
Review: V. Gordon Childe 25 Years after: His Relevance for the Archaeology of the Eighties

Reviewed Work(s): Prehistorian: A Biography of V. Gordon Childe by Sally Green: The Method and Theory of V. Gordon Childe by Barbara McNairn: Gordon Childe: Revolutions in Archaeology by Bruce Trigger

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V. Gordon Childe 25 Years After: His Relevance for the Archaeology of the Eighties

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A Review Article

This is a review article of three monographs published recently about V. Gordon Childe, who was Europe's most eminent prehistorian from 1925–1957. The article draws attention to the fact that there seems, especially in Great Britain, to be a re-emergence of Childe's popularity after a relative inattention in the last 20 years. There is a possible explanation of this phenomenon as part of the reactionary trend of European, and especially British, archaeology to the American New Archaeology and as part of the development of strongly history-oriented theoretical models of social and economic change. The article focusses on the theoretical and philosophical background to Childe's writings, especially on his ideas of progress, historical theory, and his use of historical materialist models of prehistoric cultural change.

Sally Green, *Prehistorian: a Biography of V. Gordon Childe* (Moonraker Press: Wiltshire, England 1981; distributed in the U.S.A. by Humanities Press, Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey) 200 pages. \$22.50. Referred to in the text as "Green: Childe". Barbara McNairn, *The Method and Theory of V. Gordon Childe* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh 1980; Columbia University Press 1980) 184 pages. \$10.00. Referred to in the text as "McNairn: Childe". Bruce Trigger, *Gordon Childe: Revolutions in Archaeology* (Thames and Hudson Ltd.: London 1980; Columbia University Press: New York 1980) 207 pages, 33 plates. \$22.50. Referred to in the text as "Trigger: Childe".

V. Gordon Childe's Major Works Referred To in the Text

- How Labour Governs* (Labour Publishing Co.: London 1923)
The Dawn of European Civilization (Kegan, Trench, Trubner and Co.: London 1925)
The Aryans (Kegan, Trench, Trubner and Co.: London 1926)
The Most Ancient East (Kegan, Trench, Trubner and Co.: London 1928)
The Danube in Prehistory (Clarendon Press: Oxford 1929)
The Bronze Age (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1930)
New Light on the Most Ancient East (Kegan, Trench, Trubner and Co.: London 1934)
Man Makes Himself (Watts and Co.: London 1936)
What Happened in History (Pelican Books: London 1942)
Progress and Archaeology (Watts and Co.: London 1945)
Scotland Before the Scots (Methuen and Co.: London 1946)
History (Cobbett Press: London 1947)
"The Sociology of Knowledge," *The Modern Quarterly* NS:IV (1949) 302–309
Prehistoric Migrations in Europe (Kegan, Trench, Trubner & Co.: London 1950)
Social Evolution (The Rationalist Press Association, Watts & Co.: London 1951)
Society and Knowledge (Harper & Brothers: New York 1956)
Piecing Together the Past (Routledge and Kegan Paul: London 1956)
"Retrospect," *Antiquity* 32 (1958) 69–74
"Valediction," *Bulletin of the London Institute of Archaeology* I (1958) 1–8
The Prehistory of European Society (Penguin Books: London 1958)

During his lifetime, V. Gordon Childe (FIG. 1) gained the reputation of being the leading prehistorian in Europe. At his death in 1957, he received more tributes than any other archaeologist before him (and perhaps more than any since) from archaeologists, historians, and social scientists throughout the world. Without exception, these observed that Childe was the greatest prehistorian and a wonderful human being.

Childe's reputation, as far as his fellow archaeologists and prehistorians were concerned, was founded on his first-hand knowledge and experience with archaeological material in museums and sites all over Europe—especially Eastern Europe and the USSR—and the Near East. Moreover, Childe was familiar with a vast amount of the published literature regarding these sites and was able, consequently, to draw all this material together into masterly syntheses which enabled other archaeologists to grasp the patterns of European and Near Eastern prehistoric change and variation. No one had travelled as widely as he, nor had anyone (it seems) read so many of the original excavation reports. No one could remember the details as he could and yet still distinguish the woods from the trees.

Childe's reputation as the master of his field was established from the very beginning of his professional career, with the publication of the first edition of *The*

Figure 1. V. Gordon Childe holding a present from some of his students at Brno University. Date unknown. (Picture supplied by the Institute of Archaeology, University of London.)



Dawn of European Civilization in 1925. In fact, it might be said that he took the archaeological world by storm. During his lifetime, his vast, complex, cultural-chronological schema and his functional interpretations went, for the most part, unchallenged and were, moreover, accepted as *the* synthetic framework of European prehistory and its chronological connections with the Near East.

In contrast to his “technical works” of synthesis (such as the six editions of the *Dawn* and the *Danube in Prehistory*), Childe’s works of an interpretational nature, in which he postulated grand models for the social and cultural evolution of Europe and the Near East such as *Man*

Makes Himself and *What Happened in History*, were regarded by his archaeological colleagues as “popularizations” of the serious business of prehistory. They seemed, moreover, vaguely embarrassing because of their overtly Marxist connotations, and were never considered part of his serious intellectual repertoire. Nor did Childe’s highly philosophical and theoretical works on the nature of history and knowledge and explanation receive any closer attention or discussion by contemporary archaeologists. It was left to Childe himself at the end of his life to summarize what he saw as his most important contribution to archaeology and knowledge in general.

The most original and useful contributions that I may have made to prehistory are certainly not novel data rescued by brilliant excavation from the soil or by patient research from dusty museum cases, nor yet well-founded chronological schemes nor freshly defined cultures, but rather interpretative concepts and methods of explanation.¹

It must have been a disappointment to Childe that, while he was alive, the modelling and reconstruction of socio-cultural evolution that most appealed to him were the subject of such little active dialogue among his colleagues within the discipline, compared to the details and nuances of chronological and cultural synthesis in which they delighted.

After the spate of literature on Childe at his death,² less was written about his works than one might have expected, considering his worldwide reputation. Gradually, with the carbon-14 dating of European prehistory and improvements in its use, parts of Childe's cultural-chronological framework were pulled down; finally, the whole structure of his model for the diffusion of innovations from the Near East to Europe, which had bound together his synthetic framework, came under heavy attack.³

As Trigger has remarked "there is a tendency for his ideas to be invoked or condemned piecemeal, as they relate to current controversies."⁴ Thus, Childe's ten indices of urbanism have been systematically challenged and pared down;⁵ his "Oasis Hypothesis" for the intro-

duction of agriculture and domestication of animals⁶ has been placed in the ranks of implausible theories for the Neolithic Revolution.⁷

Gordon Childe was seen as a great synthesizer of data; but now that the data have outgrown his syntheses, they have been superseded. His interpretational models have been regarded as either refuted or untestable. V. Gordon Childe and his works have been relegated to the history of the discipline and, as such, are generally regarded as irrelevant to current developments in research into the evolution of human culture and society.

And yet, in the last two years, three full-scale monographs have appeared that deal exclusively with the life and works of V. Gordon Childe by Barbara McNairn, Bruce Trigger, and Sally Green. In fact they are part of a new "let-us-know-Childe-better" movement which has been growing during the last five to 10 years. Green's manuscript was finished in 1976, and Trigger's was written in 1977–1978. In addition there are articles and unpublished manuscripts by at least two others.⁸ How does one explain this relatively sudden interest in Gordon Childe after a 15–20 year silence? Does it represent an interest in the history of archaeology in which now, 20 years after his death, it is time to take an "objective" look at the great man? Does it, perhaps, represent a reaction to the constant pounding which some of his ideas have taken during the '70s,⁹ in what may be called a morbid fascination for details of the victim? Or is it possible that the work of V. Gordon Childe has acquired some significance and relevance at this point in time for the development of archaeology and the study of prehistoric cultural evolution?

