What Happened in History

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A study of the rise and decline of cultural and moral values in The Old World up to the fall of the Roman Empire.

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Liam says

Although I think the title of this book is very memorable (just like the author's previous book, "Man Makes Himself"), it is perhaps misleading. The book is specifically a concise primer on the known history of state and pre-state societies leading up until roughly the begging of the new common era. That said, the title hints at the book's more ambitious moods, in which it abstracts general patterns of social and economic organization and a loose sense of "evolution" of such schemas. I personally was strongly reminded of Jared Diamond's picture of civilized progress in this regard. The first chapter begins by considering mankind as an animal which has "history" in the first place - above and before questions of the manner in which the technology of writing was developed (which is discussed in detail later) Childe first pursues an interesting line of thought which anticipates later cognitive science:

> *Faced with a banana midway up a tube, open at both ends but too long to reach up, a chimpanzee discovered how to push the banana with a stick from one end and then grab it from the other, without going through a number of futile movements, by sitting and "reasoning." The ape must have imagined the banana in various non-existent positions before it hit upon the trick. But it did not have to go very far from the concrete situation with which it was actually confronted. What is distinctive of human reasoning is that it can go imensely farther from the actual present situation than any other animal's reasoning ever seems to get it. In this distinctive advantage language has surely been a very great help. Reasoning and all that we call thinking, including the chimpanzee's, must involve mental operations with what psychologists call images. A visual image, a mental picture of say a banana is always liable to be a picture of a particular banana in a particular setting. A word on the contrary is, as explained, more general and abstract, having elimated just those accidental features that give individuality to any real banana.[...]Men can think, as well as talk, about the class of objects called "bananas," the chimpanzee never gets further than "that banana in that tube." In this way the social instrument termed language has contributed to what is grandiloquently described as "man's emancipation from bondage to the concrete."* p.13-4

And he applies this insight to the practical interpretation of history. He says that we should not handwave the immaterial thoughts that socieities of the past strongly believed in, and puts the "spiritual environment" as equal to the material environment:

> *Without going in for any metaphysical subtleties, socially approved and sustained ideas that inspire such action must be treated by history as just as real as those which stand for the more substantial objects of archaeological study. In practice ideas form as effective an element in the environment of any human society as do mountains, trees, animals, the weather and the rest of external nature. Societies, that is, behave as if they were reacting to a spiritual environment as well as to a material environment. To deal with this spiritual environment they behave as if they needed a spiritual equipment just as much as they need a material equipment of tools.* p.14-15

Nevertheless, Childe does not deny the profoundly economic base of societies and even chooses the phrase

"biological success" to describe the manifestation of economic activity into distinct periods of sudden surges of material well-being:

> *If the whole long process disclosed in the archaeological and literary records be surveryed, a single directional trend is most obvious in the economic sphere in the methods whereby the most progressive societies secure a livlihood. In this domain it will be possible to recognize radical and indeed revolutionary innovations, each followed by such increases in population that, were reliable statistic available, each would be reflected by a conspicuous kink in the population graph [...] [Lastly,] The sharp upward bend of the population graph in England between 1750 and 1800 not only testifies to the biological success of the new bourgeois capitalist economy, but also justifies applying the term industrial revolution to its first phases.* p.23-6

In the chapter "neolithic barbarism" Childe explains the hidden limitations that the pre-civilized self-sufficient tribes, whom he terms "argricultural nomads," in spite of their sustainability, suffered from. He uses an intriguing biological metaphor for these extinct ways of life:

> *When fully explored these [villages] have been found to cover areas from 1.5 to 6.5 acres. The community that lived at Skara Brae in Orkney comprised not more than eight households, in Central Europe and Southern Russia twenty-five to thirty-five households seem to have been a not uncommon number. Such spatial aggregates formed socail organisms whose members all co-operated for collective tasks. In the the western villages on Alpine moors the several houses are connected up by corduroy streets, at Skara Brae in Orkney by covered alleys. Such public ways must be communal and not individual works [...]*
>
> *There is no need to assume any industrial specialization within the village apart from a division of labour between the sexes [...] the women would till the plots, grind and cook the grain, spin, weave and manufacture clothes, build and bake the pots and prepare some ornaments and magic articles. Men on the other hand may have cleared the plots, built the huts, tended the live-stock, hunted and manufactured the needful tools and weapons. Moreover each village could be self-sufficing. It grew its own food and could make all essential equipment from materials locally available - stone, bone, wood, clay and so on. This potential self-sufficiency of the territorial community and the absence of specialisation within it may be taken as the differentiae of neolithic barbarism to distinguish it from civilization and the higher barbarisms of the Metal Ages. A Corollary therefrom is that a neolithic economy offers no material inducement to the peasant to produce more than he needs to support himself and his family and provide for the next harvest. If each household does that, the community can survive without a surplus. [...However] even in the earliest neolithic villages and graves archaeologists have found materials brought from long distances. Shells from the Mediterranean and from the Red Sea were strung on necklaces by the Fayumis.* p.59-60

