

Moses Finley and his Critics

Harris, W.V. Between archaic and modern: some current problems in the history of the Roman economy, in W.V. Harris ed . The inscribed economy: production and distribution in the Roman Empire in the light of instrumentum domesticum, JRA supplement 6, Ann Arbor, MI 1993, 11-30

1. Ancient Economic History in the Early Twentieth Century

M. Rostovtzeff

Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire 2 vols, 1926 (second edition revised by 1957) and Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World 3 vols 1941

- buoyant view of scale of ancient economy (but little quantification)
- much attention given to archaeological material (R.'s excavations at Dura)
- inimical to Marxism and theory in general
- relatively unreflecting transfer into ancient world of types from a much later period, eg. the bourgeoisie

Tenney Frank et al. Economic Survey of Ancient Rome, Baltimore

- a multivolume work produced in 1930's, consisting of regional surveys that gathered and discussed major epigraphic and archaeological sources for economic activity.
- a cross between a source book and a retelling of traditional accounts with an accent on the economic
- little overall direction: regional specialists followed their own path

Both projects (and others like them) show an interest in the economic, but a distance from how economics were studied elsewhere, whether by classical economists, Marxists, economic anthropologists or others. None show much worry over anachronism, and little over quantitative vagueness (AHM Jones being an exception). Their results cohered with those of traditional ancient history as done by classicists.

2. Finley's Critique

Finley, M.I. The Ancient Economy, first published 1973, 2nd Edtn. London, 1985

- a **substantivist** and **minimalist** account
- thematically rather than chronologically arranged
- drawing on Max Weber and in debate with Marxism
- jargon free, and exemplified by anecdotes from classical literary sources
- and a markedly polemical method: one reason for its success and failure?

3. Different in Kind? Substantivism

KARL POLANYI AND THE CHICAGO SCHOOL

K. Polanyi, A. Arensberg, C. and Pearson, H. W. eds. 1957 Trade and Market in the Early Empires. Economies in History and Theory, Chicago

'embeddedness' as a characteristic of 'primitive' or 'traditional' societies

economic activity *in general* is a function of one's position in society

exchange *in particular* is used primarily to create, reassert, cement or modify social relationships

e.g. **reciprocity** between peers

e.g. **redistribution** between unequals

nb. **market exchange / trade** (I'll buy from anyone, I'll sell to anyone) seen as a threat to social relationships and limited by institutions such as ports-of-trade, use of foreigners as merchants, elite attitudes against trade etc. sometimes seen as a lack of economic rationality

-> Some propositions:

1. ancient economies different in kind from modern ones
2. economic rationalism was absent from the ancient world
3. ancient economies cannot be studied using modern (classical) economic theory, such as the works of Adam Smith, Pareto etc.

Finley as a Substantivist:

- Held propositions 1-3, 3 very firmly
- Identified the social values of ancient élites as constraining their economic activity. Ideal of autarky stifled growth and experiment.
- Regarded market exchange as insignificant compared to the redistributive forces of the state and private benevolence and to (economically irrational) redistribution

Differences from Polanyi.

1. Polanyi saw Aristotle as discovering the economy and initiating a disembedding of the economy. Finley did not see the Classical/Hellenistic divide as anything like as important as late antiquity/the middle ages.
2. More interested in Marxism (the only other theoretically informed kind of ancient history? more important in Europe? interest in his period?)
3. Use of Max Weber's sociology, especially regarding the City and the view that society is organised primarily by Estates rather than Classes on the Marxist view. An Estate is a horizontal group in a state defined by its legal identity: the Senatorial order, the Equestrians, Citizens, Slaves etc.

4. Different in Scale? Minimalism

MINIMIZING ARGUMENTS

How little might have been traded?
Trade simply a few luxuries for a small ruling class?
A world of peasants and few slaves
Insufficient economic punch for 'take off to modernity'

5. Another Agenda: the Origins of Modernity/ Modern World Capitalism

Modernity as the legacy of **the Industrial Revolution + the French and American Revolutions**

Why had the world changed utterly in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries?

Technological change, economic growth, 'progress' of various kinds?