The initial aim of this article is to review these three monographs about Gordon Childe, but its ultimate purpose is to explain the phenomenon of their coincidental appearance and to offer some answers to the questions posed in the preceding paragraph.

The three monographs each have a different orientation and are remarkably unrepentive. It is worth reading all three, since each has something new and significant

1. V. G. Childe, "Retrospect," *Antiquity* 32 (1958) 69.

2. R. Braidwood, "Vere Gordon Childe, 1892–1957," *AmAnth* 60 (1958) 733–736; H. J. Case, "V. Gordon Childe," *The Times* (1957, 13 October) 13; S. Cruden, "Memorial of Professor V. Gordon Childe," *Proc. Soc. of Antiquaries for Scotland* 90 (1957) 258; R. Palme Dutt, "Professor V. Gordon Childe," *The Times* (1957, 24 October); J. Morris, "Gordon Childe," *Past and Present* 12 (1957) 2; D. J. Mulvaney, "V. G. Childe, 1892–1957," *Historical Studies: Australia and New Zealand* 8 (1957) 93–94; Stuart Piggott, "Vere Gordon Childe, 1892–1957," *ProcBritAc* 44 (1958) 305–312; Alison Ravetz, "Notes on the work of V. Gordon Childe," *The New Reasoner* 10 (1959) 56–66; I. Rouse, "Vere Gordon Childe, 1892–1957," *AmAnt* 24 (1958) 82–84; M. Wheeler, "Prof. V. Gordon Childe: robust influence in study of the Past," *The Times* (1957, 23 October); Trigger: Childe 11.

3. A. C. Renfrew, *Before Civilization* (Jonathan Cape: London 1973).

4. Trigger: Childe 11.

5. V. G. Childe, "The Urban Revolution," *The Town Planning Review* 21:1 (1950) 3–17; C. Redman, *The Rise of Civilization* (Freeman and Co.: San Francisco 1978) 218; A. C. Renfrew, "Beyond a subsistence economy: the evolution of social organization in prehistoric Europe," in C. Moore, ed., *Reconstructing Complex Societies* (ASOR: Baltimore 1974) 69–96.

6. V. G. Childe, *New Light on the Most Ancient East* (Kegan, Trench, Trubner & Co.: London 1934).

7. Redman, op. cit. (in note 5) 93; G. Wright, "Origins of Food-Production in southwest Asia: a survey of ideas," *CA* 12 (1971) 447–477.

8. P. Gathercole, "Patterns in Prehistory: an examination of the later thinking of V. Gordon Childe," *WA* 3 (1971) 225–232; P. Gathercole, "Childe the 'Outsider'," *RAIN* 17 (1976) 5–6; see Trigger: Childe 11.

9. Renfrew, op. cit. (in notes 3 and 5).

to offer about Childe's life and his works. After reading each book, one is left with a different impression of V. Gordon Childe. This phenomenon is certainly one result of the different intellectual and philosophical background of each author. Bruce Trigger is a well-known and highly respected archaeologist in his own right, who has written a number of works on the history and methodology of archaeology.¹⁰ The other two authors, Barbara McNairn and Sally Green, are unknown to me. The complimentary nature of the manuscripts may not have been accidental, at least in the case of Trigger and Green, since Trigger was certainly aware of the nature of Green's manuscript.¹¹ Green did not know, however, about Trigger's manuscript (at least as far as one can tell from her citations). Neither Trigger nor Green makes any mention of McNairn's book, apart from a passing reference to it without citation in Green's book.¹² All three were aware of the work written about Childe by Peter Gathercole, and make regular reference to it.

Green's book, which I shall discuss first, is different from the other two books and from Gathercole's work in that it is essentially a personal biography. Trigger's book, on the other hand, may be termed an intellectual biography, and McNairn's book is an extended essay on his interpretational and theoretical works. These latter two will be discussed together, since there is more overlap between them than with Green, especially in those aspects dealing with the nature of Childe's theory of prehistory and history, which is currently of great significance for archaeology.

The personal biography by Sally Green is organized chronologically and is based on a thorough investigation of Childe's travels and activities and his social, intellectual and political relations, using as sources letters, remembered conversations, notebooks, and publications, including those about and by Childe in the most obscure newspapers and journals. From this, Sally Green has created a fascinating and enterprising reconstruction of the personal background to Childe's works. Discussion of Childe's writings is interspersed in the text and, though perfectly adequate in giving intellectual substance to the personal details, it is somewhat superficial when compared to the discussions in the other two volumes.

Two of Childe's works are published in full in Green's book: his last message of recommendations for future practitioners of archaeology which was published as "Valediction" in 1958 and is republished in Green's book as an appendix; and a "letter" written by Childe but only very recently published in *Antiquity*.¹³ This letter was written by Childe shortly before his death and was sent to Professor W.F. Grimes, at the Institute of Archaeology in London, but was not opened until 1968; in it Childe outlines his fears of old age, on the basis of which most of his readers, including Green, have been confirmed in their conclusion that he committed suicide.

It is on the poignant note of this letter that Green finishes her biography of Childe, having described his post-retirement depression and its possible causes. By the end of the book, the reader is also depressed and saddened by her vivid painting of Childe, as he escaped from his inhibitions against making intimate friendships by plunging himself into intellectual and political (in its widest sense) activities, including the writing of 22 books in 32 years! I would certainly agree with Jack Lindsay, the eminent ancient historian and friend of Gordon Childe, who writes in his Foreword to Sally Green's book:

There is much that is new to me in Sally Green's account. I feel that I would have understood Childe better if I had known what she tells of his childhood and boyhood. The man as he developed emerges clearly from her narrative. . . .¹⁴

The detailed account of how Childe changed from active politics in Australia and London to a full-time career in archaeology is certainly little known to archaeologists and helps to set in perspective the nature of Childe's first works, the *Dawn*, the *Danube*, and the *Aryans*. Green describes first his unhappy childhood and then his growing tendency towards the Left, especially after he went to Oxford to take a second degree during the First World War and came into contact with R. Palme Dutt and other adamant Socialists. He returned to Australia hoping to secure a job teaching Classics and Ancient Philology, which had been the disciplines in which he had taken his degree, but had constant difficulties because of, according to Green, the prejudice against his Leftist politics and status as a Conscientious Objector during the War. She traces in great detail how Childe then turned to po-

10. B. Trigger, "Major concepts of Archaeology in Historical Perspective," *Man* 3 (1968) 527; B. Trigger, *Time and Traditions: Essays in Archaeological Interpretation* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh 1978); B. Trigger, "Aims in Prehistoric Archaeology," *Antiquity* 44 (1970) 26-37.

