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Parallels and Contrasts of Morgan’s and Childe’s Theories for the Rise of State-Level Societies

There is a slew of theories for the rise of state-level societies that greatly contrast each other in every way. However, there are those that have their overlaps, such as the ideas of Lewis Henry Morgan and Gordon Childe. Like Morgan, Childe was a firm believer of barbarism preceding the state-level society. However, their beliefs differed in the causes of the transitioning of each level of civilization. Nonetheless, Morgan and Childe seem to be overall correct and thorough in explaining the rise of state-level societies.

Morgan’s general belief revolved around the three ethnical periods, a timeline of sorts consisting of savagery, barbarism, and civilization. His theories embodied the ideas of materialism, meaning that tools and inventions were the most important driving forces of advancement (Theories for the Rise of State-Level Societies Pt. I, Lecture). However, he argued that the rate of development was influenced by eight other ideas: subsistence, government, language, the family, religion, house life and architecture, and property (Morgan 4).

Childe’s theory considered many of the same ideas of Morgan, though he was a firm believer in the surplus of food leading to opportunities of specialization (Childe 7). While Morgan believed in technology and development, Childe believed that this specialization was the driving force for the evolution of society. Like Morgan had a list of traits that influenced the rate of development, Childe had a list of criteria backed up by archaeological evidence that distinguished any city from villages (and likewise, civilization from savagery or barbarism): increased size in territory and population density; specialization in areas other than food production; taxation for the purpose of concentrating surplus; monumental public buildings that symbolizes the wealth of the city through surplus; formation of a ruling class of intellects; evidence of the use of science and engineering; the invention of writing; artistic expression; foreign trade; and the ability for specialist craftsmen to live in the state organization through residence rather than kinship.

Throughout the first chapter in “Ancient Society,” Morgan provides some real-life evidence of these conditions, as well as ethnographic analogies – a snapshot of our ancestors in modern times. He argued that there are two different types of government – that which is built “upon persons, and upon relations purely personal” into a society, and that which is “founded upon territory and upon property” into a state (Morgan 6). He proposes that the Greeks and Romans kept the ideology of the society, even after civilization arose.

In Morgan’s piece, he outlines the characteristics of savagery, barbarism, and civilization. He even breaks up the first two main ethnical periods into subperiods (lower, middle, and upper statuses). His definitions for the stages of savagery maintain a general sense of technical inferiority, as well as a basic diet of fruits, nuts, and fish. In this general stage, mankind learned how to use fire and the bow and arrow; they ended this stage with the invention of pottery as artistic expression. He claims that the aboriginals of Australia and the people of Polynesia were discovered in the middle status of savagery, while some Native American tribes were discovered in the upper status of savagery.

However, Childe’s traits of savagery were almost exclusively defined by the methods of obtaining food. He argues that most people in this period are hunter-gatherers and they “live exclusively on wild food” (Childe 3.) This correlates with Morgan’s ideas of technology and development, as those who lived in the savagery periods did not have the means to successfully practice agriculture, since the defining traits of barbarism – the next level of the evolutionary stages – is the ability to cultivate edible plants and breed animals for consumption. Childe uses the findings of archaeologists to provide evidence, as he ties in the Neolithic Age of the archaeological record with the barbarism stage.

As mentioned before, Morgan gave pottery significant weight in distinguishing barbarism from savagery. In addition to pottery, Morgan discusses the use of certain materials in the building of their houses, including adobe-brick and stone, as well as the presence of agriculture and the domestication of animals. Morgan also places the use of iron as a defining trait of barbarism, as was seen by the Grecian tribes in the Homeric age and the Germanic tribes of the time of Caesar (Morgan 11).

Childe definitely agrees with Morgan’s claims of the traits of the barbarian stage, but he does not make the same argument. Implicitly, Childe does agree that there is a presence of agriculture and domestication of animals, like Morgan explains, since he believes that the Stone Age represents the barbarian stage. However, Childe takes a different approach, as he theorizes that, while some tools are used and created, every member of the society must work to contribute to the communal food supply, thus there is no specialization. The key word is “specialization,” an idea that Morgan does not touch upon. He argues that “social division of labour” is impossible without surplus. However, the necessity of solidarity in the community provides an opportunity for common traits of society to arise, by way of “identity of language, custom and belief” (Childe 7). He then claims that solidarity starts from the clan – a group of people who claim to have a common ancestor – and result in kinship. Clearly, Childe’s claims are in direct agreeance with the traits mentioned by Morgan: subsistence, language, and the family.

Finally, we approach Morgan’s definition of the status of civilization. Frankly, he does not elaborate as much on this final ethnical period as the two earlier periods. He does mention that there is a presence of a written language, as well as literary records, but that is all. It can be argued that he finds it impossible to define a civilization, or state-level society, so this is when critics of Morgan’s theory can look to Childe to fill in the gaps.

Childe’s ten traits of a civilization overlap slightly with the institutions and ideas investigated by Morgan, particularly involving the invention of writing, artistic expression, and a form of government. However, most do not seem to correspond nicely. Most strongly is the idea of writing as an identifying trait of most societies is discussed by both Morgan and Childe.

While Morgan merely stated that the status of civilization started “with the use of a phonetic alphabet and the production of literary records” (Morgan 11), Childe goes a little further in discussing writing as a criterion of civilization. He attributes writing as an enabler for other sciences, such as arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy. He then concludes that “calendrical and mathematical sciences are common features of the earliest civilizations,” and they are derived from writing, using the Egyptian, Maya, and Babylonian calendars found by archaeological excavations (Childe 14).

Morgan briefly delves into subsistence in Chapter II of “Ancient Society,” but he does not attribute the notion as the main driving force of the growth of civilization like Childe, since he claims that subsistence is “connected more or less directly with inventions and discoveries” (Morgan 4). However, Childe describes that the surplus of subsistence is what allows the growth of civilization to commence (Childe 11).

We can see, then, how these two authors can agree with each other, though they take very different approaches and choose to focus their attentions on other variables and factors of the growth of civilization. Morgan’s argument revolves around technology and inventions, and Childe places an emphasis on the importance of surplus. Both provide archaeological evidence to give impact to the legitimacy of their claims.

Works Cited

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