Without schematizing the entirity of the ascent of man, Child does a good job of hinting at how a roughly egalitarian village can become, via the economic niche of plunder through war victories, a chiefdom with hereditable wealth:

> *In [a patriarchal] society personal property may extend from ornaments and clothes,*

> *implements and weapons, to flocks and herds - and slaves - capital goods which can increase. And now a man who has distinguished himself as a "war chief" (in matriarchal society often a temporary and elective office), has a chance of consolidating his authority on an economic basis by wealth in cattle or servants. As this wealth will pass onto his sons, so the authority it gives may become hereditary [...]*

or become a more complex economy with craft guilds (initially peopled by "part timers" who have other means of income):

> *...Among barbarians of [the copper age] on this sort of technical and economic development some of the fertility and other rituals that had been performed comunally by all clansmen in savagery are often found to have been monopolized by "secret societies," initiation into which must be purchased by feasts and presents. Within such a society there are generally grades; advancement up this ladder of rank is, like initiation, a sacramental rite, but it must be none the less purchased. The members of such a society normally remain fishers or hunters or herdsmen or farmers. If they became specialists and were exempted like craftsmen from these productive avocations, they would become professional priests. And if rank be hierarchical, the richest and highest will be very like kings. The archaeological material just described gives some hints that this sort of development had been going on in the Copper Age in Syria.* p.86-7

Childe describes with awe the great archetectural achievements of the ancient sumerians, and without denying that it is dubious how "voltunary" the labour that created these feats were, he is inclined to stand in awe of the ability for a society to feed and cloth its workers (who were completely removed from the production of bare necessities) through such prolonged and ambitious feats of construction. This was thanks to advances in social oranization and food production technology:

> *Before the end of the Uruk phase at Erech, the ruins of successive settlements had already formed a tell some sixty feet high. At the top one is no longer standing in a village green but in the square of a cathedral city. In the foreground lie the ruins of a gigantic temple measuring over all 245 feet by 100 feet dedicated to the goddess Inanna. Behind, attached to the temple of Anu rises an artificial mountain or ziggurat, thirty-five feet high. It is built of mud and sundried bricks, but its steeply sloping walls have been consolidated by hammering into the brickwork while still wet thousands of pottery goblets. A flight of steps leads up to the summit - a platform covered with asphalt. On it stands a minature temple measuring over all 73 feet by 57 feet 6ins., containing a long cult room with narrow chambers on either side and an altar or an idol at one end. The walls of white-washed brick and imported timbers ere embellished with niches and buttresses and pierced with cleerestory windows; the doors were framed with imported pinewood and closed with mats [...] The artizans, labourers and transport workers may have been "volunteers" inspired by religious enthusiasm. But if they were not paid for their labour, they must at least have been nourished while at work. [...] The fertility of the soil that enabled the farmer to produce far more than he could consume supplied this. But its expenditure on temples suggests what later records confirm, that "gods" concentrated it and made it available for distribution among their working servants. Perhaps these gods were projections of ancestral society and were regarded as the creators, and therefore the eniment owners, of the soil that society itself had reclaimed from deser and marsh by the collective laour of ancestral generations.*

> *[...] So the temple appears as a sort of divine household, an enormously enlarged version of the patriarchal household of barbarism. But in this household the several tasks which were performed collectively by the members of a neolithic household have been differentiated and divided between specialists, each of whom concentrates on performing one of the functions which in a neolithic economy would be only one item in the daily toil. So the several operations of the textile industry, all of which would habe neem completed by the barbarian housewife, have been allotted to three distinct groups of craftswomen. The specialists thus withdrawn from direct food production are nourished by the surplus produced by the god's tenants and concentrated in his granaries.* p.91-5

And later in Egypt, the great surpluses of the land, combined with functioning top-down social organization, allowed for the utter affrontery of great artictectural feats:

> *The union of Egypt had put an end to deadly feuds between villages; the Pharaohs' frontier policy protected the cultivator from the depredations of raiding nomads; public works had added to the arable land; the calender permitted rural operations to be rationally planned; the surplus grain stored in the royal granaries might provide relief in time of famine.*
>
> *On the other hand, these reserves had been collected by force. Their producers had little left for the purchase of industrial products. Save when directly employed by a king or a noble they could not afford metal tools, but made shift with a neolithic equipment of stone hoes and wooden ploughs and mattocks [...] They were liable to compulsory labour, digging canals, towing barges upstream, quarrying and transporting stone, building pyramids and the like. When thus removed from [the land they worked] they were presumably fed and clothed by the State or the noble employer - perhaps better than a free neolithic cultivator. In any case, in the Second Millennium King Set I records that he provided each of the thousand labourers employed on building his temple with "4lb bread, 2 bundles of vegetables and a roast of meat daily, and a clean linen garment twice a month"!* p.123