11. Trigger: Childe 11.

12. Green: Childe 130.

13. V. G. Childe, "Letter to W. F. Grimes, 1957," quoted in G. Daniel "Editorial," *Antiquity* 54 (1980) 2-3.

14. Lindsay in Green: Childe ix.

litics and obtained a job working for the Labour Party of Australia and wrote his first book *How Labour Governs* on the basis of his experience working in politics and his disillusionment with Australian Parliamentary party politics. The Labour Party formed a government in New South Wales and Gordon Childe was chosen to be the "personal agent" of the Premier of New South Wales, John Storey, in London. Storey, however, died in 1921 when Childe was en route to London to take up his position. Thus he arrived in London with a job that had ceased to exist. What Green stresses is that at this point, although he had no job, he did not want to leave London and return to Australia. Moreover, "Childe was still hoping to continue his career in politics, though the study of past societies continued to fascinate him and occupy much of his time."¹⁵

Until 1925, Childe found part-time jobs, mostly connected with politics. During this time he spent a good deal of time reading and traveling throughout Europe to visit museums and archaeological sites. Finally in 1925 he obtained a full-time job as a professional archaeologist, as librarian of the Royal Anthropological Institute in London. With the publication of the *Dawn* and the *Aryans* and the establishment of his reputation as a synthesizer, he was offered in 1927 the position of the first Abercromby Chair of Prehistoric Archaeology at the University of Edinburgh. It was at this point that he finally became committed to a professional career in archaeology.

The value of Green's personal biography of Childe can be grasped in this summary of her detailed description of this period in his life, a highly significant "turning-point". It is especially clear when compared with Trigger's superficial treatment of the same "turning-point".

When Storey died in 1921 Childe found himself without a job and was unable to secure a university post, apparently because of his political activities. After a further brief spell of government employment, he again found himself out of work and in London. His thoughts now turned to a career in archaeology.¹⁶

Trigger thus sees, apart from certain discrepancies in timing, Childe's activities from 1921 as a deliberate cultivation of a career in archaeology. Green, on the other hand, sees Childe's vocation from 1921 to 1925 as more ambiguous.

His Communist friend R. Palme Dutt later explained Childe's choice:

15. Green: Childe 41.

16. Trigger: Childe 34.

. . . he wrote to me that he would have chosen revolutionary politics but he found the price too high, and that he preferred what he termed the bios apolausticos (flesh-pots) of professional status.¹⁷

Although Childe no doubt was not entirely serious when he said this, this quotation from R. Palme Dutt nevertheless reflects an important characteristic that sets Childe apart from most other archaeologists, in that he was a highly political person; he was aware of the world about him, felt strongly about political issues, and, throughout his career, incorporated these feelings into his choice of what he wrote and where he published it. For Gordon Childe, archaeology and prehistory were not an ivory tower into which one escaped from the cares, dirt, and unpleasantness of the current world. He published his interpretational works on the social and cultural evolution of Europe and the Near East, such as *What Happened in History*, with publishing houses where they would have a wide distribution, not to popularize them in a debasing way, but because he genuinely believed that it was his social responsibility to do so in order to disseminate knowledge.¹⁸ There is no doubt that this attitude of political awareness, which sets him apart in archaeology, also sets apart the nature of his interpretations and his theory of history. It certainly set him apart philosophically and psychologically from his colleagues in archaeology.

Bruce Trigger's biography keeps to a minimum the personal details of Childe's life but, when read in conjunction with Green's biography, its dry, intellectual text is brought to life so that together they provide a vivid picture of V. Gordon Childe, the mind and the man. Trigger's book is explicitly *not* a personal biography, but focusses on the development of Childe's thought over his entire career:

. . . not on Childe's interpretations of specific archaeological data, but on the ideas that shaped these interpretations.¹⁹

Following Childe's own idea of cultural evolution, Trigger traces the evolution of Childe's thought in a multi-linear fashion. Thus the book is arranged roughly chronologically, starting with the *Dawn* and ending with *The Prehistory of European Society*. At the same time, however, Trigger recognizes that there were a number of trends that continued and evolved throughout Childe's archaeological career from his prewar and wartime tenure of the Abercromby Chair at the University of Edin-

17. R. Palme Dutt quoted in Green: Childe 57.

18. Green: Childe 98.

19. Trigger: Childe 12.

burgh to his postwar tenure of the Directorship and Chair of Prehistoric Archaeology at the Institute of Archaeology in London. These trends are expressed as a series of themes which each form the subject of a chapter. The chapter on "Prehistoric Economics" (Ch.IV) encompasses Childe's publications in the late '20s and early '30s—the *Danube in Prehistory*, *The Most Ancient East*, *The Bronze Age*. The chapter on "Scottish Archaeology" (Ch.V) discusses Childe's excursions into field archaeology while he was the Abercromby Professor (1928–46). The chapter on "Human Progress and Decline" (Ch.VI) focusses on the important phase of Childe's life in the '30s and early '40s when he was writing his historical materialist works on the rise and fall of civilization in Europe and the Near East: *Man Makes Himself*, *New Light on the Most Ancient East*, *What Happened in History*, and *Progress and Archaeology*. The chapter on "Archaeology and Scientific History" focusses on Childe's earliest years at the Institute of Archaeology immediately after the Second World War, and his theoretical contribution to the theory of history: *History*. Chapter VIII on "The Prehistory of Science" chronologically overlaps both Chapters VI and VII, but focusses on an article entitled "The Sociology of Knowledge" and *Society and Knowledge*. The final thematic chapter in Trigger's book (Ch.IX) is entitled "Societal Archaeology" and deals especially with Childe's post-war publications on the evolution of society in Europe and the Near East: *Social Evolution*, *Scotland before the Scots*, *Prehistoric Migrations in Europe*, and the *Prehistory of European Society*.

Included with the text is a delightful selection of photographs, which are largely irrelevant to Trigger's book, but which might have been included very appropriately in Green's book, which, apart from the dustcover, has no illustrations.

The Method and Theory of V. Gordon Childe by Barbara McNairn has no pretensions of being a biography. It is a long essay, arranged thematically, which aims at redressing the lack of attention given to Childe's interpretational, theoretical, and philosophical works.²⁰ There are five themes around which these works are discussed after an initial chapter discussing his syntheses of the prehistoric data from Europe and the Near East. The themes, each of which is discussed in a separate chapter, are "The Concept of Culture", "The Functional-Economic Interpretation of the Three Ages", "Historical Theory", "The Philosophical Background", and "Childe and Marxism".

Although there is a good deal of overlap between the themes that are discussed by McNairn and those dis-

cussed by Trigger, the completely non-chronological treatment of Childe's works by McNairn means that there is very little correlation between the contents of the different chapters of Trigger's book and those of McNairn's. From this point of view, there is little sense of repetition when reading the two books.

McNairn's book relies heavily on long quotations from Childe's works, which, surprisingly, do not detract from the continuity of the text. They are especially useful when cited from his more obscure journal articles and books. Even the most ardent Childe-fan has probably not read more than half of his 22 books or 225 articles,²¹ so that it is valuable to have some of his original texts available.

In addition, McNairn's book is characterized by detailed discussions of the historical background to the general themes covered by Childe's works, and how concepts such as "culture", "economics", and so on were used at the time when Childe was writing. This is especially valuable and somewhat missed in the two more strictly biographical treatments. Thus, for example, McNairn's discussion of dialectics and historical materialism is the only such discussion in these three monographs on Childe. Trigger, in fact, explicitly avoids any discussion of this subject.²² As we shall see, however, an understanding of this subject is an essential prerequisite to grasping Childe's view of history and the world.

There are certain themes in Childe's works, most of which have been mentioned in the above summaries of the three monographs, which provide the foundation for understanding the relevance of Gordon Childe for current archaeological research.

