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# Interview of Neil Faulkner

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Neil Faulkner is a Marxist archaeologist specialized in ancient Rome and author of “The Decline & Fall of Roman Britain” and “Rome: Empire of the Eagles, 753 BC -- Ad 476”. He teaches at Kings College, Cambridge, and is part of the editorial board of the “Current Archaeology” journal. (<http://www.archaeology.co.uk/>)

Faulkner took part in the “Marxism” conferences in July 2008 in London where he gave talks about his works «Gordon Childe, GEM de Sainte Croix & the making of the ancient Greek world » (available recordings at <http://www.resistancemp3.org.uk/>)

This interview, in the frame of these conferences, concerns questions such as the relevance of Gordon Childe’s theories today, the relationship between Marxism and archaeology, and the importance of politics in the academic world.

**In general terms, what has Gordon Childe brought to our world and historical understanding? What points are relevant today?**

In my opinion, when looking at Childe’s career, we can observe that



there is a series of contributions he made successively. Firstly, he organised the data for prehistory across Europe, and created a comprehensive map of the different cultures for the first time. In that sense created the raw material, which he needed to then go on and elaborate more sophisticated theories in later stages of his career. The second major development, is the way in which he took the map of cultures, which is both a geographical and a chronological map, to build a general picture of the way in which human societies developed progressively, and gradually improved in terms of their knowledge of technique and their understanding

of how to make nature yield the basis of human wellbeing. That is why he talks about these series of stages through which he sees human social development moving. That in fact, is part of his culture history which is the starting point of his synthesising thought, to build this picture in series of stages of social development. Crucial to it, and highly relevant today, is his idea of diffusion. Childe's position on diffusion is moderate, he rejects on one hand the idea that everything comes from a single source. (This idea turns out to be reactionary: the ideas that we need « super races » that are going to teach everybody else how the world should develop). On the other hand, he equally rejects the negation of diffusionism. (The idea that every society develops independently and goes through these stages of social development under its own momentum. It is an idea that has fascist and racist implications, which is particularly true during the interwar period. For example, the German nazis argued that the Aryans were the people who had independently built European civilisation and therefore Aryan racial purity was something to aspire to in the present). Childe takes a middle position on diffusionism and argues that human societies are intrinsically creative, but simultaneously interacting and drawing ideas from each other, that there is a constant cross fertilisation of ideas. It is not the case that the east is always ahead and teaching others how to do things: at one point, the

east was ahead, but then stagnates under a powerful ruling class. For example, the ideas about bronze working technology diffused into Europe, and because Europe was freer, it became much more innovative on the metalworking techniques. Therefore, we have this constant cross-fertilisation of societies, which have their own resources for social development. Moderate diffusionism is therefore a very powerful idea in the world today, because what Childe has done by looking at the prehistoric record, is that he destroyed the idea that there are only a few centres of social development or that societies prosper in isolation from others, and presented us with a vision of human progress which is about the linkages between societies.

**This is linked to the concept of accumulation of knowledge, in what aspects is this process so important?**

That is the last stage of the development of Childe's thought; it is the idea of progressive social evolution. Because Childe is increasingly aware that while there is progress, progress is not even and smooth. There isn't in other words a dynamic that means societies become steadily better able to innovate, to raise productivity of labour, and to increase the resource bases available to them. In fact, it is going up and down, going fast in one place, stagnating in another, and can even go backwards sometimes; it's a

very uneven process. Moreover, he explains it largely in terms of the reactionary effect on social development of powerful ruling classes accumulating large proportions of social surplus, and using this social surplus in wasteful ways: building huge tombs for dead leaders, wasting huge quantities of material culture by burying them in tombs, by building armies, engaging in wars, building empires etc. In all sorts of different ways, resources are being accumulated and wasted. Childe sees that as a fundamental contradiction with progressive social development. At the last stage of his life and career, he is increasingly preoccupied with the question of progress, in my opinion he's reacting to fascism, to the Second World War and to the development of the atomic bomb, and so on. He is looking at the crisis of bourgeois civilisation of his own period. And he asks himself is progress inevitable? If it isn't, what is it that makes progress happen? As opposed to what holds it back. He is very preoccupied with trying to establish that progress can happen, and identifying what it is which is necessary to make it happen. His work becomes polemical about the way which ruling classes accumulate large quantities of surplus become barriers to progress. He sees that in prehistory, and antiquity. I think he is drawing his understanding of the past heavily on his perception of the present and the way ruling classes are wasting away resources in the present.

