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klassischen Griechenland
Theorie – Praxis – Transformation

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RE-THINKING THE ANCIENT ECONOMY, ONCE AGAIN

Neville Morley

I. WHERE ARE WE NOW?

How might the state of the historiography of the ancient economy in the early decades of the twenty-first century be described and understood in ten or twenty years' time, in the *Festschriften* that will some day be dedicated to those scholars who currently dominate the debate, or in the reviews of scholarship presented by future doctoral students? The process of imagining how the current discourse may appear in retrospect offers one means of attempting to step outside our immediate context and assumptions, and to recognise broader, underlying themes and tendencies in our discussions. It prompts us to try to identify not only the major topics and theoretical approaches that currently occupy our attention, but also the ideas that are now being taken largely or entirely for granted, and those that are being neglected or ignored. Of course, as the study of historical narratives has long since established, different accounts can always be given of the same set of events, which have (deliberately or not) varying implications and effects.¹ Our imaginary retrospectives will always be grounded in polemical interpretations of the present – insisting, for example, that the theme of ecology and the environment *will* in future be recognised as central because we believe it *should* be central now – just as the actual reviews of scholarship in the future will be driven by the wish to legitimise the writer's chosen approach by situating it in relation and/or opposition to the earlier traditions of interpretation that she has identified, or invented.

Certainly we can see this occurring in the accounts that are currently offered of the present state of the discipline and its roots in the historical debates of previous decades. One conventional narrative runs as follows: the fierce debates of the 1970s around the ideas of Moses I. Finley and his supporters, a period in which ancient economic history became arguably the most vital and controversial field within the study of antiquity (at least in the anglophone world), were succeeded in the mid-1980s by feelings of boredom and frustration, when the economic debate appeared to have become stale and predictable and so many historians turned to more exciting topics in social and cultural history. Now, however, we are in a position to put those fruitless arguments behind us and to develop a proper understanding of the ancient economy, free from the ideological preconceptions and blinkered perceptions of those earlier scholars. This basic structure of narrative can be found in a

1 See White (1991) and Berkhofer (1995); for a general introduction to ideas of historical narrative, Morley (2013a) 94–105 and, for a discussion focused on ancient economic history, Morley (2006).

variety of recent publications, which otherwise offer quite different accounts of and approaches to antiquity. To begin with two publications that reflect work begun a decade or so ago, Alan Bowman and Andrew Wilson claim that ‘there now appears no need for us to revisit the old “primitivist-modernist debate” in detail’, since it is clearly established (not least in the aftermath of the *Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World* (*CEHGRW*), of which more below, that they are fruitless and that future studies must rest on the proper quantification of economic performance.² Peter Bang in contrast appears highly sceptical of the quantitative approach and its tendency to interpret every aspect of the ancient (and especially the Roman) economy optimistically, making extensive use of terms like ‘sophisticated’ and ‘complex’ as ‘apologetic or defensive value markers’. He insists instead on the need for a proper comparative approach – but this call is founded on an account of the earlier scholarly tradition that is structurally identical to that of Bowman and Wilson, contrasting past impasse with present possibility:

The subject [of Roman trade] has become ‘falsely’ familiar to the scholarly community; positions are well known and deeply entrenched, arguments repetitive and circular, the outcome a stalemate. A clear symptom of this is the continued vitality of the century-old debate between ‘primitivists’ and ‘modernists’. There is an urgent need for a change of perspective.³

The pattern recurs in some more recent publications from younger scholars. Claire Holleran suggests that ‘it has been increasingly recognised in recent years that arguing about the place of Rome on a linear spectrum between two extreme viewpoints is both futile and unhelpful’, and talks of ‘this now stagnant and rather reductionist debate’, as justification for a study that eschews explicit engagement with theoretical issues.⁴ Similarly, Sven Günther calls for a ‘third way’ of approaching the ancient economy, beyond primitivism and modernism, to be found above all in the ideas of the New Institutional Economics, an approach promoted by a number of contributors to the *CEHGRW*.⁵