First among these, introduced into recent archaeological literature by Colin Renfrew,²³ is Childe's use of diffusion as a model to explicate, if not to explain, change and variation, which formed the foundation concept for his syntheses of European and Near Eastern archaeological data, such as the six editions of the *Dawn* and the *Danube in Prehistory*. All three authors discuss at length Childe's part in the controversy as to whether European civilization grew up as a result of diffusion of innovations from the Near East (the Orientalist "school" based on the syntheses of Montelius) or from the west and north of Europe (the Occidental "school" inspired by the works of Gustaf Kossinna).²⁴ In this controversy Childe

20. McNairn: Childe 3.

21. A complete bibliography of Childe's works, including those written since Isobel Smith's original compilation (Smith, "Bibliography of the publications of Professor V. Gordon Childe," *ProcPS* 21 [1955] 295–304) is published as Appendix II of Green: Childe.

22. Trigger: Childe 7.

23. Renfrew, op. cit. (in note 3).

24. McNairn: Childe 30–45; Trigger: Childe 44–49; Green: Childe 53.

was the master of compromise. Recognizing in varying degrees during his career the creativity of Europe, he abhorred the abuse of the Occidental model by Kossina and Hitler in supporting the idea of Aryan racial supremacy, and in general assumed that most inventions and cultural stimuli in Europe originated in the Near East.

Two points should be emphasised here. The first one, which is brought out in all three monographs and has been discussed at length by Colin Renfrew, is that the Orientalist diffusionary model was an essential assumption if “. . . prehistoric Europe was to be dated at all . . .”.²⁵

Until the discovery of radiocarbon dating . . . there was really only one reliable way of dating events in European prehistory after the end of the last glaciation . . . This was by the early records of the great civilizations, which extended in some cases as far back as 3000 B.C.²⁶

The model of diffusion and its corollary, the zoning of Europe into concentric areas with increasingly retarded rates of the adoption of innovations radiating out from the Near East, allowed the construction of a chronological framework for Europe based on absolute dates and producing the so-called “short chronology” of European prehistory.²⁷ This chronological framework was nevertheless constructed on highly unstable foundations, a fact that Childe was well aware of.²⁸

The second point is that the controversy between the Occidentalists and the Orientalists, which tends to dominate Childe’s early “technical” works such as the *Dawn*, the *Danube*, *The Aryans*, and, to a certain extent, *The Bronze Age*, is very different from a controversy that later played a much more significant role in his reconstruction of European prehistory—that is, the controversy over the relative role of external agents (by diffusion) and internal agents in promoting cultural change.²⁹

This latter controversy represents essentially a conflict between, on the one hand, Childe’s use of a traditional model of change that had been developed in European archaeology from the 19th century and earlier and which must have been an integral part of his university training and, on the other hand, an explanation of change provided by Marxist dialectical models of historical materialism, which he acquired from non-archaeological

sources. The controversy between the Occidentalists and the Orientalists, on the other hand, as Trigger points out,³⁰ was one that raged between the proponents of different sources of stimulus for change; but both of these “schools” maintained that the mechanism of change was diffusion.

One of the philosophical foundations of Childe’s world view, and one which is not inconsistent with either his diffusionary model of *ex Oriente lux* or his Marxist model of historical materialism, is an underlying acceptance of the concept of progress.³¹ Both Trigger and McNairn draw attention to the fact that the concept of progress pervades Childe’s work throughout his career and that this puts him well within the tradition of the Enlightenment, Victorian evolutionists, and Marxists.³² For McNairn, however,

The concept of “progress” as of “decline” is not a scientific but a metaphysical concept. . . . from a scientific point of view nothing is added or subtracted by calling a particular trend progressive or retrogressive.³³

She thus stresses that a faith in scientific knowledge rather than in the concept of “progress” provided a more significant philosophical background to Childe’s intellectual works and his life.³⁴ Trigger links Childe’s treatment of “progress” at different times in his career with his changing pessimism or optimism for the current and future world situation, and thereby implicitly accepts Childe’s concept of “progress” as a metaphysical one. I feel that, in this respect, both Trigger and McNairn have missed an important point of Childe’s philosophy. That is, at least by the early 1930s, Childe was drawing on historical materialism as a general model of change and the principle of dialectics to explain change; accordingly, his concept of “progress” is not metaphysical; it is a scientific concept based on rigorous validation by the observation of real phenomena. In the historical materialist model of change, developed by Marx and Marxists, the scientific concept of “progress” is embodied in the principles of dialectics, among which are the constancy of change, the accumulation of innovations, and the antagonism between progressive and conservative elements as a source of energy for change; but the principles of dialectics maintains that change is always *pro-*

25. Renfrew, op. cit. (in note 3) 32.

26. Ibid. 27.

27. Trigger: Childe 120; McNairn: Childe 31; Green: Childe 91.

28. Trigger: Childe 165.

29. Trigger: Childe 76, 96; McNairn: Childe 27, 106.

30. Trigger: Childe 55.

31. Ibid. 54.

32. Ibid.; McNairn: Childe 106.

33. McNairn: Childe 108.

34. Ibid. 134.

gressive (that is, going towards a new quality), never regressive (returning to a former quality).³⁵

Thus Childe, as a practitioner of historical materialism, knew that optimism is no more a realistic attitude than pessimism. Neither is relevant to his concept of “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.³⁶

The following year, Childe elaborated on this role of the historian.

It is unscientific to ask “Have we progressed?”. . . . But it may be legitimate to ask, “What is progress?” and here the answer may take on something of the numerical form that science so rightly prizes. But now progress becomes what has actually happened—the content of history. The business of the historian would be to bring about the essential and significant in the long and complex series of events with which he is confronted.³⁷

These statements do not make sense if taken from the point of view of the traditional metaphysical concept of “progress” with its connotations of working towards an ideal state of “good” or “civilization”. McNairn’s reaction to the above passage from Childe shows a sense of confusion with it.

. . . what Childe ended up with was not so much an objective definition of progress but rather a concept of progress stripped of all its connotations of advancement or improvement. It is thus interesting that he was unable to abandon the concept entirely.³⁸

Childe’s concept of “progress” was stripped not of its “connotations of advancement or improvement”, but of its metaphysical nature, and embodies a historical materialist model of change. He could never have abandoned the concept of “progress” entirely or even partially, since it clearly played an integral role in his basic philosophy of the evolution of society. In fact in

his volume *History* Childe expressed the hope that history and archaeology would help create a “science of progress”.

Childe’s interest in the history of knowledge and science represents essentially an extension of his basic philosophical concept of “progress” as the primary intellectual force behind his works and life. It does not represent *the* moving force as suggested by McNairn³⁹, nor is it merely a separate theme in his investigations, as suggested by Trigger.⁴⁰ Childe was concerned with the problem of how to measure “progress” in the archaeological and historical record. He forcefully rejected cultural relativism in suggesting that there are certain trends and features in human society that are more progressive on an absolute scale.⁴¹ These trends revolve around knowledge, especially scientific knowledge and consciousness.

