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THE EVOLUTIONARY THEORY OF V. GORDON CHILDE¹

HENRY ORENSTEIN

BOAS AND HIS STUDENTS were credited, earlier in the present century, with dethroning the ideas of cultural evolution and progress from the dominant position in anthropology which they enjoyed in the latter half of the preceding century. After a period of disgrace, however, these ideas have returned to prominence and have recently acquired considerable acceptance and support among anthropologists. It appears, on looking back at the earlier dispute about the matter, that the criticisms which Boas and his associates levelled at evolutionist theory were neither thorough enough nor constructive enough to convince a later generation of students that the theory was untenable. Kenneth Bock remarks, with reference to one of the more articulate of the present day evolutionists, "The fact that White's position has not received the summary refutation that might have been expected for a completely defunct and disproved theory testifies that he raises issues that have not been satisfactorily explored and resolved,"² and this observation applies with equal force to many other contemporary synthesizers.

Of all the present day evolutionists, Vere Gordon Childe is probably the most sophisticated, the most empirical, and among the most insistent. Furthermore, he is an outstanding prehistorian, and, as such, controls unusually well the archaeological data of long-range cultural history. If there is any value in evolutionary theory, any evidence for the idea of progress, then it should be apparent in his writings. Primarily this paper is an attempt to analyze Childe's use of the concepts of evolution and progress to see to what degree they are dependent on his data and to what degree he has simply imposed them on his material. The beliefs of a few other evolutionists will also be touched upon, but only lightly and usually parenthetically.

Childe's ideas have changed from time to time as those of any productive scholar presumably would, but I shall ignore these changes and any seeming inconsistencies which may result with the intention of concentrating on the evolutionary ideas as such, rather than chronicling Childe's personal intellectual history. The evolutionary ideas found in Childe's work are also found in the writings of other

1 I am indebted very much to John H. Rowe for his many constructive suggestions on both theoretical and stylistic matters in the preparation of this paper.

2 Kenneth E. Bock, *Evolution and Historical Process* (American Anthropologist, vol. 54, pp. 486-495, 1952), p. 486.

evolutionists, though often somewhat differently presented, and this paper is an evaluation of ideas, not people. Similarly, no discussion of Childe's notable contributions to prehistoric archaeology and the detailed interpretation of archaeological evidence is relevant here, although this work is at least as important a part of his contribution to anthropology as his theoretical formulations are.

Prehistorians have traditionally classified the archaeological cultures they recover into ages or stages, conceived, since the nineteenth century beginnings of the discipline, as an evolutionary sequence of progressive phases through which man has passed in his "ascent to civilization." Childe follows this practice, incorporating in different works earlier schemes taken from the nineteenth century evolutionists. Thus, he has suggested reviving the Three-Age system of Thomsen: Stone, Bronze, and Iron ages,³ as well as the seven fold system put forward by Morgan.⁴ He also uses the modified and expanded form of the Thomsen system generally current among prehistorians, but with some alterations of his own. He takes the Palaeolithic, Neolithic, Bronze Age, and Early Iron Age of this scheme, appends to it a Feudal period and a phase of bourgeois capitalism, and leaves out the Mesolithic.⁵

These categories are not meant to be a system of classification of "history as actuality"; they are put forward as "generalized history." White describes this evolutionist argument:

Of course, a law of cultural evolution would describe no actual series of events any more than the law of Newton describes any particular falling body. But infinite variety of particulars does not preclude universals. How quaint then to expect a scientific law, a statement of the universal to describe this and that particular.⁶

Childe appears to agree with him on this point:

White has demonstrated in detail that Tylor is studying the evolution of religion, not the history of any given religion. . . . The same is true of archaeologists. De Mortillet's classification does not purport to set forth the history of Technology in France or anywhere else, but the development of Technology in the abstract.⁷

3 Vere Gordon Childe, *Archaeological Ages as Technological Stages* (Huxley Memorial Lecture, Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, London, 1944), p.1.