**Gordon Childe does not take into account the class struggle in his theories. Is this aspect relevant in an analysis of historical change? Can this notion be used in an archaeologist's approach?**

There are two parts to this question, a simple part that is to say: a central weakness of Childe is that he does not place the class struggle at the centre of his understanding of the historical process. The problem with his theories is that the motors of history are missing. He has this « sense » of development but he is not actually providing us with an understanding or an explanation of what it is which powers the change, the development, that makes history happen. That is because the class struggle is missing, and even to a certain extent class relations are missing altogether, he isn't even particularly talking about class, even in a static sense. He does not establish the way classes relate to each other within a social structure, let alone the way their collisions gives way to historical change. That is what Childe was criticised for by other Marxists. I would argue that Childe was not a Marxist at all, because the class system is so absent of his theories although Marxism heavily influenced him and he definitely thought himself as one. It seems to me the class struggle is fundamental in the approach to understanding the world from a Marxist perspective. For example, he was criticised by Christopher Hill, a great historian of the English revolu-

tion, for not discussing class relations in class struggle. That is straightforward and arguable.

Now, the hardest to see is to what degree, as archaeologists, we can recognise class relations. We can at least recognise the existence of class relations, because we can see the social differences more often than not, reflected in the layout of settlements, the size of houses, the quality of grave goods and all of those obvious elements. What is much more difficult to do as archaeologists, in my opinion, is to see how these classes relate to each other directly, particularly how these classes engage in struggle, and how the struggle gives rise to economic, cultural, and social changes that can be reflected in the archaeological record. We can see changes, but those changes are usually open to multiple interpretations. We cannot necessarily prove that when we see a culture change we can attribute it to class struggle unless we have independent historical sources, which would give us that contextual information. Personally, I do not know to what degree we can progress towards a strictly Marxist archaeology as opposed to a Marxist archaeology informed by history. A Marxist archaeology where we just observe, recognise and analyse past struggles and give life to the changes we can see in the archaeological record is a genuine question to me. It is in fact reflected in the Rome book I have just written. It is almost entirely

driven by historical sources, because what I wanted to do was to show how there was a dynamic of competitive military accumulation. It is essentially the underlying dynamic of roman imperialism. Rather than seeing it as a dynamic rooted in the slave mode of production, (which I do not find useful or convincing as a paradigm). I wanted it to demonstrate that Rome was powered by this dynamic of competitive military imperialism. How do you do that? By using historical sources. All my data is drawn from the historical sources, because you cannot really draw directly from archaeology that kind of understanding. In this case, not the struggles that are taking place inside the roman poverty so much as the struggle taking place between the roman ruling class and other ruling classes from whom the Romans are seeking to take surplus and accumulate. There is a challenge for Marxist archaeologists in how to recognise from material the class struggle.

**From what you are saying, it is difficult to combine the methodology of both history and archaeology in a more general approach of history. Part of the problem is the fact that most historians do not take into account the material data when they validate their theories, and on the other hand, archaeologists tend to stick to the analysis of material culture without linking it to written history. How could we combine both approaches?**



To me, the answer to this is that it has to be done theoretically, in that we have to develop explanatory paradigms that can accommodate the historical evidence, which generates certain classes of data. History generates data about politics and political competition, and about military activity and military competition, and at an elite level, about political structures and ideological beliefs and so on, so there is a whole category of data that is being generated by historical sources. And there is another category of data that is being generated by archaeology, where there is much more information about technique, settlement patterns, the exploitation of the land, cult activity... All those things that are well represented by surviving material culture. Only to a limited degree do the historical and archaeological sources overlap. What one needs is the development of overarching theories that enable us to accommodate within a holistic perspective what both sources of data are bringing to light. The part where the archaeological and the historical data conform to the paradigm we are actually developing. Marxism potentially is an immensely rich explanatory paradigm because it can create these overarching holistic perspectives that can then embrace both archaeological and historical data within a single framework of understanding. I cannot see much else today that can do that with the same explanatory pan.

**About the talk, according to you what is the centre of the slave mode of production in the ancient world?**

I believe there are two problems: an empirical problem, and a theoretical problem. The empirical problem is that slavery is only a dominant source of surplus for limited periods in limited places in the ancient world. The obvious "local" for slave production (both chronologically and geographically) is Italy and Sicily in the second and first centuries B.c. and into the first A.d. In that period it is true to say that in parts of the Italian and Sicilian countryside up to a half of the population may have been slaves. This is why the three great slave revolts of antiquity we that we know about occur in Sicily and southern Italy at this time. Now, that's quite a limited period of time, and limited geographically, if you look at the whole of ancient history what you have to say, I think, is that the bulk of the surplus being accumulated by the ruling class is probably not coming from people who are technically, legally, slaves, its coming from a combination of slaves, surfs, tenant farmers, wage labourers, bondsmen... In other words, the actual status or position of the producer varies greatly both over time and from one region of the Roman Empire to another. So you have an empirical problem, and it is very interesting that if you look at what Marx, and in particular Engel say, they assumed that slaves were a much higher proportion