He (Childe) suggested that progress may be objectively defined as what is cumulative in the archaeological record To arrive at this conclusion, however, he had to equate progress with scientific knowledge⁴²

“Knowledge”, wrote Childe, “must be communicable and in that sense public and also useful”.⁴³ Any other knowledge for him was “false”. Thus “true knowledge” is “an ideal reproduction of the world serviceable for co-operative action thereon”.⁴⁴ It follows that:

There can be only one test of truth as thus defined, only one criterion by which to decide whether a conceptual reproduction does in fact correspond to the external world. That is action.⁴⁵

The role of a “Science of Progress” was to use archaeological and historical data to reconstruct the complex path by which “true knowledge” had accumulated through the progressive ups and downs of social transformation in the millennia of human existence.⁴⁶

Childe’s explication and explanation of the mechanisms by which human society progressed uses the meth-

35. Sidney Pollard, *The Idea of Progress* (Penguin: London 1971) 126–136.

36. V. G. Childe, “Changing Methods and Aims in Prehistory: Presidential Address for 1935,” *ProcPS* 1 (1935) 1–15.

37. V. G. Childe, *Man Makes Himself* (Watts and Co.: London 1936) 4.

38. McNairn: Childe 108.

39. Ibid. ch. 5.

40. Trigger: Childe ch. 8.

41. Ibid. 140; McNairn: Childe 107.

42. Trigger: Childe 117–118.

43. V. G. Childe, *Society and Knowledge* (Harper and Brothers: New York 1956) 4.

44. Ibid. 54.

45. Ibid. 107.

46. Ibid. 1; Trigger: Childe 130.

odology of scientific history, in particular that of historical materialism. Childe's historical method and theory are the subject of specific chapters in both Trigger's and McNairn's books,⁴⁷ and focus on Childe's treatise on this topic—*History*.

A general observation should be made in connection with Childe's historical methodology. First of all, it is probably fair to say that most archaeologists, let alone historians, are not familiar with Childe's treatise *History* and his numerous articles on historical methodology and the nature of causality. As a result of this ignorance and lack of familiarity with these and other theoretical and interpretational works, Childe has been vastly underestimated as an archaeological and historical theoretician, especially in North America, where theoretical discussions of the kind that Childe most enjoyed to write have dominated archaeology in the last 20 years. There are three main points in which this underestimation and misunderstanding of Childe are especially clear.

The first is that, unlike many prehistoric archaeologists and historians, Childe insisted that it was not logical to make a dichotomy between history and prehistory,⁴⁸ and likewise between science and history or prehistory.⁴⁹ Childe saw history as a scientific discipline, especially when combined with archaeology, which dealt with cultures as the main unit of analysis rather than individuals, and with trends rather than events. For Childe,

good history had to be based on explicit generalizations about human behaviour, but specific generalizations were not necessarily relevant outside of particular socio-economic contexts. Because it attempted to specify these contexts and to relate them to one another, scientific history became the keystone of the social sciences. . . . Childe saw historical disciplines as being scientific in that they sought to explain events not simply in terms of common sense, but as individual, and perhaps unique conjectures of general and familiar processes and patterns.⁵⁰

Whether one looks at Childe's last works or those from early on in his career, his statements on history and causality have a remarkable relevance for current archaeological thought. In his last message to the archaeological world he wrote:

A prehistorian, like any other historian, should aim not only to describe, but also to explain; historical description should be at the same time explanatory. But the historian has to

explain the individual and possibly unique event. Uniformities of behavior just will not do.⁵¹

And in 1936 he wrote for wider distribution:

It is an old-fashioned sort of history that is made up entirely of kings and battles to the exclusion of scientific discoveries and social conditions. And so it would be an old-fashioned prehistory that regarded it as its sole function to trace migrations and to locate the cradle of peoples. History has recently become much less political. . . . and more cultural. That is the true meaning of what is miscalled the materialist conception of history. . . .—it puts in the foreground changes in economic organization and scientific discoveries.⁵²

Neither Trigger nor McNairn mentions that what Childe was expressing in his statements on historical methodology was fully in line with the New Historians, who from the late 1920s included not only Historical Materialists, but also others such as historians of the "Annalists School" in Paris, e.g., Marc Bloc and Fernand Braudel.

Childe has been virtually ignored by the American New Archaeologists because of his adherence to a historical framework; he is thus declared particularistic and irrelevant to the search for general laws of human behavior. It is clear, however, that the history, or rather prehistory, that Childe practiced was very different from "history" as understood by the New Archaeologists, and anything but "particularistic".⁵³

This brings me to the second point about Childe's historical methodology: the nature of causality. First of all, Childe's view of causality was obviously very different from that of the traditional prehistorians who comprised his intellectual ancestors and colleagues. If there were any patterns or explanatory laws at all in their interpretation of the archaeological data, these comprised such concepts as unilinear progress towards civilization, or cyclical laws of the rise and fall of civilizations, but in general there is no explicit statement as to general paradigm, and one must assume that the law of free will (or God's will) dominated their reconstructions.

On the other hand, as both Trigger and McNairn have rightly pointed out, the nature of causality, as conceived by Childe, differs from that of the majority of social scientists in Europe and America, among whom may be

47. Trigger: Childe ch. 7; McNairn: Childe ch. 4.

48. Trigger: Childe 110, 14.

49. Ibid. 128.

50. Ibid. 134.

51. V. G. Childe, "Valediction," *Bulletin of the London Institute of Archaeology* I (1958) 6.

52. Childe, op. cit. (in note 36) 9–10.

53. I. Walker, "Binford, Science and History," in R. Schuyler, ed., *Historical Archaeology* (Bayward Publ. Co.: Farmingdale, N.Y. 1978) 223–239.

numbered the American New Archaeologists.⁵⁴ In his summary of Childe's conception of the nature of causality, Trigger writes:

. . . as a Marxist Childe believed that human nature was not static, but that it tended to change as society itself was transformed. Thus, by the time he published *History* in 1947, he had ceased to believe in the existence of transcendental laws that governed human behavior any time and anywhere. He adhered to an overall approach to the study of cultural change that was grounded in materialism and a dialectical mode of analysis. Hence he continued to believe in certain general laws of history such as the primacy of social relations of production, the periodic development of conflicts between the forces and relations of production and revolutions that adjusted these relations. On the other hand he regarded most explanations of human behavior as being valid only for societies that shared a particular mode of production, and thus were at the same stage of development. For example, he considered that the laws of traditional political economy that had been designed to explain industrial societies could not be used to explain behaviour in other types of societies, or even major processes of related historical transformation. Historians must utilize a broader range of laws to explain such changes.⁵⁵

This is in contrast to the aim of the more conventional social scientists, including the American New Archaeologists, who assume (in varying degrees) that human nature is fixed, and that the aim is to find universally valid laws of human behaviour, transcending the details of historical and socio-economic context.⁵⁶ These statements make nonsense of the conclusion to which some archaeologists have come: that there was a conflict between Childe the humanist-historian and Childe the socialist-Marxist-historical materialist, or between Childe the particularist and Childe the generalist.⁵⁷ There was no conflict!

This discussion of Childe's concept of the nature of causality leads on to the third point about his historical methodology, that is, his concept of the nature and explanation of change. This is closely connected to the issue that dominates, if only in the background, the three monographs about Childe and is an issue that certainly surrounded the work of Gordon Childe while he was alive—"the great puzzle of Childe at all times was to what extent he was a Marxist".⁵⁸ Put a little more within the framework of what has been said above, this question

might be rephrased: "To what extent was the historical method and theory of Gordon Childe based on the principles of historical materialism?"

