Review
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Chapters 1 through 4 reveal Childe as a cultural historian, a materialist, and an evolutionist, and they also highlight his standing as one of the leading archaeological synthesizers of European prehistory. The subsequent three chapters (“Archaeology as Anthropology”; “Archaeology as a Social Science: Inaugural Address”; and “Society, Science, and History”) move the reader away from the specifics of archaeological patterns, sequences, and technological stages and into Childe’s continuing attempts to understand his discipline’s relationship to the social sciences and to history. The final chapters bring us back to cultural (social) evolution and include his classic statements on the primary revolutions in human history: Chapter 8 (“The Urban Revolution”), Chapter 9 (“Old World Prehistory: Neolithic”), and Chapter 13 (“The Bronze Age”).

The final chapter (Chapter 14, “Retrospect”), published in 1958, the year after Childe’s suicide in Australia, offers a bluntly honest précis biohistory of his complex and never static intellectual career.

Orser and Patterson open the book with a brief but well argued introduction. Its title “V. Gordon Childe and the Foundations of Social Anthropology,” and the reversed version that serves as the lead title for the entire book and which delegates V. Gordon Childe to a subtitle, reveals an agenda. The editors are attempting to claim Childe as one of the founders—indeed, probably the first major, intellectual ancestor—of “Social Archaeology.”

But what is “Social Archaeology?” Currently it is not a theoretical perspective in archaeology but, rather, a number of programmatic statements combining disparate elements that emphasize the social and historical nature of the archaeological record. Such statements also give attention to the contemporary uses (and abuses) of archaeological knowledge and the immediate social position of the discipline and its practitioners.

The editors try to clarify such a nebulous program by dividing it into two separate definitions: (1) “societal archaeology,” an approach that emphasizes human social organization and interactions in history, and (2) “social archaeology,” the study of how and why the present uses archaeology and the knowledge of the past it generates.

Childe can be seen, as the editors’ introduction tries to demonstrate, as a possible advocate of an embryonic “societal archaeology.” Oddly their discussion is primarily based on his famous books—The Dawn of European History (1939), What Happened in History (1946), History (1947), Man Makes Himself (1951), and Social Evolution (1951)—with little reference to the essays they collected in this volume. However, even in regard to “societal archaeology,” the reader must look closely and focus on the last period in his thinking. The case for “social archaeology” is even weaker and almost invisible in the 14 chapters. Childe was a politically active person and very early (1922) undertook a “sentimental excursion into Australian politics” (p. 191), but there is little evidence of more than a passing scholarly interest in the social positioning and purposes of archaeology between 1925 and 1957. Clearly, Childe was firmly committed to the public dissemination of archaeological knowledge (his “bookstall archaeology”) but this goal easily fits into standard, even bourgeois, archaeology.

If the reader concentrates on the essays presented by Patterson and Orser, Childe comes across much more powerfully as a traditional social scientist and cultural evolutionist. His partial acceptance of historical materialism moves him beyond the means of production to the social relations of production, but he is never far from a materialistic base. His “societal archaeology” has more to do with the persistent problem of how to apply empirical but general models of cultural evolution to the historical and ethnographic specifics of individual case studies than it does with what some archaeologists today are calling “Social Archaeology.”

Whiggish history always ends up where it wants to go. In the early 1970s, processual archaeology had arrived and was also in search of intellectual ancestors. One candidate was Walter W. Taylor. Unfortunately, Taylor was still alive, and when asked to comment on this new movement, he focused on how it fundamentally differed from his own theoretical views. If Childe were still with us, it is possible that “social archaeology” (or “societal archaeology” and “social archaeology”) would in part get a similar reaction.

Patterson and Orser have given us an excellent collection of the key independent essays by the most famous archaeologist of the last century. Just as Childe’s intellectual career was varied and multilinear, so can this compilation of his writings be put to many positive uses. It could even be used to understand Childe in his own terms and in his own historic setting.


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In 1991, almost one year after the United States announced the Human Genome Project (HGP), a small group of population geneticists and evolutionary biologists critiqued the endeavor, arguing that, because the HGP planned to map the human genome on the basis of largely Caucasian samples, it was “Eurocentric.” They proposed a second project, the Human Genome Diversity Project (HGDP), which would expand the sampling to reflect the greater genetic diversity of the human family. Some urgency was implied, given that HGDP participants felt that samples from indigenous populations were of particular importance and that these had to be acquired before some groups simply vanished.