We might, provocatively, characterise such accounts as ‘Augustan’, by analogy with the interpretations of Roman history promulgated under the Principate: triumphalist narratives in which the unproductive civil strife between the camps of ‘primitivists’ and ‘modernists’ that threatened the field of ancient economic history with irrelevance, if not actual destruction, has finally been succeeded by concord and harmony under the benevolent rule of a new paradigm.⁶ Just as the underlying causes of the civil wars of the first century BCE came to be presented by contemporary historians in terms of the impact of un-Roman luxury and personal ambition, a betrayal of the proper traditions of Rome, so the old arguments that had fuelled the historical debates of the 1970s and 1980s are characterised as an aberration or a distraction from the central task of understanding the ancient economy. In both

2 Bowman & Wilson (2009) 5.

3 Bang (2008) 1; his comments on optimistic and value-laden approaches to antiquity are found at 28–32.

4 Holleran (2012) 23.

5 Günther (2012) 1–2.

6 On Augustan and later versions of the history of the Roman Republic, and the associated politics of memory, see Gowing (2005).

cases, this is of course a rhetorical move which serves as a means of discouraging anyone from reviving such disputes or questioning the new order: who would want to revive an unhelpful discursive stalemate?

In describing current accounts of the historiography of the ancient economy in these terms, I am not disputing the idea that some of those earlier debates had indeed become unproductive and predictable, just as the self-serving nature of Augustan accounts of the history of Republican Rome does not automatically invalidate the picture they offer of the negative consequences of the civil wars. I would suggest, however, that there has been a change, probably an inevitable one, in the underlying motivations of the attempted diagnosis of the limitations of the earlier discussions. We can see a shift from a yearning for new ideas, new questions and new possibilities (as seen in a number of edited volumes published around the turn of the century, which seem to support the idea of a pluralistic approach to ancient economic history in place of a monolithic, predictable debate) to the present deployment of a narrative of crisis replaced by consensus that aims to establish a single theoretical or methodological approach as dominant (even if there are still several different claimants to that position).⁷ It is also worth emphasising the difference between accounts of the earlier debate that seek to present it as always unproductive and now wholly irrelevant to our activity as ancient economic historians, and those that identify the continuing significance of the underlying issues, even while dissenting from many of the substantive claims made by different figures in the debate – as seen for example in Armin Eich's account of the historiography of the ancient economy, which traces continuity in the issues and problems that have confronted different historians.⁸ There are, as I have suggested elsewhere, very different ways of being an ancient economic historian 'after Finley', depending in part on whether one seeks to find new answers to the long-standing issues with which he was engaged, or to dismiss such issues as belonging entirely to the past.⁹

The majority of accounts of ancient economic historiography present it as a purely intellectual development, driven by competing ideas about the nature of antiquity, how to interpret which kinds of evidence and the choice of theories and methodologies, occasionally – for good or ill – influenced by ideas from other disciplines; some also offer a biographical dimension, especially when it comes to Finley's intellectual development (especially his relationship with Polanyi) and influence on a generation of Cambridge ancient historians. What is not generally considered is the relationship between such developments in the realms of ideas and

- 7 Important collections from the late 1990s, opening up the debate about the ancient economy, include Parkins & Smith (1998), Mattingly & Salmon (2001) and Cartledge, Cohen & Foxhall (2002), and a similar intent seems to underpin the selection of published and unpublished articles in Scheidel & von Reden (2002). Parkins (1997) expresses discontent with the existing discourse, without offering much indication of what new directions might be followed instead.
- 8 Eich (2006) 7–104 on the historiographical tradition, 55–63 on the ostentatious efforts of much recent scholarship to distance itself from Finley. It is almost certainly significant that this is a work on the Greek rather than the Roman economy; as Scheidel, Morris & Saller (2007) 5 noted – not, I think, as a compliment – Greek historians have remained more concerned with Finley-esque questions of structure and culture than their Roman counterparts.
- 9 Morley (2013b) 104–11.

disciplinary practices, and external historical circumstances – perhaps because one past attempt at this, Donald Engels’ association of Finley’s ideas with those of Pol Pot and the Sendero Luminoso, was so widely rejected and ridiculed.¹⁰ An interesting exception – interesting not least because the volume is now so often cited as a watershed in the scholarly tradition, marking a break from the past disputes and the inauguration of a new era of enlightenment – is found in Scheidel, Morris & Saller’s introduction to *CEHGRW*, where they offer a critique of purely intellectual conceptions of historiographical development. Their account of previous debates is presented in terms of an ongoing dialectic between structure and performance (they frame the volume as a whole with a quotation from Douglass C. North to the effect that these are the two great themes of all economic history), such that the earliest historians of the ancient economy were focused on performance before Finley and A.H.M. Jones in the 1950s and 1960s pushed the discussion towards the other pole (‘Finley *relentlessly* emphasised structure over performance’; my italics):