The sequence of Childe's reading and his introduction to the theory of dialectical and historical materialism is not at all well known, nor is it discussed in his biographies. It would be fascinating to know, for example, whether he had read Plekhanov or Pokrovski on historical materialism before he wrote *The Most Ancient East* or *The Bronze Age*. Both of these would seem to be experiments on his part with historical materialism, and both are written just before the earliest deliberate application of historical materialism to archaeological data in the Soviet Union.⁵⁹ It is possible that he had done little formal reading on the topic of historical materialism, but had begun to pick up its main principles from reading *Das Kapital*, from his conversations with Marxist historians, and from his experiences with politics and political history. There is no doubt in my mind, however, that by the late 1930s he had been reading extensively on the theory of historical materialism and that its principles were deeply embedded in his works. Childe's historical materialism, however, has the drawback that it is not at all explicit, especially in those works such as *Man Makes Himself*, in which it is applied to the archaeological data. This lack of self-consciousness of methodology tends to lead to inconsistencies in its application by Childe and certainly led to an underestimation of his use of historical materialism by his colleagues in archaeology. In *Retrospect*, it seems likely that Childe had been aware of these shortcomings and did not consider that he had really applied the principles of historical materialism until his works during the Second World War.

McNairn correctly points out that

During Childe's lifetime British archaeologists on the whole were largely unacquainted with the principles of Marxism (*historical materialism*—*R.E.T.*), seeing it primarily as political dogma rather than a historical model. Even today it is often represented as a crude mechanistic materialism.⁶⁰

The implicit or explicit correlations between Marxist principles and political dogma lead most archaeologists who discuss Childe, including the authors of these three monographs, to spend an inordinate amount of space discussing Childe's connection with Soviet archaeologists and comparing Childe's historical materialism to the application of historical materialism in the Soviet

54. Trigger: Childe 131, 176; McNairn: Childe 73.

55. Trigger: Childe 131.

56. Ibid. 177.

57. Rouse, op. cit. (in note 2).

58. G. Daniel, "Editorial," *Antiquity* 32 (1958) 66.

59. M. Miller, *Archaeology in the U.S.S.R.* (Atlantic Press: London 1956) 80.

60. McNairn: Childe 161.

Union.⁶¹ In my opinion, most of the statements made about Childe and the Soviet Union are essentially a red herring. There is little evidence to show that the main stimulus for the development of Childe's use of historical materialism in the late 1930s came from the Soviet Union, or that the historical materialism practiced by archaeologists there provided any kind of model for Childe's.

The historical materialism practiced since 1930 by Soviet archaeologists is itself varied, depending on the theoretical knowledge and synthesizing skill of the researcher. Not a single Soviet archaeologist, however, has ever attempted to write an interpretational synthesis that equalled the scope and skill of Gordon Childe's masterpieces. The explanation for this, and the use of historical materialism in Soviet archaeology is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this article. Saville, quoted in McNairn, notes that a similar situation exists in Soviet historical studies.⁶²

It should, however, be remembered that, until very recently, Gordon Childe was the only archaeologist who had ever attempted to write an interpretational synthesis of European and Near Eastern prehistory using the principles of historical materialism. In many ways, the lack of popularity of historical materialism in archaeological research is amazing in light of the materialism inherent in the study of archaeological data (which Childe himself noted),⁶³ and the logical acceptability of the principles of dialectics. Its lack of popularity must be explained by ignorance, and by its association, on the one hand, with unilinear schemes of human social evolution⁶⁴ which became fossilized in the hands of its adherents, and, on the other hand, with non- (even anti-) establishment politics in West Europe and America.

To understand Childe's historical materialism, it is more constructive to do as McNairn has done and go back to its basic principles as expounded by various philosophers and historians starting with Marx: dialectics, materialism, historical transformations.

In both McNairn's long discussion and Trigger's short notes on Marxist theory and historical materialism and Childe's use of it, it is clear that they are at a disadvantage, compared to Childe himself, in not having used these principles in their own archaeological research.⁶⁵

Trigger, in fact, states explicitly that

A lack of knowledge of eastern European languages, and of the intricacies of the history of Marxist philosophy, precludes an in-depth study of the relationship of Childe's ideas to Soviet archaeology and Marxism.⁶⁶

Both authors quote heavily from the works of Ravetz and Gathercole, who have made detailed studies of Childe's Marxism.⁶⁷

In discussing Childe's historical materialism, there are two main aspects. The first is the nature and explanation of change which, in historical materialist terms, means a discussion of the principles of dialectics and the internal contradictions between the different components of the social system. The second concerns the nature of the components themselves, the mode of production, social organization (sociology) and ideology, and the interplay between them.

It has been suggested⁶⁸ that Childe did not make use of the principles of dialectics in his historical materialism, even though he accepted the other main characteristic of historical materialism: the priority of the mode of production as "an explanation for the form taken by the sociology and ideology."⁶⁹ McNairn in fact goes so far as to say that "Childe did not philosophise on the problem of change in any depth."⁷⁰

The principles of dialectics and dialectical materialism are summarized by McNairn⁷¹ and may briefly be recapitulated here. They propose that every material phenomenon, which may as easily be social relation as technical product, contains within itself opposite trends of progression and conservation; between these trends there is, on the one hand, a dynamic unity and on the other hand, constant antagonism. This antagonism produces the energy that activates a transformation of the phenomenon from its old form or quality to its new form or quality. Thus each phenomenon contains within itself the seeds of the destruction of its old quality and, at the same time, the birth of its new quality. This process of transformation comprises a phase of constant but gradual changes, alternating with rapid transformational leaps into the new quality (revolution): nothing is fixed or static. The changes are *progressive*; there is no retrogression; moreover the progress is cumulative.

61. G. Daniel, "A Defence of Prehistory," *The Cambridge Journal* 3 (1949) 131-147; idem, op. cit. (in note 58) 65-68; J. G. D. Clark, "Prehistory since Childe," *Bulletin of the London Institute of Archaeology* 13 (1976) 1-21.

62. J. Saville, *Marxism in History* (Hull 1974) 5.

63. Childe, op. cit. (in note 51) 8.

64. E.g., F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884).

65. McNairn: Childe ch. 6; Trigger: Childe ch. 6.

66. Trigger: Childe 7.

67. Ravetz, op. cit. (in note 2); Gathercole, op. cit. (in note 8).

68. McNairn: Childe 134, 158.

69. Ibid. 150.

70. Ibid. 134.

71. Ibid. 152.

Thus the essentials of dialectics include constant change, the antagonism within and between components being resolved by their transformation into a new quality which is nevertheless based on the old, and the progressive and cumulative nature of change. There is no doubt from the discussion earlier in this article about Childe's philosophy of progress and from his interpretations of prehistory as seen, for example, in *Man Makes Himself* and *What Happened in History* that Childe thought of the process of social and cultural evolution as a dialectical one. In these volumes, for example, his model of ideology as turning from a progressive and positive motivation for the creation of urban centers into a conservative element that held back the means of production or diverted it into unproductive redistribution indicates clearly a deliberate attempt to put prehistoric reconstruction into a framework of dialectical change. In looking at the many other instances of this kind in his interpretational works it is clear that this was no random adoption of a dialectical model but the utilization of this model as a general theory of change. The main problem, as Trigger and McNairn point out, is that he was not explicit about his utilization of a dialectical model of change.

