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Week 3

Diffusion from East to West and Back Again

When looking at the oldest and the most recent papers from this week's reading, one would expect to see a great divergence in methodology, interpretation and final product. From V. Gordon Childe in 1958 to Benjamin W. Roberts in 2009, however, even with significant advances in archaeological theory, methodology (particularly radiocarbon dating), and ideas about cultural interaction and technological change, both authors seem to be speaking with the same mind, but different intentions. Both are trying to trace the evolution and geographic spread of metals and metallurgical technology through Europe, but the primary point of divergence lies in the question of why. In this brief response I argue that the Orientalist discourse lies at the heart of Childe's approach to his history of prehistoric Europe whereas Roberts, although trying to reapproach Childe's material without the biases of Orientalism and technological evolution, falls into the same traps, and ultimately the same conclusions.

Like many other fields of study within archaeology, technology and production studies had the hands of V. Gordon Childe acting in the formative period of their approach and application. In his book *The Prehistory of European Society*, Childe tracks societal evolution through diffusion from the Orient to the West during the period of European prehistory. Grounded in the cultural historical framework of the time in which he is writing, Childe sees the only means of passing on

technological innovations as diffusion from one society to another through the actual movement of peoples and more specifically, craftsmen. For Childe, evolution of societies from a 'civilized' to a 'barbarian' state is solely dependent on the level of technology employed. Terms such as Neolithic and Bronze Age are not solely chronological periods, they are stages in societal development. In order for new technologies to be able to move into a new cultural group, that cultural group needs to build up enough surplus and wealth to support specialized craftspeople. Cultural groups then advance from one technological stage to the other by the actual immigration of craftsmen from more advanced regions who bring along their superior knowledge in particular technologies, and for Childe, metal production is the most important marker of technological achievement. The combination of the increase in societal wealth and the importation of new technology allow the cultural group to move into a new stage of evolution.

Childe's choice of technology as an evaluative factor is not arbitrary. He is writing in a period and about a particular subject matter which the Orientalist discourse was busy using to characterize the Orient as the "other", and both technology and history play a major role within the narrative. Orientalism is not just the dichotomy between the East and the West, it involves the active creation and subjugation of "the other" through an intellectual power discourse originating from the West. Technological superiority, and how that technological superiority was achieved in the West, is a primary component of Orientalism and the main goal of Childe's work. Childe is not solely attempting to lay out, in an unbiased fashion, the prehistory of European society, he is trying to actively explain what created

European society and what made it distinctly different from the Orient. Childe made this task especially difficult on himself by discovering earlier that some of the crucial turning points in human history, the Neolithic and Urban Revolutions as he put them, were actually located within the Orient. In order for him to make these developments the possessions of the West, he needed to derive a historical and archaeological explanation for how these became stagnated and distorted in the East, but continued to develop in the West. Childe achieved this by isolating an important factor in both revolutions, technology and craft production and specialization, and following it as it diffused from the Near East, into the Aegean and finally into Temperate Europe. In each instance, the actual method of transmission was the same, the primary difference, however, is in the political structure of the culture receiving the new technology. In the case of the Orient, technological development stagnated because of the “economic domination by these totalitarian purchasers”.¹ As Wailes noted, scientific knowledge in the Orient made little progress and inquiry was instead directed toward astrology, magic and the supernatural², all stereotypical traits assigned to the Oriental. In the West, both the Aegean and Temperate Europe, were able to adopt technological change without letting it corrupt the Urban Revolution to the point of creating an extreme concentration of wealth. A middle class even developed, as Childe believed from the contents of private tombs in Crete and Greece, to the point that he concluded “the Mycenaean society may be called already European”.³ Both technology and society

¹ Childe 1958, 160

² Wailes 1996, 8

³ Childe 1958, 161

were given the freedom to innovate and develop. Wailes notes this strong dichotomy within Childe's work as well, but he fails to see this as one of the central governing aims. This is not to say that I believe Childe actively set out to create such a justification for this view of the Orient, but that he was so steeped in the Orientalism of the day that it made Childe's project, determining what it meant to be a European society, a worthwhile venture.

In contrast to Childe and over fifty-one years after his great work, Benjamin W. Roberts chose to engage the same topic, how metallurgical technology entered Western Europe, but Roberts strove to do so while avoiding many of the assumptions which Childe made. One of the major inherent pitfalls was the latent Orientalism, although not blatantly stated by Roberts. Roberts sought to look at the early evidence for metallurgy not as a sign of societal development, but for the sole purpose of understanding how technology was transferred in general. By being both outside of the cultural historical framework and having access to radiocarbon dating techniques, Roberts was posed to make significant contributions to this study, which had not been examined since Colin Renfrew argued for independent discovery of metallurgy in Iberia. Even without this baggage, however, Roberts still falls into the same diffusionist conclusions as an explanation of technological transfer and continues to view technological understanding as a complete packet composed of every step necessary to create an object, from raw material to end result. In the end, Roberts still believes that people informed in every aspect of the chain operation must move to a new group for that group to be able to engage in any part in the process. Even though he states that the processes were much more

likely to be smaller in scale than Childe's model, the technological transfer explained is only typical of large-scale production. In the end of the article, Roberts even acknowledges that metal recycling could be occurring as well, but he fails to see this as a possible way into learning parts of a new technology. Even after over fifty-one years of technological theory, for Roberts, the only changes that needed to be in Childe's approach were his emphasis on metallurgy alone and his connection of technology with social change. The learning processes of technology, however, remain the same.