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Research article

Between Endorsement and Disavowal: André Leroi-Gourhan's Russian Interactions

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Abstract

Material-based interpretations of everyday undertakings have long been of interest to the French social sciences, including anthropology and history. André Leroi-Gourhan (1911-1986) follows to some extent this trend, insofar as his pioneering contributions to ethnographic and prehistoric technology – from the “elementary forms of human activity,” to studies of stone tool manufacture, to the formulation of the “chaîne opératoire” – shed much light on the more tangible and infrastructural dimensions of human existence. At the same time, his predominantly idealist recourse to evolutionary “tendencies,” “vital thrusts” (élan vital), and suchlike metaphysical notions rather held him at bay from would-be historical and dialectical understandings of primitive socio-economic formations – and this, despite his ready access to and close acquaintance with the professional literature from the other side of the Iron Curtain. Hence the paradox, as outlined here, of Leroi-Gourhan's distant attitude towards the conceptual (historical-materialist) substrate of Russian-cum-Soviet archaeology, on whose practical achievements he nonetheless remained well-informed and appreciative. In turn, this ambivalence may partly explain the rather superficial and incomplete perception of Leroi-Gourhan's works within Soviet archaeology and anthropology, limited to his publications on Prehistoric art and religion while ignoring his broad-ranging contributions to “anthropogenesis.”

Keywords: André Leroi-Gourhan; S. A. Semenov; Palaeolithic archaeology; Prehistoric technology; Stone tool manufacture; “Proletarian archaeology”; Planimetric excavations; Pincevent

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Научная статья

Между одобрением и отрицанием: взаимодействие Андре Леруа-Гурана с Россией

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Аннотация

Материально-ориентированные интерпретации повседневности уже давно представляют интерес для французских социальных наук, включая антропологию и историю. Андре Леруа-Гуран (1911-1986) в некоторой степени следует этой тенденции, поскольку его новаторский вклад в этнографические и доисторические технологии – от “элементарных форм человеческой деятельности” до исследований изготовления каменных орудий и формулирования “chaîne opératoire” – пролили много света на более материальные и инфраструктурные аспекты человеческого существования. В то же время его преимущественно идеалистическое обращение к эволюционным “тенденциям”, “жизненным толчкам” (élan Vital) и тому подобным метафизическим представлениям скорее удерживало его от потенциального исторического и диалектического понимания примитивных социально-экономических формаций – и это, несмотря на его свободный доступ и близкое знакомство с профессиональной литературой по другую сторону железного занавеса. Отсюда описанный здесь парадокс отстраненного отношения Леруа-Гурана к концептуальному (историко-материалистическому) субстрату российско-советской археологии, о практических достижениях которой он, тем не менее, был хорошо информирован и высоко ее оценивал. В свою очередь, эта двойственность может отчасти объяснить довольно поверхностное и неполное восприятие работ Леруа-Гурана в советской археологии и антропологии, ограничивающееся его публикациями по доисторическому искусству и религии и игнорирующее его широкий вклад в “антропогенез”.

Ключевые слова: Андре Леруа-Гуран; С. А. Семенов; Археология палеолита; Доисторическая технология; Изготовление каменных орудий; “Пролетарская археология”; контурные раскопки; Пенсеван

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INTRODUCTION

Need prehistoric archaeology, a scientific discipline specialising in the meticulous study of ancient material remains, be materialist at heart, or by default? The study of techniques, from early prehistory to modern times, is clearly predicated on rigorously empirical and experimental research, but does it necessarily follow that technology is or should be exclusively concerned with the material dimensions, the substrate of social life? The Russian interactions of André Leroi-Gourhan (1911-1986), the central figure around which this paper revolves, highlights some of the complications at stakes. While his pioneering studies of ethnographic and prehistoric technologies clearly shed much light on the infrastructural dimensions of human existence, his predominantly idealist recourse to evolutionary “tendencies” and suchlike “vital thrusts” rather held him at bay from a would-be material-historical understanding of primitive socio-economic formations. To these ambiguities can be added Leroi-Gourhan's evident linguistic propensities and conceptual dispositions towards Russian archaeology – including, in some respects, its Soviet versions –, affinities that, paradoxically enough, were barely reciprocated, even until today, on the other side of the (former) Iron curtain.