4 V. Gordon Childe, *Archaeology and Anthropology* (Southwestern Journal of Anthropology, vol. 2, pp. 243-251, 1946), p. 251.

5 V. Gordon Childe, *What Happened in History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1946), pp. 17-20. His displeasure with the Mesolithic category may be due in part to its "unprogressive" features.

6 Leslie A. White, *The Science of Culture* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, 1949), p. 408.

7 Childe, *Archaeology and Anthropology*, p. 245.

Both authors speak as if this distinction answers the objections by critics of evolution that evolutionary theory does not fit the facts of cultural histories. But the anti-evolutionists are not answered. Abstractions are made from particulars. If progress is a "scientific law," if it actually describes historical developments "in the abstract," then it must have *some* relation to the events of history and prehistory. Childe repeatedly refers to discrete historical phenomena in expounding the theory of progress. But the question is whether the particulars presented actually do support the generalization; and whether so many facts have been ignored that the "statement of the universal" subsumes only a very few exceptional cases. Proponents of this type of theory must point to some body of data, some area of historical reality which can serve as convincing evidence for it or accept the charge that it is an *a priori* construct, attractive chiefly because it puts our own culture at the top of the pyramid.

In adducing empirical evidence in support of their theories, evolutionists often deal with different units of study. They sometimes speak of evolution as obtaining in culture as a whole, i.e., their approach is what Steward has called "Universal Evolutionism."⁸ If the sequence of stages is meant to apply to the totality of culture, then its empirical support must be found in this unit, and it can be applicable to this unit only.

However, in other contexts we find evolutionists referring not to the totality of culture but to the development of particular cultures. When the sequence is meant to be applicable to all cultures, we may call the theories "Unilinear Evolutionism." Such schemes, if they are to be valid for particular culture-histories, must be derived from a comparison of the historical developments of a sizeable sample of the world's cultures. On the other hand, if an evolutionary scheme refers to a limited class of cultures, then the data need only refer to a convincing sample of the class in question. In such cases we may apply Steward's term "Multilinear Evolutionism."

Strange to say, one can discern in the writings of Childe suggestions of each of the three types of evolutionism. As with so many evolutionists, he speaks inconsistently of one type and then the other without distinguishing between them. Each of these three types, as Childe employs them, includes some notion of the idea of progress, though the idea is much less noticeable where he practices multilinear evolutionism. We shall discuss each in turn.

8 Julian H. Steward, "Evolution and Progress" (in A. L. Kroeber, ed., *Anthropology Today*, pp. 313-326, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 315. The body of this paper was written before reading Steward's article on the subject. We arrived at the same classification of evolutionism as Steward and will use his terms.

At times explicitly and more often implicitly, Childe refers to culture as a whole for evidence for his theory of progressive stages. Sometimes he contends that cultures are not isolable. He speaks of the "illusion . . . of a multiplicity of 'civilizations,' any of which can be isolated from forerunners and contemporaries and still continue to behave as a living organism."⁹ His position, indeed, emphasizes diffusion.

The discoveries and inventions implicit in metal working are so abstruse and complex that independent origin at several points . . . is excluded as fantastically improbable; knowledge of the essential techniques in the Old World have been diffused from some centre.¹⁰

All cultures, he insists, are interdependent parts composing a single whole—Culture.

Even a comparative sociology aiming at the establishment of general rules and a general scheme recurrent in many "instances" the differences between which can be ignored . . . can make little headway. On the one hand the number of observed and observable instances is very limited; on the other hand it is questionable how far any human society is really comparable to any distinct corpse and not rather to some organ or member of one body.¹¹

There seems little question that progress is thought of as occurring in culture as a whole. Each step may be taken by any one of the societies on earth; the invention can then be diffused to another society which can, in turn, take the next step. Thus, first labeling the traditional three ages as simply stages in the development of cultures, as having no reference to particular times; he goes on:

