

V. Gordon Childe, “The Urban Revolution”

As LeGates and Stout note, V. Gordon Childe (1892-1957) is “arguably the single most influential archaeologist of the twentieth century.” He devoted much of his career to understanding the relations between urbanization and social change in Mesopotamia (present day Iraq). One of his most important contributions to archaeological theory was to challenge the old nineteenth-century view of ancient human history -- stone age/bronze age/iron age, which were typically labeled ‘savagery,’ ‘barbarism,’ and ‘civilization’ -- with a more rigorous historiography of cultural development. Childe theorized four main eras -- paleolithic, neolithic, urban, and industrial -- divided by transformative “revolutions” in production and social relations. “Paleolithic” comes from the Greek *palaios*, ‘ancient,’ and *lithos*, stone, and denotes humans’ first development of durable, shaped tools; the neolithic or new stone age involved more advanced stone tools as well as weaving, the first domestication of animals, the use of the wheel, and the cultivation of crops. The urban revolution is the new concentration of population enabled by the production of an agricultural surplus that Childe documented in the fertile river valley between the Tigris and the Euphrates in Mesopotamia, beginning about 3,500 BCE. The industrial revolution, beginning in the late eighteenth century, involved the mobilization of large sources of energy (water power, coal, other fossil fuels) to power large-scale machinery for production and transportation.

“The Urban Revolution” is a short essay written in a British town planning journal that develops ten criteria for distinguishing the first cities; the essay synthesized Childe’s thinking about the similarities and contrasts in urban development in Mesopotamia (especially the Sumerian empire) compared with Egypt, the Indus Valley, and the Maya of the Yucatan peninsula. For Childe, urbanization was not simply about density or numbers of people; the city is “the resultant and symbol of a ‘revolution’ that initiated a new economic stage in the evolution of society.”

Questions

1. Childe’s four-stage history of civilization leaves a huge time interval between the first urban revolution (3,500 BCE) and the industrial revolution (the late 1700s). Do you think we might be at another revolution of the scale and scope of the four transformative moments identified by Childe? If so, how would Childe help us make sense of changes in urban civilization today?
2. Agriculture -- the changing technologies of food production that allow society to produce a reliable surplus over immediate needs -- is central to Childe’s analysis of the rise of cities and urban civilization. Cities could only emerge in those places where soil fertility and climatic conditions were sufficiently productive, with some human intervention (e.g., irrigation). What does it mean for urban civilization and agriculture today that advanced transportation technologies and an industrialized food system allow cities to be fed through far-flung networks across nations and continents?
3. One of Childe’s ten criteria for identifying early cities is architectural: “Truly monumental public buildings not only distinguish each known city from any village but also symbolize the concentration of the social surplus.” What does it mean that many of these monumental buildings from the first urban revolutions (e.g., the Egyptian pyramids) are today tourist

attractions for visitors from around the world? What are today's "monumental public buildings" that "symbolize the concentration of the social surplus"?

4. Childe quotes an ancient Egyptian scribe who wrote about an elite ruling class "exempt from all manual tasks," and then (strangely, for a Marxist) adds: "On the other hand, the lower classes were not only guaranteed peace and security, but were relieved from intellectual tasks which many find more irksome than any physical labour." In any city you've experienced, what is the most vivid encounter you've witnessed between someone who seemed "exempt from all manual tasks" and a "lower class" person engaged in physical labor?

5. "Writing is ... a significant, as well as a convenient, mark of civilization." Discuss.

6. "There could be no room for sceptics or sectaries in the oldest cities." What does Childe mean by this? (Read the full paragraph on p. 38; "sectaries" means nonconformists).

7. Childe concludes by reminding us that later "urban revolutions" in places beyond the very first cities "did not start from scratch," and he emphasizes the importance of both economic and "cultural capital." "Even today," Childe wrote to British readers, "we use the Egyptians' calendar and the Sumerians' divisions of the day and the hour. Our European ancestors did not have to invent for themselves these divisions of time nor repeat the observations on which they are based; they took over -- and very slightly improved -- systems elaborated 5,000 years ago!" What does the history of this kind of "cultural capital" tell us about the relations between the past and the present -- especially if we may very well be seeing today a "new economic stage in the evolution of society"?