ANTECEDENTS

The French social sciences and humanities have long displayed considerable interest in the material forms of historically and anthropologically known societies. Without reaching back to Saint-Simon or Auguste Comte, we can begin with Émile Durkheim's (1858-1917) identification, early in his career, of possible causal or explanatory links between what he called the moral and the material “densities” of modern societies. This apparent proximity to materialist tenets led Durkheim himself to an abrupt volte-face; from then on, he deliberately emphasized the importance of religion in social life as a means to counter the hypothesis of its economic or infrastructural determination. By the interwar years, nevertheless, the French scientific milieu was far better disposed to welcome Marxism into the social and human sciences (Gouarné, 2013; Gouarné & Kirtchik, 2022). It was partly in this spirit that Durkheim's nephew Marcel Mauss (1872-1950) effectively introduced technology – the study of techniques, defined as “traditional efficient acts” (pursued with mechanical or physico-chemical ends) – in his anthropological teachings. From 1928 onwards, Mauss also contributed to the conceptual foundations of the new *Musée de l'Homme*, together with physical anthropologist and anti-fascist militant Paul Rivet (1876-1958). In this spirit, both scholars placed distinctive explanatory and epistemological emphasis on ordinary life and mundane material practices.

What is important to know – as Rivet indicated in 1936 – are all the aspects, or at least the average aspects of a civilization, and not the exceptional forms it takes among the privileged classes. For the ethnologist, the house of the poor is as precious and informative as is the palace of the rich. The humblest and most imperfect tool, the coarsest pottery, have as much if not more value as the most finely decorated vases. It is only on the average cultural state [*état culturel*]



moyen] of a given region that the ethnologist's comparisons should bear (Rivet, 1936, p. 13).

Two of Mauss' well-known students took these lessons to heart. One, André-Georges Haudricourt (1911-1996) was something of a maverick rationalist, left-leaning and Russophile to boot. Given his interests in agronomy and in agricultural practices, Mauss sent him to Leningrad and Turkmenistan in 1934 – not an easy time-period to dwell in the USSR – to study plant domestication and dispersal under the famous botanist Nikolai Ivanovich Vavilov (Haudricourt, 1987; Haudricourt & Dibia, 1987; Barbe & Bert, 2011; as well as Haudricourt's 1994 account of his times in Soviet Russia in Haudricourt & Bertrand, 2002).

Mauss's other technology student was André Leroi-Gourhan.¹ Already in one of his earliest publications, in the 1936 *Encyclopedie française* edited by Rivet and historian Lucien Febvre, Leroi-Gourhan proposed to replace the standard classification of techniques (according to their finality: hunting, fishing, basketry, weaving) with a new approach which highlighted the universal mechanical and functional features implicated in the “elementary forms of human activities” (Leroi-Gourhan, 1936). Further enriched by meticulous observations gathered during his ethnographic and archaeological fieldwork in Japan (from 1937 to 1939), Leroi-Gourhan's “elementary” technomorphological insights were considerably expanded in the two volumes of *Évolution et techniques* (*L'Homme et la matière* 1943, *Milieu et technique* 1945). These publications rapidly secured their author's reputation among ethnologists, museum professionals, archaeologists, historians and philosophers too, as a leading specialist in the study of “materially creative activities” in the social and human sciences (Leroi-Gourhan, 1943, 1945; partly translated into English in Leroi-Gourhan 2024).

Yet, alongside the comprehensive scope and descriptive qualities of these volumes, their more theoretical pages left somehow undecided the ultimately materialist or idealist tenor of his claims, whereby, to give an example, “the inevitable, foreseeable, rectilinear character [of the tendency] drives the hand-held flint [tool] to acquire a handle, or the bundle dragged on two poles to equip itself with wheels” (Leroi-Gourhan, 1943, p. 27). While readers such as Haudricourt, Febvre or linguist Marcel Cohen rather deplored the intrusion here of idealist speculations, others – including philosophers Emmanuel Mounier, Raymond Ruyer, and to an extent Georges Canguilhem – were clearly attuned to these metaphysical overtures. This simultaneously empirical and abstract conception of a continuously incremental “universal technicity” – inspired in part by the *élan vital* philosophy of Collège de France professor Henri Bergson (1907) and by the evolutionism of Jesuit-palaeontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1955) – came to fruition in Leroi-Gourhan's two volume masterpiece *Le Geste et la parole* in 1964-1965. Alongside their archaeological reception, these volumes also reached and influenced a particularly