If the whole long process disclosed in the archeological and literary records be surveyed, a single directional trend is most obvious in the economic sphere *in the methods whereby the most progressive societies secure a livelihood*. In this domain it will be possible to recognize radical and indeed revolutionary innovations. . . . These revolutions can . . . be used to mark off phases or stages in the historical process. . . .¹²

With our purposes in mind, it would be wise to neglect the vagaries and moral connotations of the term "progress." We may then agree that something like this process has occurred in the history of technology—if the unit of study is culture considered as a totality. Inventions occur in the course of specific histories and

9 Vere Gordon Childe, *The History of Civilization* (Antiquity, vol. 15, pp. 1-14, 1941), p. 3.

10 Vere Gordon Childe, *The Bronze Age* (Cambridge: University Press, 1930), p. 10.

11 Vere Gordon Childe, *History* (London: Cobbett Press, 1947), pp. 2-3.

12 Childe, *What Happened in History*, p. 17: emphasis mine. For a similar statement see Childe, *Archaeological Ages as Technological Stages*, p. 1.

diffuse to different cultures taking part in the development. Invention and diffusion are concrete phenomena; and the over-all direction in technology *has* been toward greater complexity and efficiency. One could hardly deny this. But the important methodological decision is what is to be done with the general proposition. If it stimulates inquiry into the determinants of technological invention and diffusion, then the concept of progress in technology may be said to serve as a springboard for scientific historical research. It may be said to compose one problem-center about which numerous specific historical investigations might cluster.¹³ From this perspective we estimate its value as greater in proportion as the investigations yield pertinent conclusions. Childe does attempt to use the concept of progress in this way, and we shall review his conclusions shortly.

But, on the other hand, the *definition* of "progress" could be understood by some theorists as one *end* of research. And Childe appears to accept this position, too. For example, in advocating the Comparative Method for ethnology he says that "this method offers the brightest prospect for reaching general laws indicative of the direction of historic progress."¹⁴ And again:

One [of the functions of archaeology and history] is surely to define progress. To ask "have we progressed" is of course, meaningless—the question can only be answered in the affirmative. It is for history to say what this progress has consisted in and to provide standards for determining it.¹⁵

If this is one of the goals of anthropology, if we are prone to stop when such information is gathered and ordered, then our aspirations are indeed meager for the data of history. The "law of progress" when considered as an end in itself is little more than a cultural conceit, an ethnocentric rationalization.

Here we come to the nature of such schemes. The "less progressive" societies of our day are as much a part of the totality of culture as is Euroamerican culture. Each society has changed, each in its own way. Certain changes which have occurred in the history and prehistory of mankind as a whole can be considered as steps toward the present condition of each and every culture on earth. This must be granted if one admits that all cultures have histories. If cultures have changed in some respects, then if each society were interested, it could find a "trend" extending from the beginning of man's history—granted that it were known to them—to their present state. For, given the entire life-history of the whole of man-

13 This point has been well made by Melville Jacobs (*Further Comments on Evolutionism in Cultural Anthropology*, *American Anthropologist*, vol. 50, pp. 564-568, 1948, p. 565).

14 Childe, *Archaeology and Anthropology*, p. 251.

15 Vere Gordon Childe, *Changing Methods and Aims in Prehistory. Presidential Address for 1935* (Proceedings, Prehistoric Society, n.s., vol. 1, pp. 1-15, Cambridge), p. 11.

kind, it seems likely that each culture can have its own criteria for progress and its own evolution, and can place itself always at the pinnacle of the cultures on earth—if it wishes. Societies interested in cycles would select facets of culture which would give them cyclical narratives. But if the interest is in “progress,” then a simple-to-complex development is the outcome; with appropriate definitions of “simple” and “complex.” The sequence need only pass from what is most unlike their own culture, through those that are similar to it, up to the apex, whether Hopi, Hottentot, or Hollywood.