As civilization spread via colonies and the imitations of aspiring outsiders, dangers arose without even considering the threat of war. Not only of material shortages, but crucially of the loss of knowledge, and the altered consciousness of the civilized mind:

> *In Italy the conquering Etruscan landlords had supported, from their surplus luxury and armament industries, mining and reproductive engineering works. Their irrigation and draining channels show what could be done with iron tools towards the reclamation of stony land. But the Romans, when they had expelled their Etruscan overlords, the Tarquins, found themselves [to be] civilized farmers, blessed with money, morgages and debt-slavery, but with no outlet in an exporting industry. The dangers of their situation are revealed by the historian Livy who records famines in the years 490, 477, 456, 453, 440, 411 and 392 BC.* p.201

Towards the end of the book, I felt on more familiar ground with the the ancient greeks, but Childe's focus is on the emergence of the broadest categories of social organization, and his explanation of the emergence of democracy helped me to demystify the notion. What was novel was, says childe, is that the wealthy traders, after achieving political influence through the newly invented coin money, began to team up with the

ordinary free men (farmers, fishermen, artisans etc) against the landlord aristoracy for leverage. It was also possible to create an overwhelming military force, composed of merchant economic backing (liberated by the invention of coinage) and inexpensive iron-age weaponry.

> *Turned into cash, the proceeds of industry were no loess potent than rents from land, and the profits of trade appeared no less honorable than pirate's booty. First perhaps in Ionia, then in Peninsular Greece the new merchant class successfully challenged the prerogatives of the landed gentry. The qualifications for executive office, seats on the council and assembly votes were reckoned in money as well as, or instead of, in areas of land owned. Aristocracy gave place to oligarchy.*
>
> *In their struggles the middle-class often sought allies among the poor - small freeholders in debt, tenants and share-farmers, even landless artizans and labourers. The development of tactics appropriate to Iron Age armament had given even these military value. Victory no longer depended upon the prowess of chariotry (the preserve of the rich landowner) but on the valour of an infantry recruited from yeoman farmers. Moreover, at sea - and in Greece sea-power was decisive - even a labourer, too poor to afford body armour, could serve his city in the fleer at an oar. In fact he could claim with justice and some hope of success a vote in the election of magistrates and in the legislative assembly. The concession of such claims would transform the State into what the Greeks called democracy (rule by the people).*
>
> *[...]In Athens [...] after the expulsion of the local tyrants democracy was made completely effective. Industry was put on an equal footing with commerce and farming. The old clans were deprived of political influence. Property qualificiations for magistracies were abolished, and most offices were filled by lot instead of by election. Every citizen was expected to attend assemblies and to sit on juries. To make this effectively possible assemblymen and jurors as well as magistrates and councillors were paid, as we should say "for time lost." Democracy was not only politically coneded by also economically established.* p.207-8

This last line ought to give us pause, especially given how much as we like to handwave the ancient greeks for their non-universality of democracy.

Sugus says

Si bien a veces abruma con detalles que interesan a los arqueologos e historiadores solamente, realmente no se puede considerar como una falla. El libro esta bien estructurado, paseando por la totalidad de la prehistoria humana hasta la caída del imperio romano. Lo interesante es el uso de conceptos políticos modernos aplicados a tiempos antiguos. Es interesante como se pueden ver trazos de la lucha de clases (tan presente cuando el libro fue escrito) en los reinos de la mesopotámia, o el antiguo egipto. Sin embargo, es claro que hay una gran parte del libro, sobre todo la primera, cuyos fundamentos históricos son... imprecisos. Se basa mucho en la especulación, algo que imagino que no se puede evitar ya que se esta hablando sobre culturas y hechos de los cuales no hay ningún registro escrito.

Michael David says

There are many newer books that have a more comprehensive and exhaustive grasp on the evolution of history. As a panorama of history, however, this book still remains good, although a bit too banausic for my tastes.

Neama Mohamed says

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Raymond says

While I am sure there have been books written about the same basic subject that include recently attained or intuitive information, this is a great introductory survey of the rise of civilization and the birth of human culture. I recommend it highly.

I am not sure how many copies exist (need to check Amazon, etc.), but I imagine it might be a difficult find, especially in hard cover.

This is not a book I would lend out. I have experienced a long history of lending books and never getting them back.

Alper says

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Ayse Sen says

içinde sayfalar yanl?? bas?lm??t?. zaten kitab?n konusu a??r. çok faydal? olmas?n?n yay?nda ara?t?rmaya te?vik ediyor.