¹ On Leroi-Gourhan's life and work, see mainly Soulier 2018, as well as Audouze 2002, Audouze & Schlanger, 2004, and Schlanger, 2023; 2024, on which several of the following discussions are based.



widespread anthropological, philosophical and indeed post-modern and post-humanist readership – in French and, in function of their availability, in translation as well.²

The broad-ranging achievements detailed in *Le Geste et la parole* reflected two distinct expansions in Leroi-Gourhan's research horizons from the mid-1940s onwards. First, the emphasis he placed there on human cultural and biological evolution corresponded to his gradual shift from the fields of ethnology and museology towards prehistoric archaeology and, to a lesser extent, human palaeontology. Although this shift was partly motivated by disciplinary challenges and manoeuvres (notably due to the emergence of Lévi-Straussian structural anthropology and the rise of Marxist thought in the social sciences), it also confirmed Leroi-Gourhan's growing research interests in the origins and developments of humankind – as embodied in the figure of *Homo faber*, this “tool-making animal” successively invoked by Benjamin Franklin, Karl Marx and Henri Bergson.

A quite distinctive (though not necessarily antithetical) expansion in Leroi-Gourhan's worldviews ensued from the reaffirmation of his Catholic faith. As already intimated, these religious sensibilities occasionally transpired in his scientific work, usually implicitly or inconspicuously – and in any case without proselytising intents –, as a source of intellectual and spiritual guidance. This affinity was manifest by the mid-1950s, when Leroi-Gourhan became a “lay sympathiser (*sympathisant laïque*)” at the *Centre catholique des intellectuels français* (CCIF), a resolutely open-minded gathering of intellectuals, scientists and clergy concerned with the place and the relevance of religion in contemporary life. Leroi-Gourhan gave several presentations at the CCIF – on such topics as “Human origins” (1955), “Techniques and society among humans and animals” (1957) and “The technological illusion” (1960) – and these effectively foreshadowed the sweeping perspectives he went on to elaborate in *Le Geste et la parole* (see translations in Leroi-Gourhan, 2024).

A technologist, then, a prehistorian and a believer as well, Leroi-Gourhan was also – as yet another variable in our shifting kaleidoscope – a keen and well-informed Russophile. His adolescent encounters with post-revolutionary émigrés spurred his lifelong fascination with the culture and language of “old Russia” – that is, of “white” coloration, as distinct from the “reds” favoured by Haudricourt. These interests, coupled with his manifest linguistic abilities, proved their intellectual and strategic worth throughout his life. Mastery of Russian undoubtedly contributed to his secondment in 1935 to the Arctic department of the *musée de l'Homme*, whose director Anatole Lewitsky (himself a Russian émigré) was then developing the field of “comparative technology”. In his doctoral research on *Archéologie du Pacifique nord* (published in 1946) Leroi-Gourhan was able to include a range of relevant Russian sources. Finally, from the 1950s onward, his linguistic competencies served him to present to a French audience recent prehistoric excavation and studies published in leading Russian-language journals such as *Sovetskaya arkheologiya*, *Sovetskaja Etnografiya*, and *Materialy i issledovanija po*

² Leroi-Gourhan, 1964, 1965; translated into English in Leroi-Gourhan 1993. For some comments on Leroi-Gourhan's reception through “French theory” and beyond, see Audouze, 2002; Schlanger, 2024.



arheologii SSSR (Leroi-Gourhan and Mazon, 1950; Leroi-Gourhan, 1954, 1957, 1958a and 1961).

CONTACT ZONES

In addition to this general interest in Russian archaeology, Leroi-Gourhan also forged specific affinities on matters technological with Sergey Aristarkhovich Semenov (1898-1978), the founder of the laboratory for archaeological technology at the Leningrad-based USSR-wide State Academy for the History of Material Culture (GAIMK). The strength of Semenov's approach derived from his use of distinctive experimental and forensic methodologies (allegedly mastered during his former career as a security agent) for investigating the functions of prehistoric tools (Semenov, 1957, 1964, 1965/2005, 1970/2005; and Klejn, 2012, p. 307-308). In addition to its intrinsic interest, this “traceological” contribution is noteworthy for its exceptionally rapid and wholehearted endorsement by Western scholarship – a laudable recognition of a Soviet scientific breakthrough that was nevertheless wholly contingent on the 1964 translation into English (by M. W. Thompson, 1955/1961) of his 1957 *Primitive technology* (Semenov, 1957; 1964)³. As part of his technological investigations, Semenov also undertook a range of dedicated experiments on the manufacture of stone tools by percussion. Some of his preliminary results were presented (by his colleague V.V. Bounak) at a symposium on *Les processus de l'hominisation* held in Paris in 1958, where they caught Leroi-Gourhan's attentions.

