



Marxism and Archaeology

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According to Historical Materialism (central part of Marxist ideology) the human and social evolution goes through a linear chain of uniform social stages starting from early Paleolithic going through middle and upper Paleolithic, Mesolithic – these are the Old Stone Age stages. The following ones are Neolithic, Copper Age, Bronze Age, Iron Age, the period of Slavery, Feudalism, Capitalism, Socialism, and Communism. The evolution of every society and nation should evolve through this linear chain of successive social stages without exception. This concept is somewhat borrowed from the Three Age system in early European archaeology but has its own particularities. The main feature of it is the inevitability of going through this chain of successive social stages, and this concept accentuates the future of the entire Humanity that will reach socialist and communist stages of social organization.

In this light the main task of every historical/archaeological museum in communist countries was to possess as many artefacts as possible that cover as many as possible social stages of human and social evolution. In the 1960-es, armed with this ideology, a communist secretary (the highest ranking communist official) of the town of Pleven, (North Bulgaria) heard that on the Romanian side of the Danube River archaeologists found lower Paleolithic artefacts. In the Pleven district lower Paleolithic artefacts were not found. He became envy of the findings in Romania and insisted to compulsory commission to the town of Pleven the only then specialist in Paleolithic archeology from the Institute of Archaeology, Sofia (capital of Bulgaria). The phrase with which the communist secretary asked the archaeologist was: “- Go and find me lower Paleolithic artefacts!”. So, the Paleolithic archaeologist in company with some archaeologists from the Historical Museum in Pleven

went to the nearest Copper Age site and collected from the surface some flint artefacts which they presented as lower Paleolithic ones. Then they went to the nearby restaurant and feasted, celebrating the well-done work.

But the strong ideological views of the communist leader of the Pleven district did not come from nothing and did not die out in the post-communist era. The early European archaeology borrowed the positivistic views of natural sciences and mostly from biology where every animal or human organ and bone can be precisely measured and thus its proper place in the living or fossil organism to be found. Some of the late 19th century archaeologists were that much convinced by these views that they even did not go to archaeological sites they excavated but waited outside excavation area their workers to bring into them artefacts. They believed to be capable of ascribing the derived from archaeological contexts artefacts to their proper place in a set of cultural characteristics of ancient people, just as biologists can fit in a missing organ within a whole organism. The archaeological term fossil directeurs that is often used in the present-day archaeology remind these views of early archaeologists. Of course, the workers at these uncontrolled archaeological sites, as they were paid for each artefact that they brought in to archaeologists waiting outside the excavation area, started to replicate the diagnostic artefacts and sell them to archaeologists. Thus a Paleolithic collection of bone decoration objects can be found in the Archaeological Museum in Krakow, Poland, which the workers in the late 19-th century made out of bone found at the excavation site. Some of these art objects are genuine but no one can tell the difference. The same is with a collection of bifacial stone artefacts housed at the Archaeological Museum in Halle, Germany.

Another view borrowed from the extreme positivistic views and basic materialism is that each organ of an animal (extinct or living) can be measured precisely and fit in a general frame of a linear evolutionary chain. On that basis the form of an organ or artefact becomes the most important trait and its geometry and exact measurements can fit in the missing link of biological and social evolution. On this ground later racial theories grew up and defined dominant peoples (Nazi German people) and the lower in the evolutionary chain peoples such as Jews, Gypsies, and Slaves. Thus the preoccupation with the artefact form as dominant feature in archaeology made some German archaeologists during the World War II to collect natural small stones with geometrical forms that are similar to Mesolithic microlithic tools. This happened in the vicinities of the town of Opole, Poland.

These theories have been somewhat transformed and adopted by the Historical Materialism and turned into dominant ideological scheme in archaeology of the former communist countries. The central archaeological feature remained the form of the artefact. Each human tool or artefact was linked to the dominant social feature - 'means of production', which was considered as the main driver of social evolution and change. Each prehistoric group of people or in higher social stages each social class bears with it as intrinsic feature progressive or regressive 'means of production' (tools of trade and techniques), which define its progressive or regressive role in history. The main task of archaeologists at that time was to construct through the form and the sizes of the diagnostic tools the linear evolutionary chain of human and social evolution. It is not a surprise then that at the beginning of the 1990-es a team of archaeologists from Sofia University, Bulgaria collected on the southern Black Sea coast a bulk of small, natural stones with geometric forms similar to Mesolithic microlithic artefacts. I personally, with the aid of a colleague, looked at this collection and established this fact.

The role of social change is also defined in archaeology according to the extreme positivist, basic materialist and Marxist views that ascribe uniform social identity to large groups of people that bear with them better tools made of better materials and migrate as a wave of advance into new territories where they exterminate the local disadvantaged people. In this way the invaded regions become settled by new, progressive populations. The Marxist concept of struggle between progressive and regressive classes is transformed into archaeological concept of revolution of masses of people that move to new places armed with progressive technologies and more efficient weapons. To the question what triggers these mass migrations and invasions a single explanation is put forward. Climate crisis was considered as the only cause and this explanation remains unchanged since the Soviet times and continues in the present-day archaeological interpretations. The paleo-climatic evidence from early and Middle Holocene, however, shows that there were small changes in climate conditions but they were not significant. There was no change in the vegetation cover on a regional scale. Local early farming communities managed

skillfully their environment and changed accordingly their crops by replacing dry farming crops with those related to more wet conditions and vice versa depending on local climatic cycles. Thus the climate crises theory of the modern politics and its transfer to explanation of social change in archaeology reinforces the Marxist view of social change as a 'big cause - big effect' relationship that acts automatically when conditions allow it. The latter is borrowed from the Marxist concept of 'revolutionary situation' when social conditions of a given population deteriorated up to a point that automatically lead to social revolution and violent change of social organization. This line of consideration often leads to archaeological conclusions that put a smile in the face of a judicious observer. For example, it is known that early farmers successfully exploited all the possible ecological niches that contain valuable resources for subsistence. Despite this evidence some archaeologists ascribe a uniform social identity feature to the early farming communities in the Balkans and Anatolia. They considered these communities as exceptionally vegetarian ones, contrary to the local hunter-gatherers, which they assumed as predominantly meat eating. This idea comes from the fact that these farmers used to grow cereals and, because of this, their diet should consist only of cereals (bread and other related foods). However, the field data from late Mesolithic/Epi-Paleolithic and early Neolithic sites in the Balkans and Anatolia show that there are fauna and flora that belong to domestic and wild animals and plants, and that these communities had diverse diet and complex social organization and craft specialization.

As it can be seen from above the strong ideological views of the communist leader in the Pleven district, Bulgaria live on in the mainstream archaeology of Europe and elsewhere. Although a declarative concept has been elaborated by the present-day mainstream archaeology, which states that the transition from "primitive" to "complex" societies is made through multiple trajectories of evolution, in fact, in modern research schemes this theoretical framework comes down to two main concepts: social inequality and uniform social hierarchy. Prehistoric and protohistoric 'aristocrats' (distinctive, rich burials in archaeological record) are viewed as a progressive group of people that organized societies into early states. The large group of pre-urban and early urban societies with little or no social hierarchy is viewed as something less important in the evolutionary drive to social complexity.

In summary, Marxist ideology is built on a single 'big-cause - big effect' relationship that is not able to explain the complexity of archaeological record. Contrary to this, the study of complex systems views a small cause or a combination of small causes to have big systematic effect, and archaeological evidence supports this theory.

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Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.