
A Review on the Roots of Marxist Approach in Archaeology

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To cite this article:

Soner Akin. A Review on the Roots of Marxist Approach in Archaeology. *International Journal of Archaeology*. Vol. 3, No. 4, 2015, pp. 33-38. doi: 10.11648/j.ija.20150304.11

Abstract: Marxist approach in archaeology simply orients us towards thinking archaeological data, information and knowledge in Marxist perspective. As it was seen rather a theoretical stance, we could have a chance on witnessing some organized attempts in world's history. For instance 20th century can be seen the beginning point by the followers in Soviet Union within activation. As is well known, archaeology reached scientific base after the death of Karl Marx. Still the theoretical improvement of the approach was conducted by other contributors. In this paper the literature and the rise of praxis about Marxist archaeology was analyzed in order to understand today's practices more properly along with their effects on producing archaeological knowledge, after in situ practices or other applicatory academic work. This study helped us understand the position of today's archaeological knowledge with their main economic and political background based on Marxism.

Keywords: Marxist Archeology, History in Marxism, Marxist Archaeological Knowledge, Political Background of Archaeology, Marxist Perspective in Archaeology

1. Introduction

Today's scientific surveys has begun to question that archaeologists are concerned with more than simply the identification of areas to be studied, and instead they defend the theory that the primary objectives include understanding variations and patterns in the distribution of human activities in specific places, as well as determining the relationship between humans and their environment as well as the available natural resources (Mohammadifar and Niknami, 2013:6). Indeed, this rising perspective on the mentioned mission of archaeological study has found its bases through the rise of Marxist archaeology which was arisen a century ago. In this respect, looking at the evolutionary steps and contributors of Marxist archaeology can give us brief outlook about the rationale behind this questioning.

Gordon Childe can be seen as the contributor of Marxist approach's diffusion archaeologist for high-brows in intellectual arena. It was early before another motive on accelerating the diffusion for more recent times which was the reveal of post-processual archaeology in 1980s to 1990s. As is known, reviewed versions of Marxist archaeology were once more popularized amongst the archaeological community.

Having a close look upon Marxism, we can easily define that it originally consisted of three related ideas: one is

philosophical anthropology (or anthropological philosophy), the second is a theory of history, and the third one is an economic and political program. In practice, there was also an activism in Marxism as it has been understood and practiced by the various socialist movements, particularly before 1914. Yet this can only evaluate as a rendition.

Philosophical anthropology and theory of history are the main pillars among the other bases. These seem as the most convenient outlook that was naturally existed in Marxist doctrine. Material Culture is used in the relationships which people enter into with one another. Archeologists are in this point of view to understand the process in which how the material culture was oriented by ancient people of history in order to fulfill their basic needs. (Harris, 1994: 64) For instance materials to feed themselves or their families and gain clothes could be studied to enlightened answers. In this respect, Marxist approach was used to give a sequence for this answers to reach a much more rational and logical framework.

Stages are specified in Societies as evolution in Marxist Approach. Marx and Engels identified 5 successive stages of the development of these material conditions in Western Europe which could be added up upon the beginning stage as Primitive Communism (Johnson, 2010: 76). Slave Society, Feudalism, Capitalism, Socialism and Communism were defined in this sequence. Class struggle or Structural

incompatibilities were the motives which accelerated those struggles (Earle and Preucel, 1987: 506). In the history theory, the social relations affected environment usage and naturally the technology diffusion (Brittanica [web], 2012). Today in Marxist outlook for archeology, the adaptation upon material culture could be the measure point on understanding the life times of early stages and recently defined sub stages of today. As it is naturally acceptable for all political theories, Marxist theory is also lived together with newly added thoughts and practices. In archeology, scientists were hunting traces of past people, therefore sequential archaeology and the stratigraphic studies can be transmitted up higher macro perspectives to observe the consecutive stages if we chose Marxism as a theoretical background.

2. Discussions on Marxist Archaeology

2.1. Sub Concepts and Literature Review on Marxism in Archaeology

Archeology is a scientific branch which has a near position towards social sciences. In this respect, it is highly affected or shaped by society itself. In other words, scientists deal with the output society's existence. Therefore, we need to look at the definition in Marxism upon society. In Marxism, society itself has infra and supra structures, characteristic means and sources of production, and naturally social relations as well (Brittanica [web], 2012). In this respect, as those variables are responsible for the nature of societies, they can be called as infra structures. Indeed, thinking the top down processing, the literature review upon the concepts as ideologies, beliefs, justice are seen as the supra factors for society in Marxism (Trigger, 2007:331). Marxist approach dealt with economical practices also within those variables or factors. Who works and how the product of labor is demanded or fixed is widely determined by those factors in a combined nature.