of the population than we now believe to be the case when they hypothesised the slave mode of production. The second problem is a theoretical one; it does not seem clear at all, how, from the idea that the producers are enslaved, you get a particular mode of production with specific characteristics and a dynamic that propels it through history. I do not think that from the fact of people being slaves and people being exploited as slaves you can extrapolate an entire mode of production in the way Marx builds a comprehensive picture of capitalism as a system. So you have a theoretical problem that does not really explain very much and an empirical problem that does not really fit what we now know about the evidence. I think it makes much more sense and gives us a much more powerful paradigm if we say the legal status, the juridical status of the labourer is a secondary matter, and that the ruling class is sometimes exploiting slaves, sometimes surfs, sometimes bondsmen, sometimes tenant farmers, sometimes even freehold peasants who own their own plots and who are being taxed, or required to do labour services and so on. Nevertheless, all of this is a process of extracting surplus from agricultural production using force and coercion, because you physically have to take the surplus from those who are producing it, and I just do not see it as fundamental whether or not people are slaves.

**What is your answer to the affirmation that the main workforce of the industries of the towns of ancient Greece was slaves?**

Concerning Greece, most of the evidence of course is from Athens. Athens is an exceptional state because it is an imperial state and controls half the classical Greek world in the fifth century b.c. and to my opinion, slavery was probably a bigger proportion of surplus production in Athens than what was perhaps true of other Greek states. Even in the case of Athens, although you can identify areas where there are significant numbers of slaves. For example working in the silver mines at Laurion, where it is predominantly a slave workforce, you can also say that we know that there were slaves in workshops in Athens itself, and you can say that it's quite likely, though there's not much certainty about this, that a significant number of slaves were working on the larger estates of the aristocracy, it may even be the case, that quite often a richer peasant might have owned a slave or two. What you cannot demonstrate, even in imperial Athens with access to a large number of slaves relative to other Greek states, is that the entire mode of operation and the entire character of the society and the state is shaped by slavery. A concrete example: one of the arguments that are sometimes put is that the existence of the democracy in Athens hinges on the fact there is slave labour produ-

cing the bulk of the surplus, which creates the surplus that can sustain the relative amounts of leisure, the generation of cultural resources etc. The problem with that argument is that the people who principally owned and benefited from slaves are the upper classes, who are bitterly hostile to democracy. In fact the strongest supporters of democracy were the poorest citizens, who, in most cases probably did not own any slaves at all. It seems to me the whole inputs for Greek democracy is coming from a population of citizens who in their majority are in fact workers, in the sense they're working farmers and have no choice but to be actively involved in the productive process. The class struggle that takes place between upper class landowners and the mass of middle and small landowners is fundamental to the development of the Athenian state. To the fact that there are a significant number of slaves in Athens is not part of a basic significance in understanding how the Athenian state develops.

**By which factor do you think we can understand the growth of the Athenian democratic society if not by slavery?**

The main factor is the drawing of tribute from societies dominated by the Athenians in the Aegean. Where probably even less than in Athens, is the surplus being generated by slaves. It is an imperial tribute that is coming predominantly, I believe, from the

work of free peasant farmers. It cannot be proven because one does not have that kind of empirical base but in my opinion it is the answer to this question.

**You wrote about Gordon Childe and the relation there is between him as an archaeologist and his political ideas linked to the communist party. What effect does his political commitment have on his archaeological theories?**

First of all, Childe is radicalised and becomes a man of the left and remains a man of the left because of what happens between 1917, when he becomes involved in the anti war movement at Oxford and 1922. In that period, he is an anti war and a labour movement activist. In addition, his politics, I would define as centrist, by which I mean that he is not a full-blown revolutionary, but he is somebody who is a socialist in the sense that he wants to see a socialist transformation in society, and he is moving towards revolutionary conclusions about how to put it into place. He is a centrist in that sense, and that makes him what he remains for the rest of his life in terms of his political allegiance to the left and the working class.

The second thing, is that Childe never understood the degeneration of the Russian revolution and therefore regarded Stalinism as it developed during the 1920's, and as it was clearly formulated in the 1930's through the



1950's up to the time of his death as the direct application of Marxism. He never understood that there was a decisive theoretical, ideological political break between the revolution, which had been defeated, and the development of the state bureaucracy, state capitalism, and an ideology that matched that. Like many people on the left, he did not understand it at the time. In the 1930's and onwards, Childe begins to draw on the Marxist tradition to develop an understanding of prehistory, the tradition he's drawing on is a Stalinist tradition, which is mechanical, deterministic and dominated by the idea that there's a kind inevitable progression; an inevitable sequence of stages through which society moves, combining in socialism. It includes the idea that diffusion is relatively unimportant, that each society can develop independently. Therefore, the class struggle is largely removed from the analysis because what is happening in Russia is that socialism is being handed down by dictate and state bureaucracy; it has nothing to do with the class struggle and the self-activity of workers any more. Therefore, the class struggle no longer is relevant in the understanding of how the ancient world and prehistory worked. What he is drawing on is a completely desiccated, mechanical kind of distortion of Marxism. It results in all sorts of contradictions, which Childe is increasingly aware of and, I believe that towards the end of his life he was re-reading Marx and was increasingly suspicious