But, it might be said that from such work one can predict an inexorable future—a condition toward which man is drawn “against his will.”¹⁶ A discipline whose purpose was this would be quite peculiar, indeed. Like astrology and palmistry it could amuse a fairly large following; but it would advance man’s knowledge of the world and his control over it very little, if at all. However, if we do grant this purpose, what kind of predictions can we make?

Given the present state of our knowledge, we can say practically nothing about the future. Because technology has become more complex “in the long run,” and taking culture as a whole, we can conclude that at some *undetermined* future date, at some *unknown* place on earth, technology will become *somewhat* more complex than it is now. For all we know we might be faced with another three thousand year Mesolithic before the process is consummated. And, most important, this rather uninformative prediction is not likely to be improved upon so long as we continue to work in “long runs” and to study the “progress” of culture as one unit. Such a prediction could have been made in Thomsen’s times or before. The only difference is that the prediction must be made with less precision now; for at that time prehistorians did not have the Mesolithic or other irregularities to disturb their notion of progressive development. So it seems that the precision of the evolutionary prehistorian’s predictions is likely to be inversely proportional to the magnitude of his accumulated data—hardly a very “progressive” state of affairs.

We must repeat that Childe does not say that an elucidation of progressive trends is the only goal for archaeology and history. There can be no doubt that the statement of technological progress leads him to ask a further question. It leads him to inquire into the conditions under which technological advances have taken place. The Three-Age scheme serves as a heuristic device. In this context the discussion of progress in culture as a whole is more legitimate and more useful.

Childe attempts to solve the problem with a Marxian analysis. He contends

16 This is Leslie White’s position (*The Science of Culture*, pp. 330-359). Childe explicitly denies that this can be done (*History*, pp. 82-83).

that each stage in the history of mankind is marked off by a revolution.¹⁷ And "contradictions," he implies, are necessary antecedents of revolutions.

At a certain stage in their development the productive forces of a society come into contradiction with . . . the property relations within which they have worked before. . . . In such circumstances, to allow of further technical progress, . . . Marx and Engels held, a revolution was necessary . . . in the sense of desirable or essential for further progress.¹⁸

In interpreting the data of history according to the Marxian formula, Childe frequently employs a rather common belief involving population and economic surplus. Behind the "contradictions" constructed by the author, one always finds the notion that population will increase and continue increasing until limited by the subsistence economy or other external factors. Thus, the Palaeolithic contradiction involved a limitation on the size of the population imposed by the economy. Too much wealth was devoted to supporting the magicians and too little to the subsistence economy.¹⁹ The Neolithic contradiction entailed in part an increase in population. Geographical expansion became necessary and war was the inevitable outcome.²⁰ The contradiction in the Bronze Age economy is seen as the outcome of a concentration of wealth in the hands of a few men. The population increased to a size greater than could be supported by the subsistence economy and again geographical expansion and war resulted.²¹ These propositions are apparently intended to explain the destruction of "high civilizations."

In proposing these "explanations" Childe has recourse to rather tenuous estimates of fluctuations in the populations of prehistoric times. Actually we know very little about the magnitude of prehistoric populations and at present have few, if any, accurate methods for making appraisals. Childe's method seems to be, at times, to infer population size from social and economic conditions, e.g., the existence of cities.²² Such inferences lend little credibility to explanations of the destruction of these same social and economic conditions in terms of population fluctuation.

However, even if we ignore the absence of good evidence for the computation of populations, we still have a questionable assumption bound up in Childe's efforts

17 Childe, *What Happened in History*, p. 17.

18 Childe, *History*, pp. 72-73.

19 Childe, *What Happened in History*, pp. 37-38.

20 *Idem*, p. 59.

21 *Idem*, p. 177.

22 Vere Gordon Childe, "A Prehistorian's Interpretation of Diffusion" (in *Independence, Convergence and Borrowing in Institutions, Thought and Art*, Harvard Tercentenary Publications, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1937), pp. 15-16.

at explanation. What concrete evidence would lead us to believe that populations do in fact continually press the limits of their available provisions? It is quite likely that such conditions have prevailed in many areas at many times. But the nature of the relationship between demographic factors and cultural ones, including technics, is not too clear. Before this relationship can be used in an explanatory proposition it must be clarified and confirmed.