Looking at the sub concepts behind Marxist doctrine, we saw the philosophical understanding as *dialectic materialism*. In this understanding, Marxist materialism and Engels' dialectic understanding was combined in Marxist doctrine (Trigger, 2007:337). According to this, economic status of societies reaches their natural border in their improvements. The conflicts in societies themselves are naturally growing in this outlook. The corruption in economic systems was bound to vertical improvements in one sense. (Johnson, 2010: 183)Owing to this outlook with dialectic materialism, how people had lived and behaved in the past began to be seen in seen a more realistic processural perspective. The beginning of the events or the final results becomes to be observable in scientific perspective.

Marxist Archaeology and the background of it were dealt with 20th century and 21st century's popular authors in our time. Firstly famous Australian archaeologist, Prof. Dr. Gordon V. Childe was one of the chief intellectuals who arrestingly paid attention to the issue through his popular books as *The Danube in Prehistory* (1929), *Prehistory of*

Scotland (1935), *Man Makes Himself* (1936, 1951), *What Happened in History* (1942), *Progress and Archaeology* (1944, 1945) and *Social Evolution* (1952). Following this Marxist approaches were thought in the anthropology for new perspectives by Eric Wolf from Austria, after 1950s. Wolf can be recalled for his books as *The Mexican Bajío in the 18th Century* (1955), *Europe and the People Without History* (1982) and *Pathways of Power: Building an Anthropology of the Modern World* (2001). Robert Adams and Leslie White in 1960s, Thomas Patterson, Antonio Gilman, Bruce Trigger, Philip Kohl, Mark Leone, Michael Rowlands, Barbara Bender and Kristian Kristiansen along with their critics for Marxist perspectives and defends on processual archaeology in 1970s, Robert Paynter, Carol Crumley, Robert Chapman, Liz Bellamy, Michael Parker-Pearson within a turning back attitude in Marxist approach in 1980s, Kent Flannery, Norman Yoffee and Elizabeth Brumfiel in 1990s gave many famous studies upon this approach, through many critics and opponent or proponent works in literature. Indeed, when we looked at the original contributions for the approach, John Bellamy's work as *Marx's ecology: Materialism and nature* and Stephan Shennan's book as *Population, culture history and the dynamics* became prominent among the works in 2000s which brought different perspectives on Marxist archaeology instead of critics.

In the early attempts of adaptation was driven by material culture studies. A kind of artifactology understanding about typologies and typological studied became prominent. Yet, the attempts on following the lines via typological studies could be deeply acting as blinder. Hence it could be wrong, as to Marxist approach. (Harris, 1994: 32) Because, first of all Marxist doctrine is a social one which is against all one sided approaches. According to Marxists dominant power focal points in societies were giving the clues of next change (Brittanica [web], 2012). This approach could be used in archeological studies in hypothesis shaping in a deductive sense. Slave based-societies to feudal ones, then finally capital societies, societies are driven by dominant groups, as to Marxism. In this drive, the final destination could be the very beginning of other stages, and this point is inspirational for today's contextual seriation studies when this attempt was combined with material culture studies and reshaped. Marxist archaeologists often interpret the archaeological record as displaying progressions through forms of society.

Marxist has also a fancy-schmancy discourse. As to this, two more social stages for human society to progress will occur through, being expectable as socialism and then communism. This outstanding was not totally useless in archaeological studies. Because, they were defined as the ultimate stages, and the whole humanity is in a progress that was experienced to catch this points.

Looking through the dialectic materialism, we catch the point that some factors can be questionable. Archeology like the other disciplines naturally always exists in a position upon that what would be studied. Choosing the reference points via doctrines always means using the accumulated

nature of science. (Hodder, 1991: 65) In social realm of past, the limits of domestic production, the need on the help of neighbor nations, nation's demands to save their sources or the periods which are open to solidarity can be observable factors to construct theories as they were in a nature about to end among groups. In other words, the ending signals could be read by those variables.. For example, more neighbors in a settlement cause to the phenomena on immigration to demanded zones etc. Indeed, pursuant questions could not be found in archaeological studies, which could not be imagined if doctrinal perspective was not chosen at all.