Since the 1980s Roman historians have put economic performance back at center stage, although Hellenists still focus more on structure. It might be naïve to assume that this intellectual history has been driven solely by internal forces, with better theories driving out worse ones as evidence improved and scholars engaged in searching mutual critiques. After all, the ancient economy first emerged as an academic issue, focusing on performance, at the height of the so-called ‘first globalization’ in the generation before World War I. International trade and industrial output were booming, and (though we are not aware of any statements to this effect by participants in the primitivist-modernist controversy) this historical context may well have made economic performance an obvious and important issue for classical scholars to address. The shift towards structure and what Hopkins called the ‘cellular self-sufficiency’ model took place against the background of mid-twentieth-century barriers to international movements of capital, goods, and people, growing statism, and increasing concern over market failures and redistributive welfare economies; and the swing of interest back towards performance and markets coincides with the ‘second globalization’ since the 1980s.¹¹

The idea that there may be a connection between the ‘optimistic’ readings of ancient economic development and the conditions of the early twentieth century is entirely plausible, not least because Rostovtzeff for one drew explicit parallels between the two, offering antiquity as a reassurance to those bewildered by contemporary developments because it showed that such radical transformations had occurred previously.¹² A link between the ideas of Finley, Jones, Polanyi and the like, and the economic failures and subsequent political catastrophes of the 1930s and 1940s,

10 Engels (1990) 131–42.

11 Scheidel, Morris & Saller (2007) 5.

12 Rostovtzeff (1926) 10: ‘The creation of a uniform world-wide civilisation and of similar social and economic conditions is now going on before our eyes over the whole expanse of the civilised world. This process is complicated, and it is often difficult to clear up our minds about it. We ought therefore to keep in view that this condition in which we are living now is not new, and that the ancient world also lived, for a series of centuries, a life which was uniform in culture and politics, in social and economic conditions. The modern development, in this sense, differs from the ancient only in quantity and not in quality.’ Cf. Morley (2015) on the history of applying the concept of ‘globalization’ to the Roman Empire.

could likewise be developed in much more depth and detail, but is basically convincing.¹³

While Scheidel, Morris & Saller's potted narrative has a somewhat Hegelian air, moving under its own internal dynamic from thesis (early twentieth-century focus on economic performance) to antithesis (late twentieth-century focus on structure) to synthesis (their own combination of the two, though with a clear tendency to emphasise performance again), they do concede the possibility that this new interest in economic growth and transformation may also be influenced by contemporary developments – up to a point.

But it would also be naïve to reduce the 115 years of debate to mere reflections of underlying socioeconomic forces. The changing world we live in surely makes certain questions about the past seem more interesting than others ... but it does not shape the data themselves ... If contemporary developments got some Roman historians interested in economic growth in the late 1970s, their questions won support because they drew attention to the fact that Rome's emergence as a superpower in the last centuries BC must have transformed the Mediterranean into a network to feed it.¹⁴

Contemporary globalisation is an impetus to consider such questions, but they turn out to be firmly supported by the ancient evidence and current interpretations of it, rather than mere reflections of the world beyond the academy. Perhaps Scheidel, Morris and Saller would just as readily concede that the response of Finley et al. to the events of their own times likewise led them to identify real, significant aspects of the ancient economy and its limits – but they do not say so; the reader is left to assume that the emphasis on growth and dynamism in *CEHGRW* reflects objective historical fact, or at least a current consensus, whereas the ideas and debates of earlier decades are fully historicised, shown to have been overtaken by subsequent events and thus kept firmly in the past.

