

Evaluating Vere Gordon Childe and his Impact on Archaeology: A Critique

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Introduction

It may be argued that Western archaeology has always been dominated by Capitalism (Hodder 1995, 199; Hamilakis 2007, 15-16). However, in the last century, due to two world wars and rapid changes in technology, people have started to view the world from different perspectives. During this period, archaeology itself started to change and improve, both theoretically and scientifically. One of the most important individuals behind this progress was Vere Gordon Childe, an Australian scholar who focused mainly on European Prehistory, with a strong belief in Marxism. This article will critically evaluate Childe's archaeological theories and practices in three parts: the first section will focus on how Gordon Childe positively influenced archaeology; the second section, on the possible flaws in his ideology; and the third section will conclude with the author's personal opinion on Childe's contribution to the field.

Theories, Methods and Influence

Marxist archaeology, as its name suggests, is a field of archaeological theory influenced by the German philosopher, Karl Marx. Marxist archaeologists hold the belief that the development of human society is a result of production and class struggles (Faulkner 2007). In contrast to processualism and post-processualism, the Marxist model considers both objective and subjective archaeological interpretation as essential and dialectical (Johnson 2010, 95-97). Marxism, however, was not introduced into Western archaeology until Childe visited the Soviet Union and became the first Western archaeologist to apply Marxist theory to his work (McGuire 1992, 69). Although Marxist archaeology may never be fully accepted by European archaeologists, the impact that Childe's ideas had on the West have been significant.

Some archaeologists argue that there is a conflict between being a humanist-historian and being a Marxist. However, Childe arguably succeeded in combining these different concepts, evidenced by his use of Kossinna's conceptualisation of race and Montelius's chronology method for dating

materials (Childe 1937). Although these concepts and technological skills may seem questionable in the present day, Childe was one of the earliest archaeologists to combine different approaches and results (Trigger 2006, 243), which, importantly, provided archaeology with a new perspective. Therefore, Childe is considered both a processualist and a post-processualist. On the one hand, Childe's theory impacted objective processualism, also known as New Archaeology, by integrating two new principles into the theory. Firstly, Childe interpreted material evidence as the scatters of functioning society, which cannot be regarded as static entities (Trigger 1980, 181). Secondly, Childe explained how systems of change played a significant role in human social development (Trigger 1980, 181). In contrast, Childe is also seen as a "prototypical post-processualist archaeologist" due to his subjective interpretation and belief that humans see the world only in the way they want to (Trigger 1994, 24; Trigger 2006, 349). It seems reasonable to believe that this evaluation is true, as in Childe's paper "Is Prehistory Practical?" (1933), he claimed that "It is probably impossible to approach all the problems...in a purely objective manner." In short, it can be argued that Childe's Marxist approach to these widely accepted Western archaeological theories represents an important contribution to the discipline.

In terms of his research methods, Gordon Childe was also one of the very first archaeologists that started to use radiocarbon dating in his research. Although he only published one paper using this "technique, "Comparison of Archaeological and Radiocarbon Datings" (1950), it can be argued that he still played a key role in developing the radiocarbon technique for two major reasons. Firstly, he arranged for Willard Frank Libby, the American pioneer of archaeological radiocarbon dating, to give a lecture at the London Institute of Archaeology, despite Libby's intention to only present the technique to the Royal Society (Harris 2009, 130-131). Secondly, although sceptical about the radiocarbon dating method in the conclusion of his first and only paper on the subject, using phrases like, "the method will require considerable checking and refinement before it can provide reliable dates" (Childe 1950), Childe recognised that radiocarbon dating was better and more reliable than the previous techniques (Harris 2009, 131). In brief, he provided the opportunity for Libby to introduce radiocarbon dating to Britain's most important archaeological school and importantly, tested the method himself in its early stages. Although Childe did not fully accept this technique himself, he still appreciated it as a feasible scientific method in his published papers. These actions certainly affected the Western archaeological view of this new technology, and Childe's endorsement helped to generalise the technique academically.

Finally, Childe not only improved archaeology in an academic respect, he also helped to publicise the subject through publications like "Man Makes Himself" (1958a) and his involvement in the archaeological TV show "Animal, Vegetable, Mineral" during the 1950s. Therefore, he was seen as one of the most influential early TV archaeologists (Fowler 2016, Part 1.3).

Problems and Disputes

Despite Childe's positive contributions to archaeology, there are still some problems with his concepts and methodology. Firstly, although there are archaeologists, like Trigger (1994a, 24), who considered Childe one of the founders of cultural-historical archaeology, Childe proposed a misleading definition of culture. According to Trigger and Brothwell, Childe's definition and understanding of "cultural" was explained with "deceptive brevity" (Trigger 2006, 244 and Brothwell 2009, 194). Culture, however, was not the only concept that Gordon Childe may have glossed over.

There are multiple examples of the use of non-academic terms in some of his more notable publications, including "Prehistory and Marxism" (1979) and "Retrospect" (1958b). Childe used terms such as "savages" and "barbarians" to analyse different types of classes and civilisations, which may be considered misleading to his readers. This point is supported by Trigger (1994b, 95), who claimed that Childe had been using these terms informally until 1942, and Flannery (1994, 103), who pointed out that civilisations of the prehistoric world were more complex than Childe's classification.

Moreover, although Childe contributed much to European archaeology through incorporating Marxist theories, most of the data he synthesised has been proven either wrong or untestable (Tringham 1983, 87). Childe even showed uncertainty with some of his own analysis due to the lack of evidence. For example, in his 1929 book "Danube in Prehistory", he postulated that Bronze Age metal grave goods were imported from other countries, but in his later article in 1937, he argued that they were produced locally and admitted that he had no precise date on traded goods (Trigger 1980, 39). Additionally, Childe admitted that he had carefully selected evidence that was suitable to his intended purpose (Allen 1967, 56), which arguably made his data untrustworthy.

There were also issues concerning elements of Childe's theory. For example, during his discussion of ancient economics, he neglected to comment on the situation in far east Asian countries, for instance China (Goody 2006, 504). As a result, it can be argued that Childe's confined focus on European areas suggests he viewed the world narrowly. To summarise, some of the major problems surrounding Gordon Childe include his use and description of certain terms, limited and deceptive evidence and his arguably incomprehensive view of the world.

Conclusion and Evaluation

Gordon Childe is considered one of the most famous and controversial archaeologists in the last century, whose impact on the discipline can be perceived both positively or negatively. However,

one cannot evaluate his contribution to archaeology without having an in-depth and critical understanding of his work. The research for this essay has prompted a complex consideration of Gordon Childe as an archaeologist. Firstly, he developed new theories and new ways of thinking, integrating Marxism into different concepts in the Western world. Secondly, as a Materialist, he advocated the use of scientific methods. In addition, he moved beyond his academic circle to influence public interest in archaeology and human history. As a result, it can be argued that Childe moved the discipline of archaeology forwards, both at a theoretical and a practical level. Fundamentally, while it may be suggested that Gordon Childe failed to provide convincing evidence to support some of his theories, it can be argued that his overall influence on archaeology was mostly positive.

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