Stone tool production and use were actually a fairly new research topic for Leroi-Gourhan. Since the late 1940s, he had been intrigued by the flintknapping experiments of L. Coutier and François Bordes, but – unlike these prehistorians who mainly valued the potential of these techniques as distinctive chrono-cultural markers – Leroi-Gourhan rather intended to take this “technical behaviour” to more fundamental psychological and cognitive directions. These emerging interests made him all the more attentive to Semenov's experimentally based propositions at the 1958 symposium, whereby:

the manufacture of australopithecine tools required some 3 to 5 [striking] blows, Chellean tools needed 20 to 35 well directed blows in a single operation, Acheulean tools already required two operations and 60 to 70 blows, Mousterian points implied four distinct operations and nearly 100 different blows – and, in the case of Cro-Magnon hafted blades, as many as eleven operations and up to 200 or 250 blows. (Bounak, 1958, p. 104-105)

In the discussion that followed, Leroi-Gourhan specifically welcomed these results “on the enrichment of operational series in the course of the Palaeolithic [, which] correspond perfectly with those of my own research” (Leroi-Gourhan, 1958b, p. 110)⁴ – namely a conception of incremental accumulation in prehistoric flintknapping procedures

³ On traceological research in the USSR see Levitt, 1979; Philipps, 1988; as well as Longo & Skakun, 2005.

⁴ “*Les résultats des travaux cités de Semenov sur l'enrichissement des séries opératoires au cours du Paléolithique correspondent rigoureusement avec ceux de mes propres recherches.*” On this topic, see also Semenov, 1964, p. 42-45. and Semenov, 1970/2005.



and products which Leroi-Gourhan championed well into the 1960s. Similarly, while he did not fully endorse all of Bounak's phonetic theory of primitive language (presented at the 1958 symposium), Leroi-Gourhan “totally approved the [latter's] idea of a primordial link between technical gesture and language (...)” (p. 110) – this being a precocious formulation of the insight that was to feature so prominently in *Le Geste et la parole*, regarding the mutually enriching developments of techniques and of language.⁵

In any case, Leroi-Gourhan put to good use his unmediated linguistic access to the approaches and achievements of the Leningrad Institute, and of Soviet archaeology more generally. Besides listing selected titles and journals dealing with prehistoric matters, he also translated in 1954 a brief extract of a 1949 report by Pëtr Petrovich Efimenko (1884-1969) on his excavations at the Upper Palaeolithic open-air site of Kostienki (Leroi-Gourhan, 1954; also Efimenko, 1949). Of even greater significance was Leroi-Gourhan's 1961 review of recent archaeological publications from the Lower Palaeolithic to the Middle-Ages for the *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique* – a review in which he was particularly attentive to the conceptual foundations of Soviet research. He readily endorsed there the notion of “the history of material culture,” and attributed the originality of Soviet archaeology to its “search for the evidence of material culture as a means for investigating the technical and economic history of human groups who are not accessible through written archives” (Leroi-Gourhan, 1961, p. 262).⁶ Soviet archaeology was no longer restricted to noble works of art, he concurred, but rather sought to recover tools, domestic waste, dwellings and sites of cult, thus aiming for “a complete history, at once economic, social, technical and intellectual, of those people which have not been touched, or have been neglected, by writing” (p. 262).⁷ Foreshadowing a “truly ethnological archaeology,” this proximity to the “man of every day” made it all the more understandable, so concluded Leroi-Gourhan with evident approval, why “the popular republics [of the Soviet Union] have given such a considerable development to this 'proletarian' archaeology [*cette archéologie "prolétarienne"*]” (p. 262).⁸

AMBIGUITIES

This exceptional endorsement of “proletarian' archaeology” – expressed in a generalist “area studies” journal dedicated to the broader social, cultural and political

⁵ See Leroi-Gourhan, 1964, p. 162, p. 306 note 10 [Translated Leroi-Gourhan, 1993, p. 114, p. 412 note 10.