If we have a close look on history, technology began to be the beginning of new area in history (around Paleolithic). It means that materialistic studies become more promising. Technological stimulators' exposition in acceleration of changes upon stages can be traceable in this sense (Brittanica [web], 2012). Previously determined responsibilities for alliances and mutual ties began to be defined in terms of production and technology. Production based contradictions and struggles began to appear as well. Along with this, thinking the supra structural factors as ideologies, traditions symbolic meaning of values, rituals was also began to be evolved or reviewed in those ways.

2.2. Theoretical Background

Thanks to scientific, we know the world we live in. Yet we should not forget about the fact that our world has a history as well. The definition about history gives us the roots of our past lives. The available discussions in order to understand the past became to be seen a conflict on method choosing. Today this variety among these approaches is interesting. The prejudices of today's society in some section, and this could strengthen the natural inequalities, for example man sovereign and class sovereignty (Brittanica [web], 2012). The result could not be scientific in this sense, if we didn't choose a scientific doctrine's way. On the other hand solely materialistic views were inductive attempts towards just data hunting in archaeology.

As we know Marx and Engels were interested in the contemporary outputs of science of their term. They didn't elect scientific branches, were in initiatives to apply dialectic materialism in all kinds of scientific branches. In this respect it can be clearly argued here that if there was a scientific approached in that term, probably they could have a chance on applying their approach to this area as well. (Harris, 1994: 43) According Engels we know that daily life is reproduced and produced again and again which present us the determinative factors in history in materialism. Again this factor in itself has a dual nature, producing of the tools or material to survive and the production of humans within procreation. How people lives and lived in the past was determined by both the development level of family and the productive forces. Henry Lewis Morgan in USA being a famous anthropologist in his differentiation between barbarianism and civilization also came to the same point with Marx in these explanations.

Engels in his studies benefited from Morgan's views to

define the materialistic view in the reveal of first human. In his study Engels used the concepts as "violence, barbarianism and civilization" in his categorization. He also defined these as like stages having virtues like upward ones and downward ones. The era before class society contains those concepts (Brittanica [web], 2012).

V. Gordon Childe commented the chain of the stream of consciousness across two thinkers Morgan and Engels. He tried clarifying that the change of the productive forces could be the reason of the changing stages in civilizations. Morgans' savagery about the first ages was only about the gatherer economics (Brittanica [web], 2012). In those Paleolithic times, there was no clear production attempt so the accelerated shifting across developed stages did not appear. Hence it was the longest period of human existed till today. The discovery of this talent changed everything. It could be seen in micro example of every huge excavation studies. (Hodder, 1991: 65) Production areas of the active zones in productive terms give the archeologist the wealthiest material scale today.

According to Morgan, plant and animal resources were increased by some societies. In this food-production economy was still near to barbarianism, in Morgan's view, as we name as Neolithic period. After the agriculture, gathering and hunting became less important. In the later step settlement or urban life was invented, because the surplus of food made it convenient to live in crowded places. (Harris, 1994: 45) Because of this the fertile lands as Nile and Mesopotamia with Indus became scene for civilizations. Class society concept and slavery began to be seen in Bronze age being the first two millenniums of civilization (Brittanica [web], 2012).

Looking at history in a materialistic way in propriety was developed in country where nearly all scientific attempts were initiated to reshape in Marxist doctrine. In solid example, Soviet Union Marxist Archeology was the unique example (McGuire, 1994: 34). In Soviet Union, Scientific advancements in many branches encouraged archaeological study as well, and the Russian Academy for the History of Material Culture was founded in 1919 (McGuire, 2008:98). On later period it was just renamed as the State Academy for the History of Material Culture (GAIMK) (Trigger, 2007: 326-327). In the Soviet Union, it was deployed in Leningrad (St. Petersburg), and initially followed pre-existing archaeological theories, namely culture-historical archaeology (Johnson, 2010: 46). Soviet Union Marxist Archeology in Stalin Period was highly motivated in order to bring a kind of etatist understanding in a theme. In 1929, from Soviet Union Vladislav I. Ravdonikas published a report named as "For a Soviet history of material culture". In scholarship it could be the meeting point on gathering the concepts as material culture studies and Marxist approach in a right way. This excitement didn't take long. (Ucko, 1995: 25) Soviet Union Marxist Archaeology's later periods witnessed the isolation of Soviet Archaeology. It was sometimes seen as an attempt on separating themselves from other nations which are not Marxists. This attempt was easily

traceable in country's primary archaeological journal, *Sovetskaya Arkheologiya*, and the opening up of many more archaeological units in universities (Ucko, 1995: 28). Western understanding could be fallen into disuse by them in one sense on explaining history. The materialistic perspective upon world, nature and universe carved out a niche for oneself by rejecting culture-historical archaeology in the late 1920s (Trigger, 2007:322).