There is, however, one series of works in which he is, in fact, explicit about the nature and explanation of the process of change: the monograph and articles on the concept of "progress" described earlier in this article. I concluded earlier that Childe's concept of "progress" was expressing in fact the same process of dialectical change conceived of by historical materialists, which was very different from the metaphysical nature of "progress" as traditionally conceived by non-Marxists. It is possible that Childe, in constantly stressing the role of "progress" in his interpretational and theoretical works, was attempting to express the principles of historical materialism in terms that would be familiar and acceptable to his West European audience while avoiding the jargon of dialectical materialism.

It has been stressed in all three monographs under discussion and in much of the other literature about Childe that he must have experienced a conflict between his model of internal social and cultural change following the principles of historical materialism and his model of diffusion or external stimuli as the main agent of culture change. Both McNairn and Trigger, however, point out, as did Childe, that the internal transformation of culture according to historical materialist principles or according to any other model of cultural evolution does not exclude the diffusion of innovations nor its importance in culture change.⁷² According to a historical materialist model, material phenomena which enter a social system from

outside are subject to the same dialectical processes as those within the society. Thus innovations that are diffused to a society from somewhere else must be considered within the context of the process of the resolution of contradictions within and between the various components of that society; they cannot be separated from the internally evolving processes. Thus as both Gordon Childe and Colin Renfrew have pointed out, diffusion does not explain change,⁷³ it is a mechanism by which the material relations of one society come into contact with those of another. No society exists in a vacuum, and a historical materialist model denies, just as a systems model does, the existence of closed systems and the completely internal evolution of a society.

Childe is much more explicit concerning his adoption of the main analytical components of historical materialism—the priority of the mode of production of material life in transforming society and, within the "mode of production", the role of the social relations of production to constrain (or, as Childe puts it, to determine but not cause) the form of transformations in the means of production.⁷⁴ His adoption of these components is clear, if not explicit, as early as the writing of *The Most Ancient East* and *The Bronze Age*. It is implied, however, in his view of "economics"; Childe defined "economics" in a much wider sense than most of his European archaeological colleagues to include not only the strategies of getting food and producing surpluses, but also the social relations within and between societies by which resources were procured, produced, and redistributed. Both Trigger and McNairn point out that Childe's interest in economics was never directed towards the "ecological" or "geographical school" which was established in the late 1920s and 1930s as a significant trend in British archaeology.⁷⁵ Unlike the archaeologists of this "school", Childe did not consider that the concept of "adaptation to the environment" was useful unless the "environment" included among its significant elements the "social environment".⁷⁶ Childe's sentiment is summed up magnificently in his reaction, quoted by Clark himself, to the book *Prehistoric Europe—the Economic Basis* by Grahame Clark, a leading developer of the "ecological" and "bioarchaeological" approach:

Yes, Grahame, but what have you done about Society?⁷⁷

73. Renfrew, op. cit. (in note 3) 121; Childe, *Social Evolution* 167.

74. V. G. Childe, "Prehistory and Marxism," *Antiquity* 53 (1979) 93–95.

75. Trigger: Childe 171; McNairn: Childe 162.

76. Trigger: Childe 172; McNairn: Childe 73.

77. Gordon Childe quoted in J. G. D. Clark, "Prehistoric Europe:

72. Ibid. 131; Trigger: Childe 102; Childe, op. cit. (in note 51) 154.

It is important to note that Childe's first experiments with the historical materialist approach are in his early interpretational works dealing with change within the early urban societies of the Near East, in which he was able to supplement the archaeological data with information from ancient written sources. It is in these volumes that he developed his model of social and cultural change in which he did not have to invoke an outside stimulus as the principal factor of change.⁷⁸

Childe gained his reputation for his cultural-chronological framework and syntheses of European prehistory, and he thought of himself as a European archaeologist. His models for change in European prehistory are, however, (with a few exceptions) uninspiring and frustratingly simplistic compared to the sophistication of his models for Near Eastern prehistory and protohistory. There is no doubt that he was helped in developing these latter models by the work of historians using the ancient records, which gave him a direct route to a rich store of ideas to explain change.⁷⁹ In interpreting the European prehistoric data his creativity in model-building was restricted by the absence of any such written records, and by Childe's limited knowledge of the range of possible behavior patterns among small-scale (pre-class) societies. This was, as Trigger points out, because of his lack of familiarity with the ethnographic literature.⁸⁰

By the 1950s, Childe himself was clearly becoming increasingly depressed and pessimistic about the validity of his interpretational models of culture change.⁸¹ His strategy of research was a combination of induction and deduction,⁸² but the deductive process of validating his models with the appropriate archaeological data may fairly be regarded as the weakest part of his research, and must have been the source of much of his frustration with the data.

Childe made relatively few explicit statements about his method of organizing the data and drawing conclusions from them. This, in the tradition of European archaeological literature of his times, was not at all unusual, in contrast to the highly self-conscious literature of methodology of the American New Archaeology. It is the explicit nature of his statements on theory that is unusual for Childe's times. One can gather from reading his

works, however, that Childe went very little beyond the traditional repertoire of data classification available to him in European archaeology. Trigger makes some attempt to reconstruct Childe's use of the primary data, for example his typological classification.⁸³ It is surprising, therefore, that his discussion of the one major contribution that Childe made to archaeological methodology, *Piecing Together the Past*, is quite minimal compared to that of Green and McNairn.⁸⁴ Childe himself was aware of these shortcomings in his manipulation of the archaeological data, his tools for the validation of his models. He warned, for example, against drawing conclusions of similarity on the basis of casual resemblances, and mentioned the limitations in the use of the type-fossil and the need for quantification.⁸⁵

The one innovative contribution that Childe made to the method of the manipulation of archaeological data is in his use of the concept of "culture" and in his classification of the archaeological data into spatio-chronological units at the level of the archaeological culture. Both McNairn and Trigger give a relatively full discussion of the significance of Childe's use of the concept of "culture".⁸⁶ They describe how, during his archaeological career, Childe's concept changed from one which, following Kossinna, equated "culture" with "a people" who had the same language and possibly even the same physical structure⁸⁷ to one which is much more complex and embodies the idea that "culture" is an "archaeological social unit".⁸⁸

At certain points in his career, Childe was optimistic as to the power of archaeological data to answer the kind of questions in which he was interested.

Under suitable conditions we can learn a great deal about the mode of production as well as the means of production. The role of secondary and primary industry and of trade can be estimated from observed facts. The extent of the division of labour and the distribution of the product can be inferred with some confidence. Plausible guesses can be made as to the existence of slaves, the status of women, and the inheritance of property. Even the ideological superstructure can be made the subject of cautious hypotheses.⁸⁹

The Economic Basis," in G. Willey, ed., *Archaeological Researches in Retrospect* (Winthrop Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts 1974) 55.

78. Trigger: Childe 62; McNairn: Childe 157.

79. Trigger: Childe 110.

80. Ibid. 75.

81. Ibid. 165.

82. Ibid. 181.

83. Ibid. 136, 145.

84. Ibid. 164; McNairn: Childe 64-73; Green: Childe 136-138.

85. Trigger: Childe 163.

86. Trigger: Childe 40-44; McNairn: Childe ch. 2; Green: Childe 136.

87. Childe, *The Danube in Prehistory* v-vi.

88. McNairn: Childe 64; Childe, op. cit. (in note 72) 40; Childe, *Piecing together the Past* 38.

89. Childe, op. cit. (in note 72) 34.

But this confidence never took the form of design of research to investigate these questions; it was no more than wishful thinking, which is reflected in Trigger's statement:

His unrivalled knowledge of this (*European and Near Eastern archaeological—R.E.T.*) material facilitated his culture-historical syntheses, but did not provide a wholly satisfactory basis for his economic studies. Even less did it suffice to allow him to study prehistoric social organization, scientific knowledge and ideology. His desultory examinations of settlement pattern data were clearly designed to remedy this deficiency, but they did not produce methodological breakthroughs.⁹⁰

Childe's realization of the reality of the situation is clear by the end of his life.

