

Childe as a moralist

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Throughout his career Childe was concerned with the moral and political implications of archaeology. He was more successful than were most archaeologists of his generation in purging racism from his thinking and recognizing the abuses of archaeological data to make it serve the interests of chauvinist and reactionary causes. Yet, while highly critical of archaeology in the Soviet Union, in public he turned a blind eye to the Soviet government's abuse of archaeologists.

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Ethical issues and questions of social relevance played an important role in Childe's archaeological work, although commentators cannot agree whether they exerted a good (Rowlands 1994) or bad (Clark 1976; Lamberg-Karlovsky 1993) influence. The son of a conservative Church of England minister, Childe rebelled against both the Christian religion of his childhood and religion in general. Yet he found a substitute for religious ideals in socialism, which he admired for its emphasis on human equality and international solidarity. Socialism provided Childe with a sense of solidarity with other human beings, a quality that was conspicuously lacking in his personal life. While his disillusioning experiences with Labour Party politics in Australia led him to return to archaeology, he remained deeply conscious of the linkages between archaeological practice and contemporary social issues. In socialism Childe embraced a political doctrine which more than any other was opposed to the nationalism and racism that ruling groups were using to counteract class conflict and promote unity within European nation states in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. While Childe was a committed left-wing political activist prior to 1921 and later claimed that, while he was a student at Oxford, he frequently had discussed Marxism with Rajani Palme Dutt, it is unclear how systematic was his knowledge of Marxist philosophy prior to the early 1940s.

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Childe became interested in archaeology in the hope that it might settle the question of the geographical origin of the Indo-European speaking peoples. Like many other European archaeologists of the early 20th century, he was also anxious to discover why European civilization had turned out to be different from, and in their opinion superior to, all other cultures. In this respect Childe was no less ethnocentric than were most other archaeologists of his generation. Yet, unlike most archaeologists, he resolutely rejected a biological answer to this question. In his second archaeological book, *The Aryans* (1926), Childe attributed the cultural achievements of the Europeans to the conceptual superiority of the Indo-European languages, which could be learned by anyone. His one significant lapse in his opposition to racism was his suggestion at the end of that book that the physical superiority of the supposed original Nordic speakers of Indo-European made them appropriate bearers of these languages. Childe spent the rest of his life trying to exculpate this remark (Fig. 1).

Although, in *The dawn of European civilization* (1925) and *The Danube in prehistory* (1929), Childe played a major role in the development of culture-historical archaeology, which viewed the past as a history of ethnic groups rather than as an evolutionary succession of technological stages, from the beginning he feared the abuse of such an approach for chauvinistic purposes, a tendency already chillingly exemplified by the teachings of Gustaf Kossinna. Childe sought to counteract chauvinism by stressing the role played by cultural diffusion, which he increasingly came to view as a means by which all peoples in the world came to share one another's innovations and contribute to the general advancement of humanity. After the National Socialists came to power in 1933, Childe published two popular articles expounding this theme (Childe 1933a, 1933b). He regarded archaeology's demonstration of the importance of diffusion as one of the major refutations of the racist views that the Nazis were expounding.

Childe soon came to regard the culture-historical approach as the archaeological equivalent of conventional political history, which he associated with nationalist excesses (Childe 1930:240-7, 1958:70). He also became aware of the numerous difficulties involved in trying to trace ethnicity using only archaeological data. This led him to seek new ways to synthesize archaeological data using an economic approach. Beginning with *The most ancient East* (1928), he studied the impact of technological innovations on systems of production and exchange and speculated about the effects that such developments had on political organization in different parts of the Near East and Europe. By combining an economic approach with diffusionism, Childe sought to circumvent the political dangers that were involved in promoting nationalist and racist explanations of human history.

In 1935 Childe visited the Soviet Union for the first time. He was impressed by the vast amount of archaeological fieldwork being done there and by the use that was being made of archaeological findings to encourage a widespread belief in social progress and counteract ethnic prejudices. He was also struck by Soviet



Fig. 1. Idol with Feet of Clay? Bronze bust of Gordon Childe by M. Maitland-Howard, Institute of Archaeology, London. Copyright: Institute of Archaeology, UCL.

archaeologists' insistence on the capacity for change that they believed to be inherent in all human behaviour. For the first time Childe began to identify himself as a Marxist archaeologist and to consider seriously the value of an evolutionary approach to the interpretation of archaeological data. Soviet evolutionism contrasted with Western diffusionism's lack of faith in a human predisposition for change.

Yet, in his most important evolutionary study, *What happened in history* (1942), Childe exhibited more concern with why societies did not change than with why they did. He asserted that in societies at all levels of development repressive politics and entrenched religious beliefs were able to impede technological and social change for long periods of time, often until these societies were overwhelmed by more progressive neighbours. He squared this with Marxism by arguing that the superstructure of a society could dominate the economic base, but only in a negative,

and hence in the long run self-defeating, fashion. In other words, it could only prevent change. Childe was one of the few Marxist thinkers of the 1930s who was more concerned with factors impeding change than with ones promoting it; which suggests that his thinking continued to be dominated by cultural-historical and functionalist scepticism about the importance or naturalness of cultural change. From the beginning of his application of a Marxist viewpoint to archaeology, Childe adopted positions that were far removed from the Soviet party line.