and critical of the received wisdom the interpretations of Marxism that were coming out of Russia. That was not reflected in a clear break, to me it would have to do with his deep political allegiance of the left: not wanting to side with the enemy against the Soviet Union. In my opinion, he held back on his growing criticism and doubts because of the sense he had that if he were to join in on the attacks on Stalinism he would be reinforcing the right. However, he was increasingly coming into conflict with Stalinist received wisdom. I think that there is a "humanism" about the way in which Childe's Marxism is developing near the end. It is similar to the ideas which underlie in the development of the new left and the development of what in Britain is the communist party historians group, where you get a tradition of Marxist history emerging from the decay of Stalinism as an ideological tradition, in which there is a strong reaction against the determinism of the Stalinist tradition, and an emphasis on human beings as creators of their own history, based on self activity and so on. It is a very important element of Childe's way of talking about prehistory at the end of his life, with an emphasis on the creativity and the innovativeness of the workers, the producers of the system.

**Do you think left wing and socialist archaeologists should involve their political ideas with their investigation and academic works?**

This question in itself creates a false dichotomy, its suggesting that on one side there's history and archaeology and academic endeavour and on the other politics, Marxism and political theory. Its false in the sense that Marxism is the theory and practice of international working class revolution, it is intrinsic to it that its about trying to change the world and seeing the working class as the basis of that and the self activity of the working class as the key to the process of change. If you are a Marxist academic, I think you draw this key observation from that broad generalisation. This is how I put it: up until the emergence of an industrial working class in the 19th century, there is no universal class in history by which I mean a class that potentially transcends all national, religious, and ethnic boundaries and contains within itself the possibility of general social transformation. All class struggles up until the emergence of an industrial working class are limited, even when they are revolts from below. The slaves who fought under Spartacus did not offer the prospect of universal human emancipation because they were not part of an international working class, just as the peasant wars in Germany in the 16th century. Only when you have a working class that by its very nature is engaged in collective global production do you have the possibility of universal emancipation and rising out of the activity of this class. That is why Marxism is a product of the 19th century

not of the 16th century or the 1st century B.C. It also means academically that Marxism for the first time offers a theory of society and of history which is genuinely a science of human history in the sense that it isn't tied to the interests of any particular classes but to the interests of a universal class which because it's a universal class has an interest in the understanding of the whole of history in order to get hold of it and transform it. Therefore, in terms of the development of thought, Marxism is unique in the history of thought: in having this potential of understanding the world and history as a whole from the perspective of a universal class. Therefore, if you are committed to cause of the working class and the working class revolution you are inevitably equipped with a method of understanding history, which is much more powerful than that available to bourgeois thinkers. Its bound to affect the way in which you approach the understanding of archaeological and historical evidence, and I don't see how that could otherwise be the case. I do not see how you could be a Marxist and not want to apply that immensely powerful explanatory paradigm to understanding history and archaeology.

**Do you think the influence of Marxism is growing within the academic world? According to you, are more people interested in a Marxist understanding of the world than in the past?**

This is what I think is happening: I believe we are at a point where there is a paradigm shift happening in the universities, and in particular in history and archaeology. To me this is happening, not so much among the academics, who are in between thirties and sixties, they are formed, and to a large degree subscribe to a particular perspective, and very often it is a post-modernist and in archaeological terms post-processual perspective. To me this paradigm is disintegrating because it is unable to provide the hard analysis that is necessary to make sense of a world on fire, a world in crisis. Post-processualism and post-modernism is largely an ideological expression of inside the universities of neo liberalism outside. And post modernism will share the crisis of neo liberalism, in my opinion. At the moment, the shift is beginning to happen and is reflected among the student body, reflected among people in their early twenties, rather than at a higher level in the academic system. There now is a tension between a lot of students who are active in the movement, in the anti capitalist movement, active in the anti war protests and so on and who want hard analysis. There is therefore a contradiction between them, and their experience, and their demands and the sort of pap, the sort of nonsense that is being churned out by those who are in established academic positions. I have to say when you read some of it, its wall to wall the buzzwords of the post-modernist paradigm, discussion about people ne-

gotiating their identities, alternative discourses, multivocality and so on; these words are dreary, dull, depressing and lead absolutely nowhere because they don't actually connect with the fact people are locked into structures of exploitation, oppression, violence and they shape what people can and can't do. They create the choices; the opportunities that people have to make history. Unless you have theories of structure that understand that historical agency takes place in a framework of structures, you do not have any real purchase on understanding the present or the past. ■