My whole account may prove to be erroneous; my formulae may be inadequate; my interpretations are perhaps ill-founded; my chronological framework. . . . is frankly shaky."⁹¹

Many of these shortcomings are mentioned by Childe in *Valediction*, his message for future archaeologists, including the need for systematic retrieval of data in the field with interdisciplinary teams. This kind of work had rarely been present in the analytical repertoire of archaeology during Childe's lifetime. Moreover, he had been less interested than most archaeologists in developing techniques of retrieval and analysis of the data. Trigger sums up the situation at the end of Childe's life as follows.

This book (*The Prehistory of European Society—R.E.T.*) revealed that the typological skills on which most of Childe's archaeological analysis had been based did not provide an adequate foundation for coping with the problems of knowledge and society that were now central to his interests. He was past the stage when a major reorientation of his methods of analysis could be expected. Hence, while *The Prehistory of European Society* was a milestone pointing towards some important future developments in archaeology, it also marked the limits beyond which its author was unable to progress.⁹²

A dialectical predicament indeed!

First and foremost, Gordon Childe was a dreamer, a story-teller, a model-builder. From this point of view, Trigger is right to point to his lack of ethnographic

knowledge as a serious drawback.⁹³ It should be emphasized, however, that this lack restricted Childe in his formulation of models about pre-class societies. It is incorrect for Trigger to assume that a greater familiarity with the ethnographic literature would have helped in the testing and validation of any of Childe's theories.

After building his models, Gordon Childe was not prepared to swing back to the data and verify them, nor unfortunately were any of his colleagues and students. In subsequent years, his models that involve diffusion of innovations into Europe, the Neolithic Revolution and the Urban Revolution have been partially tested, as mentioned above. Very little, however, has been done to verify or refute his models of social change in Europe. With the renewed interest in social and economic change amongst European archaeologists, this situation is beginning to change.

Childe's death coincided with some great revolutions in the history of archaeology—the general application of carbon-14 dating, the American New Archaeology with its explicit emphasis on the rigorous formulation and testing of hypotheses, the retrieval of data on the early stages of plant and animal domestication in the Old and New Worlds, the retrieval of data documenting the evolution of urban centers, and finally the widespread growth of interest in models of social and economic evolution, including historical materialist models of social transformations.

Trigger has said that it would have required a major and impossible reorientation of Childe's thinking and energies to meet the challenge of these events. Possibly this is true. It is nevertheless a sad fact that, after reading the monographs by Green, Trigger, and McNairn, one is left with the impression that Gordon Childe, as an archaeologist, was born too early for his times. When Childe wrote his interpretational reconstructions of social and cultural evolution in the Old World, they made a great impact with the public at large and those interested in general history; they received little serious discussion, however, among his archaeological colleagues. These same interpretations which were regarded at the time they were written as popularizations of more serious and less speculative archaeological facts are now at the center of discourse on the evolution of society. Had he lived, even if he were not able to reorient himself, he certainly would have enjoyed participating in the milieu of open dialogue on grand theory and methodology which currently pervades the discipline of archaeology on both sides of the Atlantic.

Moreover, I would agree with Trigger that Childe's interpretational models of social and cultural evolution

90. Trigger: Childe 163.

91. Childe, op. cit. (in note 51) 74.

92. Trigger: Childe 167.

93. Ibid. 100.

have an important role to play on the American side of the Atlantic.

. . . today American archaeology, in spite of its remarkable accomplishments during the past two decades, is threatened by a new form of irrelevance. “. . . In Durkheimian terms, the unity of the New Archaeology is mechanical not organic”. . . . This has come about as a result of archaeologists seeking to study in detail isolated aspects of the archaeological record, either as an exercise in technical or theoretical virtuosity, or in order to establish general “laws” concerning fragments of human behaviour. These disparate studies threaten archaeology with intellectual as well as social inconsequence.⁹⁴

Thus in this powerful statement Trigger is condemning the American New Archaeologists for being anti-historical. He suggests that they should follow Childe’s example by investigating problems, such as the development of social organization,

not by analysing isolated fragments of archaeological data, but by trying to understand historical sequences of development in terms of their social, economic, political and ecological implications.⁹⁵

In other words, he suggests that regularities and patterns of human behavior have to be recognized and explained in the context of the process of their historical change through time if they are to have any relevance for our society and the accumulation of knowledge.

The main theoretical issues that Childe wrote about are “now more critical to the future of archaeology than they were when he first raised them”. They remained dormant, ignored, and virtually unknown by the majority of archaeologists not only during the two decades after his death, but even during his lifetime. He had no research students at the University of Edinburgh, and none of those at the Institute of Archaeology took on the burden of Childe’s theoretical models nor his stature of synthesis; no one followed up or tested his interpretations; the only challenges came to his diffusionary model. For the American New Archaeologists he has had no relevance. Now finally in Europe and, to a very small extent, in America, with the rising popularity of structural-Marxist models in archaeology on the one hand, and of “social archaeology” on the other, Childe’s theoretical and interpretational models are being tested, challenged, and developed.⁹⁶

94. Ibid. 183.

95. Ibid. 183–184.

96. Renfrew, op. cit. (in note 3); A. C. Renfrew, *Social Archaeology* (The University: Southampton 1973); J. Friedman & M. Rowlands,

Many of these works suffer from the same shortcomings as those of Childe himself—that is, their theoretical modelling runs ahead of their ability to design research to test the models. It is in this latter aspect that the American New Archaeology with its emphasis on the rigorous testing of hypotheses through middle-range analysis is particularly well equipped.⁹⁷ One can work towards an ideal combination, in which Childe’s kind of historical modelling will bring relevance to the American New Archaeology, and the scientific rigor of the American New Archaeology will bring greater credibility to the speculative theoretical models of socio-economic evolution.

The three volumes that have been reviewed here have each in their own way contributed to lifting Gordon Childe and his archaeological works out of the obscurity of an august but little studied (and even misunderstood) ancestor to a position of current relevance for the “science of progress”. It is fitting that the re-popularization of his works is likely to coincide with a theoretical-methodological revolution in archaeology.

Gordon Childe had modest desires for his immortality:

Society is immortal, but its members are born and die. Hence any idea accepted by Society and objectified is likewise immortal. In creating ideas that are accepted, any mortal member of Society attains immortality—yes, though his name be forgotten as his bodily form dissolve. Personally I desire no more.⁹⁸

Out of a certain sadness about him as a man and a mind, the contradiction resolves itself into a new quality and another new archaeology.⁹⁹

eds., *The Evolution of Social Systems* (Duckworth: London 1978); I. Hodder, “Theoretical archaeology: a reactionary view,” in I. Hodder, ed., *Symbolic and Structural Archaeology* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1982) 1–16; M. Spriggs, ed., *Archaeology and Anthropology. BAR* 19 (1977).

97. L. Binford, ed., *For Theory-Building in Archaeology* (Academic Press: New York 1977).

98. Childe, op. cit. (in note 43) 130.

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