Less than two years after the inception of the HGDP, the project found itself on the brink of collapse. Many anthropologists had resoundingly criticized the project’s scientific basis, and in December 1993, with a broad coalition
of indigenous, environmental, and human rights groups backing it, the World Council of Indigenous Peoples re-named the HGDP “the Vampire Project.” It was a label that would stick and today continues to haunt the project’s beleaguered supporters.

What went wrong with the HGDP? Is this the story of a group of well-meaning but overconfident scientists imposing their own visions of scientific advancement on a world that had grown less friendly to the “expert voice”? Is it the story of a newly empowered but somewhat overzealous transnational political network that stigmatized the project irreparably? In *Race to the Finish: Identity and Governance in an Age of Genomics*, Jenny Reardon takes a measured and thoughtful look at the HGDP debacle, carefully stepping aside from comment on the egos, tempers, and the political grandstanding that plague this story, to focus on the substantial conceptual issues that divided the different groups involved. Reardon’s project is to construct a much more complicated picture of the HGDP. She explores its brief but tumultuous presence as a story about science and power in the context of globalization, emergent political tensions between north and south, and fresh debates over the meaning of race. The author’s theoretical objective is to probe the HGDP as a power-knowledge nexus through which scientific and social practices are coproduced. Yet what is most captivating about the book and perhaps also more useful, is Reardon’s detailed account of the debates within anthropology that the HGDP fostered.

Reardon situates the HGDP in a longer discussion about human variation, evolution, and the classification of human diversity, and, as the title suggests, she concentrates on race as a particularly problematic category. (The HGDP was launched around the time *The Bell Curve* reignited discussion about race and IQ.) Reardon documents the various critiques of anthropologists who felt that the project, despite its turn to new genetic technologies, was nevertheless embedded in 19th-century racist biology. She also demonstrates how HGDP organizers, to their detriment, concentrated much more on the “science” of the project and failed to think carefully about collaboration and informed consent. The result of this oversight was a series of public relations disasters, with HGDP scientists such as Luca Cavalli-Sforza and Mary Claire King left appalled by accusations of biocolonialism and legal experts such as Henry Greeley scrambling to produce ethical protocols to address the objections raised.

Although the HGDP story is a complicated one, it does point rather directly to the importance of collaborating with research populations at the initial stages of a project. As Reardon notes, many of the HGDP’s proponents seemed to think that the science part could be kept separate from the collection and archiving of genetic data. When this became impossible, the project proposed a set of ethical procedures that were somehow supposed to counter what many indigenous people and activists saw as a much deeper set of historically constructed inequalities. Clearly, one of the central issues that prevented the HGDP from going forward was the failure among many of its proponents to recognize the larger political economic context in which genetic research currently takes place.

The issues raised in Reardon’s study of the HGDP are far from resolved. In some respects, her book can be read as an informative account of some of the “best bad practices” of conducting genetic research with indigenous populations. In delineating this complicated history, Reardon takes a look into an unpleasant chapter of anthropology, but, in doing so, she courageously provides us with an important and useful book for present and future research.


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This book under review attempts to contribute to the understanding of the complicity of German scholarship with the National Socialist Government and to reveal “German anthropology” as scientific stimulus for, companion in, and profiteer of Nazi mass murder. Gretchen Schafft has searched a number of archives, in particular the documents of the former “Institut für Ostforschung,” located in occupied Cracow and stored today in Washington, D.C. (NAA-SI). She has also spoken to both eminent scholars on the subject and to survivors. The material presented in the volume is convincing, both interesting and explosive, and throws a terrible light on the involvement of the scholars that she describes, many of whom were able to continue their careers almost unabated after 1945. The investigative and accusative tenor of the volume gives it a particular currency; it will certainly find its place in the contemporary discourse on scientific ethics, on anthropological accountability, and on the encounter with the darkest chapters of scholarship in the service of politics.

But the reviewer must protest decidedly against the parallel drawn throughout the work between the German disciplines of anthropology and ethnology. Schafft—either out of ignorance or intent—is victim of the cliché that while U.S. anthropology was employed in service of the concepts of cultural relativism and tolerance, German anthropology was applied exclusively in the service of Nazi extermination policy. The book, clearly written with a great deal of engagement but little knowledge of German is, as a result of this thoroughly simplified hypothesis, more confusing than constructive. A text written with the fate of millions of innocent victims in mind will be welcomed by all well-meaning readers. The central hypothesis must nevertheless be challenged in the name of German ethnology, which, since Adolf Bastian (1826–1905), has seen its calling in the study of overseas tribal societies but is wrongly included here under the term *anthropology* and, thus, also indicted for having committed mass murder.