⁶ “(...) *ce qu'il y a de plus propre et original dans les travaux russes récents : la recherche des témoins de la culture matérielle comme moyen d'investigation de l'histoire technique et économique des groupes humains non accessibles à travers les archives écrites.*”

⁷ “*On fouillera [en archéologie soviétique] beaucoup moins pour découvrir des œuvres d'art ou des inscriptions (documents qui ne sont certes pas à négliger, mais qui viennent en surcroît du reste) que pour découvrir sous forme d'outils, de débris ménagers, de traces d'habitats ou de lieux de culte, une histoire complète, c'est-à-dire à la fois économique, sociale, technique et intellectuelle, des hommes que l'écriture n'aura pas atteints de leur vivant ou qu'elle aura négligés.*”

⁸ “*A côté donc de la noble archéologie classique est née une archéologie véritablement ethnologique, beaucoup plus proche de l'homme de tous les jours que ne l'était celle des grands monuments[,] et les raisons du développement considérable que les républiques populaires ont donné à cette archéologie 'prolétarienne' sont particulièrement compréhensibles.*”



dimensions of Russian and Soviet history – was probably the closest Leroi-Gourhan ever came to an intellectual engagement with the tenets of Marxist historical materialism. This unicum may well have been inspired from contemporary Soviet publications (if such an expression was in use), unless it somehow harked back to the confrontation between “proletarian” and “bourgeois” science spurred by the infamous Lysenko affair in the late 1940s.⁹ As for these concerns with the ordinary remains of everyday life, taken as a key to “total history”, they undoubtedly reprised and extended some of Mauss's and Rivet's intuitions of the 1930s. The French research tradition as a whole clearly favoured the notions of “techniques” and “technology”, and Leroi-Gourhan reference in 1961 to the “history of material culture” served him to acknowledge both the conceptual and the institutional centrality of this notion in Soviet research.

Leroi-Gourhan's long-established interests were in documenting and explaining the evolution of technical tendencies (“the pre-conceivable lines [of development] from undifferentiated flint to finely worked blades, to copper knives and steel sabers”, Leroi-Gourhan, 1943, p. 13; translated in Leroi-Gourhan, 2024). These interests did not really encompass, to use Marxist parlance, the productive activities of historical social units in prehistoric times. Since the early 1950s, Leroi-Gourhan's favoured the notions of “behaviour (*comportement technique*)”, as applicable to humans, animals and machines too¹⁰, and that of embedded and immemorial “craft” undertakings (*artisanat*). In between, there remained little room for an appreciation of “labour” as a socio-economic, productive and even creative process. In his publications and his teachings (including to students who would later create the “*Technologie culturelle*” and “*Anthropologie des techniques*” research movements), Leroi-Gourhan mostly remained uncommitted, if not indifferent, on these theoretical positions. This attitude surfaces in his 1982 book of conversations-remembrances, *Les Racines du monde*:

I see no contradiction [between attaching importance to 'infrastructures' and not being a 'materialist']. It is a point of view that creates a contradiction [only] if it is transposed to the political level. I do not feel it. Since the publication of *L'Homme et la matière*, I have had numerous contacts with Marxists. They have recognised me, whereas I did not recognise them... I have practiced Marxism like Monsieur Jourdain [of Molière's play], without realising it, and I continue. (...) [Marx] did not play much of a role [in my intellectual formation]. I have read fragments of his work, and never took it as a whole. Generally speaking, I am not inclined towards exegesis. I will not claim that I have rediscovered the America of Marxism, but there is a bit of that in my attitude. After the fact, I found in certain texts by Marx that I have been made to read things that I have been thinking about on my own. (Leroi-Gourhan, 1982, p. 229)¹¹

⁹ On the controversies raised in France and in Western Europe by Trofim Denisovich Lysenko's attempted refutation of genetic biology through a Marxian-compatible form of Lamarckism, see mainly Lecourt, 1977.

¹⁰ See Leroi-Gourhan 1952, and 1953, translated in this issue of *Technology and Language* (Leroi-Gourhan, 2024).