Childe was also appalled by many aspects of Soviet archaeology as it was practised in the 1930s. He disagreed with its insistence on unilinear evolution, which he stated did not accord with the archaeological record. Ecological factors and historical accidents caused societies at the same general level of development to evolve differently from one another. The Soviet rejection of diffusion and migration as significant historical processes also ran strongly counter to his thinking. Finally Childe objected to Soviet archaeology's refusal to construct artifact typologies and define archaeological cultures on the ground that such "bourgeois formalism" impeded the functional interpretation of archaeological data. He believed correctly that not doing this would discourage the construction of cultural chronologies as a necessary precondition for further cultural and socioeconomic studies. In private Childe noted with concern the totalitarian nature of Soviet rule and the blighting effects that control by the Communist Party had on the development of Soviet archaeology. In 1951 he criticized Soviet archaeology for assuming in advance to be true what it was the responsibility of archaeologists to demonstrate was so (Childe 1951:28-9). Shortly before he died, Childe sent a circular letter to prominent Soviet archaeologists criticizing the inadequate standards of their work (Klejn 1994). One suspects that this letter was partly a response to the patronizing way in which in particular the Soviet archaeologist Alexander Mongait had treated Childe in his famous polemic on *The crisis in bourgeois archaeology* (Miller 1956:151).

By the early 1940s Childe was sufficiently disillusioned with Soviet archaeology that he sought to base his research on Marxist philosophy rather than on the example of Soviet archaeology. He began to study the writings of Marx, Engels, and many other Marxist and non-Marxist philosophers. Much of his thinking was based on Marx's observation that:

"human beings make their own history ...not under conditions chosen by themselves, but ones directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past" (Marx 1869 in Marx and Engels 1962, 1:247).

Childe assumed that, while calculations of material interest led individuals to cooperate to defend and enhance common interests in the face of competition within society, all human behaviour is guided by knowledge and values passed down from the past and which are only transformed to the extent that is required to achieve the goals that are being pursued. Childe had already argued that the structure

of the British government during the 19th century could not be explained entirely in terms of the needs of the capitalist system; many of its features, including the monarchy, the House of Lords, and the House of Commons, were institutions that were hundreds of years old and had been modified to suit changed conditions (Childe 1936:98). This view permitted Childe to argue that human beings never adapt to the world as it really is, but to the world as they imagine it to be. His main caveat was that the imagined world had to resemble the real one sufficiently to enable human beings to survive (Childe 1956, 1979). The last formulation ensured the ultimate dominance of materialist explanations over idealist ones.

Thus in the final decade of his life Childe moved towards an understanding of human behaviour that foreshadowed in embryonic, but highly significant, forms the compromise that is slowly and painfully being hammered out by Anglo-American archaeologists between the ecological determinism of the processual approach and the cultural particularism and extreme relativism associated with postprocessualism. Childe's main weakness was his failure to find ways to relate his new theoretical perspective to the study of material culture. Because of this, and because in the 1960s Childe was anathema to many Western archaeologists because he was a Marxist, this aspect of his work has been almost totally ignored. Today many Western neo-Marxists are repelled by Childe's materialism and his evolutionism.

After World War II Childe argued that archaeology and history might form the nucleus of a science of progress that would provide all human beings with the knowledge they required to build a more prosperous and humane world. Unlike Soviet Marxists, who were officially required to claim that they knew the truth, Childe insisted that all theories had to be tested empirically and that scholars must be prepared to discard cherished beliefs that could not be confirmed scientifically. It is no wonder that Childe's Marxist ideas were avoided like the plague by ideologues and colleagues alike in the Soviet Union (Klejn 1994).

Childe expressed his disagreements with the theory and practice of Soviet archaeology on many occasions in his writings. His most systematic assessment of Soviet archaeology was in *Scotland before the Scots* (1946). Yet his public criticism of the Soviet government was virtually non-existent. He was disgusted by the Hitler-Stalin pact and by the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 but never publicly denounced either action. He blamed the West for the Cold War, which he claimed impeded the movements of ideas across political frontiers that had characterized European culture for millennia. Yet he never blamed the Soviet Union for its lack of openness. He knew about the intellectual constraints under which Soviet archaeologists suffered, but never publicly protested those constraints. Did he fear such interventions would sever the contacts on which he depended for information about current Soviet archaeological discoveries? Did he wish to avoid getting Soviet colleagues into even greater difficulties if he protested their treatment? Or was he, as he admitted to like-minded friends, simply unwilling to give right-wing colleagues

in the West the satisfaction of seeing a prominent left-wing intellectual denounce the Soviet Union? All of these considerations seem to have influenced his behaviour, but the last and most trivial one was probably the most important. After Stalin's death he appears to have believed that, if the Soviet Union were left alone, it would evolve in a more liberal direction. Childe left it to archaeological colleagues such as Tallgren (1936) and Clark (1936) to reveal the political brutality and restrictions under which Soviet archaeologists laboured. When it came to the Soviet Union, Childe was a flawed moralist.

Throughout his archaeological career, Childe was concerned with moral and ethical issues relating to his discipline. He was more successful than most European archaeologists of his generation in purging racism from his thinking and exposing the misuse of archaeological data to promote chauvinist causes. He also sought to employ archaeological findings to help people build a more just and prosperous world and used the relative freedom of the United Kingdom to construct one of the earliest of the more liberal versions of Marxism that were to flourish in the West in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet, while publicly critical of Soviet archaeology, he turned a blind eye to the Soviet government's abuse of archaeological colleagues and of people generally. After he withdrew from Australian politics, archaeology dominated Childe's life. This seems to have left him politically apathetic in situations where one might have expected more outspoken criticism from a person who understood clearly that all human beings live in a political context (Fig. 1).

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