MARXIST ANSWERS

Some Technical Terms in Marxist Scholarship roughly defined

- **Class.** All those who have a similar role in production. A person's real social identity and interests (as opposed to any held through false consciousness, such as of national identity) is determined by his or her class.
- **Class Struggle.** The antagonism that is inevitable between Classes on account of their different and divergent economic interests. In historical perspective, it drives history propelling
- **Mode of Production** A combination of a specific **Means of Production** (such as technology, tools, techniques)+ specific **Relations of Production** e.g. family labour, wage labour, serfdom). The Mode of Production is a fundamental (base) characteristic of a society, it determines how that society is ordered and how long it will endure. It also determines elements of that society that are superstructural, such as ideology.
- **Social Formation:** an economic system composed of one or more Modes of Production, one of which exercises a dominant influence.
- **Contradictions.** Various senses including those systematic weaknesses of a Social Formation or Mode of Production that, emerging through Class Struggle, cumulatively bring about its collapse and supersession by the next, following, stage.

Class Struggle drives movement from one stage (social formation) to another.

A Marxist Grand Narrative

[The Asiatic Mode of Production (*from the Grundrisse*)]

1. Classical Antiquity based on slave labour
2. The middle ages and the growth of trade within feudalism
3. Mercantile capitalism and the collapse of the ancien régime
4. Capitalism, with industrialist and imperialist phases
5. The creation of the modern world capitalist order

What other show was in town?
How much still stands up

6. The Methods of 'The Ancient Economy'

Greco-Roman Antiquity

a self-contained unity?

the common assumption of Marxists and Classicists

-> decisions:

- not to differentiate Greece and Rome
- to periodise Homer->Fall of Roman Empire
- to exclude other ancient empires e.g. Persia, Assyria, India, China

Literary sources

but how *literary* did he consider them?

e.g. Cicero on trade

apparently comfier with Greek world than Roman

Archaeology

the legacy of Rostovtzeff

attacked the failure of archaeologists to quantify their results precisely

relentlessly minimising interpretations

Other sources

legal, epigraphic

problem orientated ancient history versus source based ancient history

The Social Sciences

Finley's wider involvement

the sociologist's ancient historian

work on slavery and other areas of ancient social life

Sociology and the influence of Max Weber

Idealtypen

Estates (as opposed to Classes)

Taxonomic/ Typological approaches

Weber and the City

Anthropology (Cultural, Economic)

Finley's first book *The World of Odysseus*

7. The Politics of 'The Ancient Economy'

Chicago, Marxism and McCarthyism

the flight to Europe
Finley as an anti-Marxist (Whittaker)

Finley and the Marxists

Andreas Carandini and other Italian Marxists
the slave mode of production
Italy and the provinces

Vidal-Naquet, Vernant and French Ancient History
Marxism and Structuralism in French Academe
Les événements (1968 and all that)
Post Marxist ancient history, Veyne, Foucault

Ancient History in the eastern bloc
Slavery
Classes versus Estates.

8. Finleyan Style and its consequences

Finley in his own lifetime

Pupils (a Cambridge School?)
Friendly Enemies - esp. the Marxists

The British Ancient Historical establishment
Syme and prosopography
Momigliano and humanism + historiography
Classicists doing history
text led approaches

Since Finley's death in 1985

the legacy in terms of institutional and personal loyalties

options (in the Finleyan Schema)

	SUBSTANTIVISM	MODERNISM
MINIMALIST	Finley	
MAXIMALIST		Rostovtzeff

The attack on minimalism

historians:

- enduring reputation of Rostovtzeff
- D.Engels (1990) Roman Corinth. An Alternative Model for the Classical City (Chicago)

- Hopkins on trade (taxes & trade, cumulative importance of trade in small good)

archaeologists
quantification e.g. of amphora studies, survey data, production estimates
Mattingly et al. arguing for a bigger economy
recognition of village production

Carandini et al.
Rostovtzeff + Braudel + Wallerstein
Italian (and French) Marxism after the fall of Communism in 1989.

The critique of substantivism

Was the ancient economy socially embedded or not?

Back to the substantivist propositions

1. different in kind?
2. economic rationality?
3. the use of classical economics?

Debates over trade and the involvement of the élite
(e.g. D'Arms, Pleket, Whittaker)

Debates over un-modern ways of functioning
(e.g. Harris and Aubert on law)

Economic rationalism (Rathbone)

SO WHAT'S HAPPENING IN ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY AND WORLD HISTORY?

A. Appadurai ed. 1986 *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge

- Commodification / De-commodification
- Consumption as cultural style, as self actualisation
- Reconciliation of classical economics and gift exchange

How could these be applied to the Roman economy?