¹¹ “*Je n'y vois pas de contradiction [entre le fait d'accorder de l'importance aux "infrastructures" et ne pas être un "matérialiste"]*. C'est un point de vue qui, si on le transpose sur le plan politique, crée une



In fact, when Leroi-Gourhan mentioned this “proletarian archaeology” in 1961, he was already identified (and self-identified) as a faithful “*compagnon de route*” – not however of free-thinking, left-leaning, or even Communist party related intellectuals (as were quite a few of his contemporary ethnologists and historians), but rather of Catholic ones. Seeking to maintain for humanity an irreducible core of spiritual solace against the assaults of atheist propaganda – a *supplement d'âme*, as it were – the CCIF organised several debates to counter or deflect the secularist threats emanating from the French Rationalist Union, and indeed from Marxist Russia (Schlanger, 2023, p. 333-341.). These intermittent conflicts and their latent entrenchments may well explain, at least in part, Leroi-Gourhan's paradoxical position: holding a resolutely agnostic attitude towards the conceptual (historical-materialist) substrate of Russian-cum-Soviet archaeology – while nonetheless remaining manifestly well-informed, and appreciative, of its practical achievements.

MUTUAL IGNORANCE

A comparable disjunction between knowledge and ignorance (both *sensu* lack of awareness and refusal to acknowledge) seems to have prevailed on the other side of the Iron curtain. Better documented research on this issue is certainly needed,¹² but it is clear that some explanation is called for regarding Leroi-Gourhan's intermittent and underwhelming presence across Soviet archaeology and anthropology. An already encountered generic factor has to do with linguistic limitations: few Russian scholars were able at that time to engage with his works in the original French, and translations were clearly wanting.¹³ Likewise, our protagonist's own cross-disciplinary or indeed eclectic propensities can explain this relative lack of visibility. Like many of his readers elsewhere (including in France itself) Russian scholars could be forgiven for not fully appraising Leroi-Gourhan's remarkably diversified contributions in the fields of ethnography, prehistory and technology – as if each domain were somehow held apart, possibly deliberately so, through some opaque disciplinary curtains of their own.

contradiction. Moi, je ne la ressens pas. Depuis la publication de L'Homme et la Matière, j'ai eu beaucoup de contacts avec les marxistes. Ils m'ont reconnu alors que je ne les reconnaissais pas... J'ai fait du marxisme comme Monsieur Jourdain [de Molière], sans m'en rendre compte, et je continue. [Marx] n'a pas joué un bien grand rôle [dans ma formation intellectuelle]. J'ai lu de lui des fragments et je n'ai jamais pris l'œuvre dans son ensemble. D'une façon générale, je ne suis pas porté vers l'exégèse. Je ne vais pas dire que j'ai redécouvert l'Amérique du marxisme, mais il y a un peu de cela dans mon comportement. Après coup, j'ai trouvé, dans certains textes de Marx qu'on m'a fait lire, des choses que j'avais pensées de mon côté.”

¹² Beginning with a deeper appreciation of the tenets and specificities of Russian and Soviet archaeology, from Miller, 1956; Mongaït, 1951, 1955/1961; as well as Thompson, 1961; to Bulkin et al., 1982; Davis, 1983; Vasiliev, 2004, 2011; Lozny, 2017; and Klejn 2012, 2017; see also Gellner, 1980; Plotkin & Howe, 1985; Bertrand, 2002, and Alymov, 2022 on relevant aspects of Soviet and Russian anthropology.

¹³ Leroi-Gourhan's translation history is somewhat chequered (see discussion in Schlanger, 2024). Unlike their rapid translation in Latin languages, *Le Geste et la parole* only appeared in English with a thirty years delay (in 1993) and *Évolution et techniques* not at all. This differs from Leroi-Gourhan's archaeological and art historical titles, mostly translated into English or American in the couple of years following their publication.



This diversity, occasionally verging on dispersion, is perceptible also within the broad field of prehistoric or Palaeolithic archaeology. In Russia, Leroi-Gourhan's recognised and acknowledged contributions mostly concerned his studies of Franco-Cantabrian upper-Palaeolithic parietal art, for which he proposed a chronology based on stylistic criteria and a structuralist interpretation. In this spirit, a (partial) Russian translation of his *Religions de la préhistoire* (1964) was published in Leroi-Gourhan, 1971. However, so far as prehistoric stone tools assemblages and cultural sequences were concerned, the readily recognised and quoted authority was undoubtedly François Bordes (1919-1981). An expert experimental flintknapper in his own right, the Bordeaux-based prehistorian had reached early on the conclusion that prehistoric civilisations are best characterised by the form of the tools they produced, and not their techniques of manufacture. Bordes's highly influential “morphological typology,” whose statistical rigour was found appealing also by Soviet scholars, cast prehistoric tool types as reflections of the mental images held by their ancient makers. This contrasted with the “functional typology” advanced by Semenov and his GAIMK colleagues, who aimed to study and to understand prehistoric tools as the outcomes of the technical productive processes in which they were implicated.¹⁴