Not only is the attempted explanation of the "decline and fall" of "high civilizations" open to doubt, but we find that Childe fails to come to grips with their ascension. He asserts that each age of prehistory was enabled to appear by virtue of an antecedent revolution; and these in turn occur when men are faced with economic and social contradictions. But he does not in fact explain revolutions. He seems to assume some relationship between the hypothetical contradictions and the succeeding revolutions. He nowhere actually attempts to establish such relationship. Contradictions, indeed, often have a different locale from associated revolutions. For example, the Bronze Age contradiction occurred in Egypt and Mesopotamia primarily,²³ while the revolution which supposedly ushered in the Iron Age started in Greece, Phoenicia, and Etruria.²⁴ In order to comply with Childe's theory, the alleged contradiction in the organization of Egyptian society would have had to induce a revolution in Greece.

In reality, Childe never does explain the appearance of the stages of technology. He only states that revolutions are essential in order to "allow of further technical progress."²⁵ But this is the very point: why does technical progress occur? Is it due to an assumed "instinct" for progress? Is there an instinct impelling men to reorganize their society when faced by a contradiction in their socio-economic organization, thus permitting a more "progressive" system to prevail? Of course, the author would not openly espouse such an absurdity.

He does argue that major inventions in the history of technology appear in a necessary order.

Progress is an individual whole in which the invention of a new way of hafting an ax formed a necessary prelude to the invention of the steam-engine or the aeroplane. In the first innovations the germs of all subsequent improvement were latent. . . .²⁶

He claims that the "sequence of historical events" involved in the progression from the Palaeolithic to our contemporary culture " . . . not only did but also

23 Childe, *What Happened in History*, Chapter 8, pp. 184-185.

24 *Idem*, Chapter 9.

25 For complete quotation, see p. 206 of this paper.

26 Vere Gordon Childe, *The Dawn of European Civilization* (4th ed., New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), p. xv.

must, succeed one another in just this order." "Each invention is determined and conditioned by preceding events. The sequence is necessary and its necessity is intelligible."²⁷

First we should note that the necessity of the order of stages is a matter of dispute. Each step may not always be a necessary precondition for the following one. Kroeber has argued convincingly that the invention of bronze casting before iron casting was not unavoidable; rather it seems to have been an accident of history.²⁸

But even if we agree that the order of the inventions was necessary, one should not think that this gives an explanation for technological advance. (Childe is not explicit as to whether he believes this.) For, a necessary sequence can give us only necessary antecedents for inventions; we do not thereby ascertain the sufficient conditions for their occurrence. We can only conclude that the causes of technological advance have not yet been revealed.²⁹

Childe is not interested in explaining only technical progress. He also wishes to enhance our understanding of some characteristics of the non-material aspects of culture. Having discovered, to his satisfaction, the processes involved in the progressive development of technology and the necessary order of change therein, he goes on to uphold the primacy of technology in history. It is, he says, the "foundation of history," because "the possibility of historical change depends on . . . the means of production."³⁰ "All . . . so called spiritual results of man's historical activity are *in the long run* determined by the material forces of production."³¹ The relations of production, Childe concedes, must be transformed into ideas and ideals—and when thus transformed they "acquire a certain independent historical reality." Sentiment may thus impede "progress," and "the relation of ideology to the productive forces may be rather remote." But Childe insists throughout that changes in ideology are ultimately based on technology.³²

27 Childe, *History*, p. 10.

28 A. L. Kroeber, *Anthropology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948), pp. 726-728.

29 There is one further type of explanation of technical inventions which *may* be involved in some of Childe's assumptions. It is in some respects similar to the explanation of the destruction of "high civilizations" by reference to population expansion which we discussed on pages 206-207 of this paper. In this instance, the continuous pressure of population growth on economic resources is supposed to create a need for economic innovations. This need, in turn, impels the invention of technical devices. Such typically functional explanations of inventions have been fairly popular in anthropology. One of the best refutations was put forward, ironically enough, by the arch-functionalists, Durkheim (Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, G. E. G. Catlin, ed., S. H. Solovay and J. H. Mueller, translators, 8th ed., Glencoe: Free Press, 1938; reprinted 1950), pp. 90-92.