2.3. *Historians' View*

Idealist historians always argue that ideas were the main point on understanding the worlds. For example, some thinks that people firstly gave a decision to settlement then began to found villages. According to him, rituals together accelerated the term on being together. But these views according to a Marxist archeologist were just a reason not a simple stimulation. Product cultivation and agriculture forced people to live together under natural conditions, and humanity goes under a process.

Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn, in 1960s and 1970s held on to New Archaeology in an interest in applying to archaeology some of the implications of the earlier work of Karl Marx by French anthropologists in the 1960s and 1970s (Spriggs, 1984: 160).

Western understanding opened itself for inclination with Vere Gordon Childe, as mentioned before. His studies in Asian archaeology gave an opportunity to him on dealing the concepts of the agricultural and urban revolutions in Middle East. *Neolithic Revolution* and *Urban Revolution* concepts are processed into archaeological studies thanks to him, and they are still usable. Age description for copper, iron or bronze was begun to be seen as a way of tracing changes from one material using improvement, it is one step further for chronology studies. (Chippindale et. al., 2009: 183)

The Dawn of European Civilization book of Childe made him popular. Childe's attempt on studies was mainly upon typological studies (McGuire, 2008: 98) As is known he was a linguistic expert, and typological studies were previously advanced in linguistic studies in science. Childe's interest upon historical analysis allowed himself to deal with archaeology in Edinburg University. Especially Neolithic time studies strengthened his newly chosen way in 1920s. In his book, *The Most Ancient East* he referred the Mesopotamian studies and their roots with Western culture. (McGuire, 1994: 34) His interest on near eastern zone archeology caused trip for eastern lands. Soviet Union visits were also effective on him in terms of meeting with Soviet archeology.

Historical materialism can also be used instead of Marxist approach in some dealings after those initiatives. (Harris, 1994: 65) Today most of the social branches applied this concept. Many history and society theories under sociology or social sciences needed this approach in this sense. According to this it was accepted that the existence of human being shaped their history instead of their consciousness.

Childe's propriety on getting records about his own theories as Neolithic and Urban revolution perspective still have validity for today's understanding. In those theories he

got together the material culture studies and the bigger questions. Thinking his theory as Oasis theory, we see that he tried to explain the reasons behind choosing settlement (Ucko, 1995: 25). It was bound to the material taking type of societies as hunter and gatherers in Neolithic period. His urbanization and state forming theories were highly theorized, and easily fitting well into Marxist understanding.

Gordon Childe's different background in this respect was no surprising, as those were the years of his contemporaries witnessed the rise of the scientific branch as archaeology. (McGuire, 2008: 101) Karl Marx was also dealt with different scientific branches, yet its doctrine became popularized in political science and economics. Thanks to his approach which sees change within a society as the result of contradictions arising between the forces of production brought a dynamic explanation for all related disciplines. This was an opportunity to think about things owing to this free will out of stereotyped patterns. (Chippindale et. al., 2009: 197) The relationship because of production could be tried to understand and social organization, institutions began to be discussed. Today's existing questions could be oriented to history. In the previous attempts it was hard to study history or archeological staff, escaping it from its own atmosphere like laboratory tables. Contradictions of past began to be seen to emerge as a struggle between distinct social classes as it is the case of today as well.

2.4. *Class Struggles in Scientific View*

Marxist Archaeology focuses on the effects of class struggle within a society. Still, different Marxist perspectives were seen in popular stances. Very classical Marxist Archaeology was highly in reliance on cultural materialism and with dialectics (Britannica[web],2012). In later periods, the inspiration from Marxist approach has changed (Ucko, 1995: 26). In the early stances before 1960s it gave place for behaviors and results. But in later inspirations, via adapted studies, the ideas behind practices and derivatives of behaviors also began to be studied.

In other words, social relations were begun to be objectified through material culture. The principle of techno-environmental and techno-economic determinism was introduced in this respect. (McGuire, 1994: 33) Tracing the evidence in this dealing shaped by Marxist Approach, some principles became useful. Similar technologies applied to similar environments tend to produce akin of labor in production and distribution, similar kinds of social groupings were taken into agenda. People who coordinate their activities by means of similar systems of values and beliefs were categorized under some titles. (Hodder, 1991: 68-72) New Archaeology is mostly focused on new concepts as cultural ecology and cultural evolutionism. Cultural materialism ignores the ideational realm in one sense. Through the synthesis of thesis and antithesis, in Hegel's dialecticism peasant and landlord do not have same meaning regardless of time and place like in the feudal social formation. Yet, the new aspects could also come from in the reflections of this term, meanings, symbols etc. Cognitive archaeology can be

suggestible today to fill this blank in one sense.