Now it so happens that Leroi-Gourhan's interests and publications, from the very onset of his scientific career, were clearly set within this later functionalist and dynamic perspective; yet this was a contribution that Semenov and Soviet archaeology at large somehow appear to have missed. There is no doubt that Leroi-Gourhan's pioneering studies of ethnographic and prehistoric technology – starting with his contributions to the “elementary forms of human activity” – can shed much light on the more tangible and infrastructural dimensions of human existence. The same goes for his incipient formulation and theorisation of the “*chaîne opératoire*” (partly reinforced, as we saw above, by Semenov's notions of “operations” and “blows” as presented in 1958), an approach that has since contributed decisively to the development of technology and material culture studies in archaeology, anthropology and the social sciences worldwide. More broadly, while Russian and Soviet scholars became acquainted with his more ostensibly “bourgeois” publications on Prehistoric art and religion, they have apparently overlooked or failed to engage with (and, to this day, to translate) *Le Geste et la parole* – undoubtedly one of the boldest and most comprehensive twentieth-century contributions to what is known in Russian scholarship as “anthropogenesis.” For all the differences between their philosophical and their scientific orientations, and of course the century long accumulation of knowledge in between, Leroi-Gourhan's opus clearly stands well on par with Friedrich Engels' inspired conjectures in the *Dialectics of Nature*, notably regarding the role of the erect posture and the liberation of the hand, as both instrument and product, in “The part played by labour in the transition from Ape to Man” (Engels, 1883).¹⁵

¹⁴ On this debate see Bordes, 1967 (in reaction to Semenov's 1964 book) and Semenov's 1968 reply.

¹⁵ It may be mentioned that these dimensions of Leroi-Gourhan's work are beginning to be taken on board by Russian anthropology, for example Krutkin, 2019.



CONCLUSIONS: PINCEVANT, *TERRAIN D'ENTENTE* OR NO-MAN'S-LAND?

If there is a place that could have served as an ideal meeting grounds, a site of mutual recognition and collaboration, it is surely Pincevent – an unimposing floodplain on the banks of the Seine some 80 km south of Paris, where quarrying works led in early May 1964 to the discovery of extraordinarily well-preserved campsites of Magdalenian reindeer hunters dating to some 12,000 years ago. The material disposition and research potential of this site proved to be in several respects similar to those which Leroi-Gourhan had been reviewing in the Russian literature. This familiarity no doubt contributed to his decision to dedicate henceforth most of his energy and institutional resources to the excavation of Pincevent – thereby establishing what is probably the longest running and continuously productive research programme in Palaeolithic archaeology worldwide.¹⁶

Yet, so far as Prehistoric interpretations as such were concerned, this may well have been something of a *rendez-vous manqué*. While the meticulous horizontal peeling or *décapage* of the archaeological layers carried out by Leroi-Gourhan and his teams – known as planimetric excavations – made it possible to recover and document the “living floors” of these ancient “men of every day,” this empirical approach actually left little scope, at least initially, for an inquiry into the modes of production and of reproduction of the socio-economic formations at hand, let alone the study of their “material culture” within the scope of “proletarian archaeology.” Likewise, while the very first scientific presentation of the site's preliminary excavations happened to take place at an anthropological congress held in August 1964 in Moscow, this temporary translocation to Soviet lands seems to have left little repercussions in either country (Leroi-Gourhan, 1970; and Alymov, 2022 on the 1964 congress).