30 Childe, *History*, pp. 69-70.

31 *Idem*, pp. 71-72: emphasis mine.

32 *Idem*, pp. 75-76.

The hierarchical arrangements of cultures constructed by the nineteenth century anthropologists were often based on an implicit assumption of economic or technological determinism. Childe has performed for us the service of openly arguing for the conception. But he offers little evidence or convincing argument in its behalf. He appears to base his belief on the fact that "to be able to act at all men must live," and "the 'means of production' at the disposal of society . . . constitute the equipment that enables human beings to procure [all the things] necessary for life and the reproduction and multiplication of our species."³³

His contention seems to be that technology is the most significant casual element in society because it is absolutely necessary if men are to live. But, it has never been demonstrated that the greatest necessities in life are the most efficacious factors inducing cultural change or stability. Further, we may assume this, and still once a necessity is complied with, there is no reason to assume that it will dominate man's social life. What a sociologist has had to say about economic determinism is pertinent here:

Certainly we are justified in assuming . . . that *some* degree of economic surplus is necessary for any kind of achievement in culture. But, once this minimum condition is met we are likely to find that different ranks of circumstances—moral, social, psychological—tend to become crucial and that these may exist, variably, in settings of relative economic misery or prosperity.³⁴

Even if there were a society living on a sub-human subsistence level, the proposition would not be relevant. Sexual reproduction, at least, is another prerequisite for societal survival; and one could make a case for sexual determinism on this logic as easily as for technological determinism.

Childe's *a priori* argument for economic determinism is not convincing. Further, we contend that the position is one that cannot be validated, even where empirical documentation is used, if definition is imprecise and methodology lacks rigor. The ordinary narrative methods of historical and prehistorical synthesis will not suffice. For example, Childe and other Marxians often state that the technology or the economy is the determinant *in the long run*³⁵—and the long run can be made just as long as is necessary to "prove" the proposition. Each change in any of the aspects of a culture is always preceded by changes in other aspects which have occurred at *some* time in the culture's history. The aspect which the student

33 *Idem*, p. 70.

34 Robert A. Nisbet, Review of *The Rise and Fall of Civilization: an Inquiry into the Relationship between Economic Development and Civilization* by Shepard B. Clough (American Journal of Sociology, vol. 57, pp. 524-526, 1952), p. 526.

35 See page 208 of this paper.

believes to be causal can, therefore, always be "confirmed" as causal by simply examining a larger portion of the historical record. One can go as far back in time as one likes to show that the chosen behavior is *ultimately* primary. Such methods neither prove nor disprove. They are the ritual incantations of cultists. Their outcome can not be scientific laws, but faiths.

Though Childe's Marxian explanation of the stages of prehistory does not measure up to scientific standards, this does not mean that the question must remain moot. Further inquiry into geographic, demographic, economic, and other factors may eventually give a solution. The problem is meaningful and significant. But we must understand that it is but one problem for scientific history. Emphasis on it to the exclusion of other historical research will narrow the scope of historical inquiry excessively. Each time any culture of the world takes a step beyond the technological level achieved by any culture up until then, it is recorded as progress for culture as a whole. Meanwhile, in the history of this unit innumerable changes may have taken place. Some particular cultures can change radically as respects their cosmologies. Some may have violent changes in art style. Other societies may rearrange their kinship systems, alter child-rearing practices, adopt new religions, accept different foods, alter funerary customs, change their patterns of sex relations; or, in fact, they may accept a basically new economy, political system, or social organization. But if none of these changes is the sort which Childe defines as "progressive" they are not included as data for his theory. The scope of historical inquiry is thus greatly restricted. Research cannot be so restricted if we are to achieve an understanding of the past in its relation to the present conditions of life.