In the social formation process of understanding via Marxist archeology, society is accepted as a unity. In it's the vital components, each part can only exist with its opposite form. If interaction between social components is corrupted, then opposites evolved in to something which is unbalanced in at first. The dynamic nature of shifting was interpreted in those terms, mostly seems as revolution.

As we all know, Marx just applied the dialectic to the nature social changes. In beyond discussions being estranged Structural Marxist Archaeology tried to bring something more practical for theory. Hegel's dialectic stance was mixed with structuralism (Brittanica [web], 2012). In this term, people began to ask the function of institutions in society.

Structural Marxist approach then began to deal with class struggles, which was basically rooted from different interests. In these views, the driving forces began to be studied. For example in the doctrine about class struggles, Marxism discussed the driving force of dominant classes. Today we can apply this view on choosing researches to trace the dominant classes' nature in some researches (Spriggs, 1984: 160). Temples, palaces or marketplaces became popular in the studies upon via excavation because of this. The surplus coming from production was under the will of dominant groups. Dispersion of interests, and individuals' self-interests became to be seen as limiting factors. (Chippindale et. al., 2009: 113)

Class struggles nature is simply explained with the problem about disproportional access to wealth. These inequalities resulted in a breakdown in the material life of a given society. In this respect material studies in archaeological terms could be reordered in the effect of doctrine in this sense as well. (Harris, 1994: 65) Marxist archaeology argues that there were no homogenous societies in world history. As is recalled, in post - processual and processual archaeology individuals are seen as the focus point on understanding past events. Therefore, different interests of individuals are accepted as a norm in the archaeological researches under Marxist doctrine.

3. Conclusion

The relation between technological improvements and social change became visible in the Upper Palaeolithic. Self-interests on gaining more usable items could be seen as driving force, for instance, in this sense. Local groups sometimes needed foreign relation after domestic production in order to survive, usually became anxieties about the control of their own resources. In this dialectic, again more self-sufficiency meant as the less alliance. Technological improvements, in this sense presented more self-sufficiency on the same way. (Chippindale et.al., 2009: 188) Local production concepts became dominant. Even the dominant force struggles within solidarity networks shifted. Mutual connection and assisting to each other within a zone where different settlements exist became ordinary cases in relations (McGuire, 1994: 34). Contradiction's volume or the position

towards thresholds were also interpreted the ideological stances in categorization. Hence we can now add up those concepts as interaction styles or ideologies as data in order to understand ancient cultures.

Neo Marxist view revealed in later periods. In archeology through neo-Marxist approach, the ideas or concepts were more emphasized in theories. Economic root of the society was less prominent in this sense (Hodder, 1991:57). In this sense, the material culture studies were reshaped. The symbolic meanings of material began to be studied. People's reflexive stance towards changes coming from external world was discussed under this approach. People's role on shaping the material culture into the external world was simple accepted. Newly used terms as praxis began to be used in this sense. It was also central point to understand the ideologies place in social change in a different platform of dialecticism Beliefs under the ideological knowledge were seen as driving force in this sense. Human action was seen as one of the responsible items on the creation in the process of history. External factors to change societies were not accepted at all. The deterministic views could be seen useless. Knowledge is created through political and economic contexts in this sense. This could be cold showers for some excursive archeological studies which are asking wrong questions to find some miracles, something like as external touches in order to understand the changes in a stable concept.

Today, the political roots are even more buried and enriched behind the uprising technocratic understandings via using technical or technological facilities. The symbolic explanatories of our times are dangerously used to understand the past via a result-oriented manner. For example, some integrated geophysical prospecting has produced remarkable results in the field of archaeology, thus the recognition of archaeological sites, and theme on the evolution of a site is tired to be reconstructed through new perspectives which were motivated by different needs (Barone et.al, 2015: 21). Those needs can be also driven today more sophisticated positioning upon the early civilizations and their ties with bigger environmental items instead of early attempting through small materialistic foundlings. History repeats itself for archaeological methodology and the enthusiasm on using technological facilities in archaeology once again signals the need on new Marxist approaches in archaeology as a safety bolt for the epistemology. All in all, Marxist approach and its successor perspectives are becoming more deadly needed in archaeological knowledge production, in order to conserve the existence of an independent framework in this discipline.

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