In fact, rather than through some theoretical impacts on archaeological interpretations, the Russian-cum-Soviet affinities of Pincevent manifested themselves at a different level, at the intersection of heritage policies and politico-nationalist ideologies. As just noted, it was upon its partial destruction by the surrounding gravel quarry that the site of Pincevent came to light: the ensuing urgency to protect it from further devastation and to secure its long-term availability for scientific research brought questions of heritage management and legislation to the fore. On these issues, as Leroi-Gourhan knew well, French heritage policies paled in comparison with the protective regulations and centralised initiatives enacted by Soviet archaeology since the 1930, which, as paleolithician Pavel Boriskovski (1965) explained to his French audience in 1964, compelled “the entrepreneurs of large scale works to deduct from their annual budget a sum dedicated to the archaeological research and excavations made necessary by these works, prior to their execution” (p. 8-9). In these post-war years of the *Trentes glorieuses*, rich in infrastructure projects in both rural and urban areas, France was clearly lacking behind in terms of organisation, legislation and personnel as well (Demoule & Schnapp,

¹⁶ On the history of research at Pincevent, see in particular Soulier, 2018, p. 463-481, and Soulier, 2021; also, among numerous other publications, Karlin & Julien, 2012; Ballinger et al., 2014; Valentin et al., 2015.



2024; Négri & Schlanger, 2024). With this comparison in mind, Leroi-Gourhan recorded his frustration in an early report on Pincevent:

Given the tidal wave that the development of major works represents for archaeology, it is timely to point out the scientific inadequacy of many excavations where the gathering of material 'documents' takes precedence over observation. France has shown through a number of works that it is not inferior to the best foreign teams, but five or six insufficiently staffed and equipped prehistoric excavation teams cannot, despite their quality and zeal, cope with thousands of bulldozers. (...) it is to be hoped that this current impetus in archaeology will result in the broadest possible adaptation of research methods to the needs and pace of modern life. (Leroi-Gourhan & Brézillon 1964, pp. 63-64)¹⁷

It is not clear exactly how or by whom – it would make perfect sense to conjecture Leroi-Gourhan's personal involvement – were the merits of Soviet heritage management policies brought to the attention of the relevant officials, and indeed of the highest realms of the Republic. Through an admixture of emulation and competition, equally designed to enhance the archaeology of France and the benevolent reputation of the French state, we find already in November 1964 the novelist and former adventurer André Malraux, now Minister for Cultural Affairs in the government of Général de Gaulle, declaring in his budget parliamentary speech:

“This expression of a national will, essential for us – not nationalistic, but national – concerns first and foremost our heritage. This year, we had to draw up an excavation program. (...) In France, we have discovered the site of Pincevent, the largest Palaeolithic site in the world, *with the exception of the Russian sites*. In just three days, we achieved what we had set out to do [to protect the site].”¹⁸ To make sure that “the Russian sites” in question are understood not just in terms of their purely geographical localisation, let alone their specialised scientific potential, but also in all their political and ideological dimensions as well, Malraux added in another parliamentary speech a couple of years later: “The awakening of archaeology is a fact, given that Pincevent is the largest prehistoric site *on this side of the Iron Curtain*.”¹⁹

¹⁷ “Par contre, devant le raz de marée que représente pour l'archéologie le développement des grands travaux, il est à peine temps encore de souligner l'insuffisance scientifique de nombreuses fouilles où le rassemblement de "documents" matériels prime l'observation, de dire aussi que la France témoigne par un certain nombre de travaux du fait qu'elle n'est pas au-dessous des meilleures équipes étrangères, mais que cinq ou six équipes de fouille préhistoriques insuffisamment étoffées et équipées ne peuvent pas, malgré leur qualité et leur mordant, faire face à des milliers de bull-dozers. (...) Mais il est à souhaiter que l'élan actuel de l'archéologie se traduise par une réadaptation aussi large que possible des méthodes de recherches aux besoins et au rythme de la vie présente.”

¹⁸ “Cette expression d'une volonté nationale, essentielle chez nous – non pas nationaliste, mais nationale – concerne d'abord notre patrimoine (...). En France, on a découvert le gisement de Pincevent, le plus grand gisement paléolithique du monde, exception faite des gisements russes. En trois jours, ce qui était demandé a été obtenu”, André Malraux, Loi de finances pour 1965, “Présentation du budget des affaires culturelles”, Assemblée nationale, séance du 7 novembre 1964, p. 4992 (emphasis added).

¹⁹ “Le réveil de l'archéologie est un fait, puisque Pincevent est le plus grand site préhistorique de ce côté du rideau de fer”. André Malraux, Loi de finances pour 1967 “examen des crédits du ministère des affaires culturelles”, Assemblée nationale, séance du 27 Octobre 1966, p. 3975 (emphasis added).



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