A crucial ambiguity in the theory of progress involves the nature of the unit of observation to which the abstract "law of progress" allegedly refers. We have just reviewed Childe's case for the idea of progress conceived as pertaining to the whole of culture. In different parts of his writings he refers not to Culture, but to the histories of particular cultures or regions. When he takes this position he of course accepts cultures as isolable.

Mankind does not form one society today but is divided into many distinct societies; all the available evidence suggests that the division was not less but even greater in the past as far as archaeology can penetrate. Each society . . . has preserved, transmitted and built up its own peculiar traditions.³⁶

The system of progressive ages is now intended to refer to many distinct histories. On the basis of material remains archaeologists have built up a classification of cul-

36 Childe, *What Happened in History*, p. 12.

tures in technological stages that do follow one another in the same order in quite a number of regions; they are everywhere homotaxial but not necessarily contemporary.³⁷

The concept of homotaxis, borrowed from biology, is meant to indicate that the sequences are the same "all over the globe"; but "it did not follow that they must everywhere occupy the same positions if aligned according to the series of solar years."³⁸

Such statements as these are not quite clear; one could possibly construe them as a type of unilinear evolutionism not much different from that practiced by the theorists of the preceding century. Certainly Childe has nowhere explicitly distinguished this position from the earlier theorists' beliefs. And yet, when we keep in mind that Childe is intimately acquainted with the data of prehistory, it seems inconceivable that he should believe that any of the suggested sequences are actually ubiquitous and invariable. His position only becomes clear when we consider further statements.

The key to the difficulty lies in his interpretation of the concept of homotaxis. In *Social Evolution* he says that ages are everywhere homotaxial in that "each . . . always occupies the same relative position in the sequence *wherever the full sequence is available*. (In New Zealand, for example, the sequence is incomplete, since the Bronze Age is missing.)"³⁹

In this light we can see that the derivation of the Three-Age or any other classification from a comparison of many cultural histories is not meant in the same sense as that intended by the early unilinear evolutionists. The Three-Age sequence may be confirmed without our having to observe the passage of each and every "civilized" culture through all three ages—because "incomplete sequences" are excepted. One may phrase the argument as follows: that whenever *both* the Bronze and Iron Ages obtained in the history of a culture, then the Bronze Age always preceded the Iron Age. Similarly with all of the categories: whenever any two, or all three, of the stages in the Stone-Bronze-Iron hierarchy have obtained in the history of a culture, then the lower stage always precedes the higher one. Thus only when substantially modified can we say that the sequence is a valid historical generalization. If we are to avoid ambiguity and unnecessary dissidence, we must be careful clearly to differentiate such generalizations from those proposed by the nineteenth century systematizers.

37 Childe, *Archaeology and Anthropology*, p. 249.

38 Childe, *Archaeological Ages as Technological Stages*, p. 1.

39 Vere Gordon Childe, *Social Evolution* (London: Watts, 1951), p. 20: emphasis mine. For a similar statement see page 29, same book.

There is one point in his theoretical work where Childe turns to inductive empiricism; he actually compares cultural histories. Here the approach is that of multilineal evolutionism. He does not deal with the alleged order of the major stages of culture growth. Rather, he examines information available on culture change *within* stages or, if you will, types of cultures and attempts to discern regularities. He first summarizes "in a very abstract way successive steps through which barbarian cultures actually passed on the road to civilization in contrasted environments."⁴⁰ The sequences are compared, and he finds that the start and finish of each display some similarities; e.g., the same species of cereals were used at the start, and an effective concentration of economic and political power obtained in the final result. "But the intervening steps in development do not exhibit even abstract parallelism. . . . They cannot therefore be used to define stages common to all sequences examined."⁴¹ However, they do display what Childe calls the processes of divergence and convergence. Divergence is explained as adaptations of one type of rural economy to different natural environments. Convergence is explained by the facts of diffusion.⁴² It involves the addition of similar traits to different societies and the integration of the traits into the respective societies. Thus, the societies become more alike without losing their distinctive individualities.⁴³

When the author does not attempt to defend a thesis, and instead empirically attempts to derive a hypothesis, his conclusions are much more in keeping with the data to which they pertain. Here we have revealed no sequences, no regularities in the accumulation of traits, but rather repetitive *processes* of history.

