this finding, Soffer concludes that the occupants used the stores as a source of power.³⁵ From this fragile piece of information about the location of storage pits, Mithen writes:

This use of animals, and no doubt plants, as the means for gaining social control and power within a society was absent from Early Humans. [Agriculture] provides particular individuals with opportunities to secure social control and power. And consequently, if we follow the proper Darwinian line of focusing on individuals rather than groups, we can indeed see agriculture as just another strategy whereby some individuals gain and maintain power.³⁶

From the fact of the ability to accumulate a surplus we see the leap to the assumption that humans behaved exploitatively; with the "open, visible and equal access to stored resources for all inhabitants of the site" relegated to an earlier phase of development, and preferential treatment surfacing as we move closer to the present.

And yet, there is a plausible alternative interpretation. Cognitive scientists have helped us to burrow deeper into the mind of Early Humans. The mind evolved a cognitive fluidity which included the ability to integrate distinct mental capacities into single, complex actions. The landscape of this new structure of the mind can be "read" from the structure of the parallel social organisation. The mind, for it to have developed as it did, required *co-operation* and *community*, rather than *competition* and *individualism*. This produced behaviour of a communal character, the bonds of which were joint action and the sharing of resources for mutual benefits.

The early farmers were still meat hunters. Given their new knowledge and the structurally necessary values such as trust, we can elaborate a new explanation for the concentration of surplus food in fewer pits located strategically near particular dwellings which rejects the exploitation hypothesis. Members of groups would have embarked on extended hunts to accumulate greater surpluses, so someone had to be held responsible, back in the settlement, for ensuring the security of the existing resources. This placed a special burden on the people who were left behind, but it need not have given them a superior status in terms of power. Their security service would be traded off for some of the meat that the hunters brought back to the settlement.

My interpretation of the facts is not based on better information about the motives of Modern Humans, but it is more plausibly related to the structure of both the mind and the corresponding social organisation. Humans needed peace and prosperity to provide them with the time and opportunity to nurture the capacities to originate art, religion and science. An exploitative milieu would have been anti-evolutionary, disrupting the conditions that foster the interactive behaviour that gave *Homo sapiens* the evolutionary advantage over Neanderthals.

Mithen lists the mental attributes that would have been involved in the development of cognitive fluidity: planning and exertion, intentional communication and attribution of meaning. These required the development of a shared language and symbols that favoured co-operation rather than competition. Co-operative action was a structural property of the mind and of society. So the bias was in favour of equality and fair exchange, even when the specialisation of labour surfaced to enable groups to increase their surpluses.

It is a fact that, at some point in history, those communally generated surpluses were hijacked by a few individuals who thereby accumulated exceptional power. But the dispute is over the timing of the advent of this revolutionary rupture with the primordial egalitarianism inherited by Modern Humans. The Marxist paradigm abuses this reality: it cannot accommodate the notion that co-operation, as a structural property of

complex social organisations, excludes exploitation of the kind that generates class conflict. As a result, unfortunately, archaeologists weaned on the Marxist ideology may be distorting the pre-historical record, consequently colouring our minds by narrowing the options for the future development of *Homo sapiens sapiens*.

The need for social experiments V. GORDON CHILDE was guided by an impoverished vision of the nature of Man and Society, which led him to sell *homo sapiens sapiens* short.

This is not to say that his assessment misrepresents current behaviour. But the terms of his overall assessment of mankind's incapacity is worth recalling, given that the leaders of nations are unable to agree, for example, on such fundamentally important issues as a law to rescue the world from climatic chaos (at the meeting in The Hague in November 2000). Childe wrote:

A reasonable inference has been that the painful discrepancy between humanity's control over the external environment and its incapacity to control the social environment is due to the absence of any science of society, the failure of sociology to become genuinely empirical and the impossibility of conducting experiments under laboratory conditions in human relationships.³⁷

But what inhibits the development of an effective science of society? Not, surely, a shortage of ingenuity?

Childe appreciated that ideologically prejudiced scholars could cripple the evolution of social science. He cited the case of Herbert Spencer, whose sociology reflected the idealisation of 19th century liberal democracy (leading to a "threads and patches theory of culture"³⁸). I have argued that Spencer misled generations of sociologists, because he rejected his empirical findings for reasons that had nothing to do with scientific integrity.³⁹ Spencer has also been credited with diverting two generations of anthropologists with his resort to "the formulation of hypothetical social conditions in imaginary primeval societies in order to justify a unilineal evolution".⁴⁰ In my view, Childe, because of his reliance on the Marxist paradigm, contributed to this failure of understanding.

We now know, after the 20th century's successive laboratory-like experiments, that Marxism does not provide a realistic paradigm for people who want to develop a society absent of institutionalised poverty and political coercion. The Soviet experiment collapsed spectacularly in 1991. Childe may have seen that collapse coming. He visited the USSR in 1953, and again in 1956. Khrushchev had denounced the errors under Stalin. The entire world of Marxism was shattered, and this was the beginning of the end of Communism. These circumstances prompted Childe to look around him with the new eyes of a man who had experienced the fall of

an idol. "It was very sad to feel himself Don Quixote and to see Dulcinea in all her squalor."⁴¹

The succeeding neo-liberal experiment in Russia in the 1990s also failed to deliver the freedoms that were promised by its ideologists. A continuation of the policies that were presented to President Boris Yeltsin will not succeed where Marxism failed.⁴² The general lesson appears to be that we are obliged to continuously challenge the pre-conceptions that shape public policy.

Do we have access to a more fruitful paradigm, one that respects the wisdom of the ancients while presenting us with the mechanisms that would emancipate people to organically evolve social systems consistent with the fundamental nature of humanity? In seeking an answer to this question, we can – ironically – benefit from the work of Gordon Childe. He drew attention to Marx's notion of "false consciousness", the facility to deceive ourselves and others. Such deceptions "keep systems working that were based upon injustice, inequity and inefficiency. Why did they survive for very, very long periods?"⁴³

But Childe was not able to provide a satisfactory explanation for this pathological condition. He was locked into a limiting intellectual construct from which he could not escape, despite the accumulating evidence that was falsifying some of his key theories. Why this was so can be explained in all too human terms: "He really was emotionally dependent upon his association with members of the British Communist Party".⁴⁴ We are all subject to the peer pressures and emotional attachments that distort the way we think, feel and act. In the end, for V. Gordon Childe, the implications were too painful. We can only wonder whether these kinds of thoughts occupied his mind on that final walk along the edge of a cliff in the Blue Mountains, where he took that one fatal step to freedom from the controversies of the past.

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