However, there are some deficiencies. For one, his interpretation of divergence requires modification. Childe contends that the process is due to variation in habitat, a surprising oversimplification for one so well versed in archaeological fact. Some differences between cultures which display over-all similarities can be understood by examining variation in natural environment; but certainly the entire process of divergence in art style, religion, social organization, etc. cannot be so understood. It is probable that some aspects of divergence are due to diffusion from different sources. And further, we may state with confidence that there will remain

40 *Idem*, Chapters VI-XI. For one area Childe does not have an actual sequence. The cultures were more or less contemporary, but are arranged in a series in accordance with their complexity. See pages 119-120 for this unfortunate methodological lapse in an otherwise acceptable study.

41 *Idem*, pp. 161, 162.

42 *Idem*, pp. 161-163, 173.

43 *Idem*, pp. 166-167.

a residue of differences after diffusion and the environmental factor have accounted for their share of cultural differentiation; this too will require explanation.

A further defect of Childe's generalizations is their vagueness. Greater specificity would be much more enlightening. For example: Can the two processes be distinguished in terms of the types of cultural milieux in which they take place? Are there differences in and between the rates of convergence and divergence under different conditions? These questions, if answered, will help to place historical anthropology on firm theoretical foundations.

Our examination of Vere Gordon Childe's evolutionism has yielded both positive and negative results. The Thomsen categories, the Morgan scheme, and the more common archaeological classification can be applied to the past without qualification only if the histories of all cultures are considered as a single unit. In this case, the classificatory system acts as a guide for investigators. It sets up a specific problem for solution: "Under what conditions did the particular stages in question come to be"? Though Childe's dialectical materialist approach is unsatisfactory, the problem is an important one which requires further research and analysis. Thus, the present practice of classifying culture as a whole into ages or stages is valuable heuristically and should be maintained.

None of the systems is valid, however, if they are intended as summaries of all or most of the histories of the world's cultures. For in this case, the histories do not conform to the classificatory schemes. The Three-Age system can be construed as a historical generalization only when substantially modified, only when "incomplete sequences" are excluded. But neither this nor the other sequential classifications are tenable as statements of invariant sequence—or for that matter, as universal generalizations to which only a few exceptions can be attributed.

Childe's comparison of culture histories within the "Barbarian" stage is another matter. The elucidation of such processes as these is one of the major goals of historical anthropology.

There is one overall objection to Childe's work; the information upon which he relies in theory construction is unfortunately restricted as to area. He tends to slight historical sequences in the Far East and almost totally ignores the facts of New World cultural developments. Whatever the evolutionary framework—universal, unilinear, or multilinear—these data are pertinent, particularly so in the case of the Americas which give us presumably independent instances of historical sequences.

In spite of their faults, Childe's evolutionary theories can be said to contain valuable insights and useful hypotheses. But we must keep in mind that there are

other problems to be solved and other approaches to employ in the scientific study of history. The work of Crawford and Fox on ecological factors in culture history is illustrative. The methodological suggestions of Taylor appear valuable in many respects. Hodgen's studies of diffusion are excellent historical anthropology. Kroeber and Richardson's work on fashion change and the acculturation studies of the ethnohistorians, Herskovits for instance, are other examples of promising methods. These methods, involving rigorous inductive work in the historic and prehistoric records, should be pursued alongside the more intensive short-range studies by the social anthropologists. It is by these means that we will achieve an adequate general theory of culture change.

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