The editors of *CEHGRW* could scarcely have anticipated how quickly their own confident conclusions would be revealed as thoroughly context-dependent. It seems a reasonable assumption that our putative future scholar, looking back with hindsight at the current state of discussion of the ancient economy and following the same procedure of relating it to the broader historical context, will ascribe considerable importance to the global economic crash that began in 2007 – in a pleasing coincidence, the same year as the volume was published.¹⁵ From this historicising perspective, the volume's broadly optimistic view of ancient economic development, the power of markets and money, the transformative power of trade and globalisation and so forth appears as a straightforward reflection of the similarly bullish claims made by the cheerleaders of globalisation, which have now largely been placed in question. Above all, it becomes easier to see how one-sided and ideological this account of global development in the late twentieth century was; how much it ignored or simply excluded from consideration, such as the very un-

13 Some relevant discussion, albeit in passing, in Harris (2013a).

14 Scheidel, Morris & Saller (2007) 3–4.

15 In this respect, I would like to claim that Morley (2007) showed at least a modicum of pre-science, offering some sceptical comments on the uneven benefits of trade and the potential instability of a fully integrated global economy.

equal distribution of costs and benefits (between regions, countries and classes), the mixed consequences of sweeping away barriers and controls for everyone except corporations and the super-rich, and the extent to which the process of globalisation might be experienced in practice as compulsion, even though it was presented as pure opportunity and freedom.¹⁶ Books which had been criticising aspects of contemporary globalisation before the crash suddenly appeared to be highly prescient.¹⁷

We might push this analysis a little further. Recent discussions of the relationship between the dominant economic theories of the last few decades and the breakdown of the global economic order have focused not only on the failure of the former to predict the latter but on the extent to which the former contributed to the latter, through the legitimisation and promotion of an agenda that can broadly be labelled ‘neoliberalism’.¹⁸ Ancient economic historians bear substantially less responsibility for global economic crisis than academic economists and their students, but it is still plausible to identify some striking parallels between the assumptions and arguments promoted in much recent historical work, encapsulated in the would-be definitive *CEHGRW*, and the dominant assumptions of neoliberal thought. There are clear structural resemblances between the relative denigration of ‘structure’ in contemporary analysis of the ancient economy, with the insistence that performance is what truly matters, and the neoliberal emphasis on the power of the free market (assumed to be universal) as the only significant factor in human activity and the only significant measure of achievement and value. Still more striking is the drive to minimise the role of the state and highlight that of private enterprise and entrepreneurship in the ancient world, clearly echoing the neoliberal ideology that regards the state as an impediment to growth and prosperity. In the contemporary critique of ‘structural’ approaches to the ancient economy, it is cultural values and attitudes that are most frequently dismissed as irrelevant, and as being irrevocably tainted by the ‘substantivist’ tradition; the supposed evidence of dramatic improvement in economic performance in antiquity is taken to be evidence that the apparently ‘primitive’ ideas found in ancient thought cannot really have operated to any significant degree in reality – directly paralleling the neoliberal assumption that human motivation can be reduced to the rational maximisation of utility. The adoption of the ideas of the New Institutional Economics by ancient historians, an approach which seems to accord at least some value to non-economic institutions like the state, can equally be seen as reductionist, as it conceives of those institutions solely in terms of their role in promoting and supporting market activity.¹⁹ In brief, the dominant ideas of ancient economic history over the last few decades echo the dominant ideas of neoliberal economics not only in their optimism about the beneficent powers of the market, globalisation and modernisation, but in their underlying assumptions about the nature of human motivation and the dynamics of human society.

16 See for example Grewal (2008); Lanchester (2010).

17 E.g. Madeley (2000), Stiglitz (2002).

18 See for example Harvey (2005), Chang (2010), Quiggin (2012).

19 Cf. Farrell (2009) 5–17, exploring trust in modern contexts.

Just as ‘zombie’ economic ideas like the efficient markets hypothesis continue to dominate most policy discussions in Europe and the United States, despite the manifest failures of pure market systems and the fact that banks and businesses had to depend on states and on society as a whole to absorb their losses and put the world economy back on any sort of track, so there is as yet little sign of post-2007 radical shifts in the approach of most ancient economic historians. The ideas of New Institutional Economics (NIE) continue to be promoted as the best means of making sense of ancient economic behaviour.²⁰ Historians persist in gathering as much quantitative data as possible, as if this will automatically reveal truths about the ancient economy, whereas clearly both the gathering of the data and its interpretation are driven by often-unexamined assumptions about economic structures and processes of development.²¹ The idea persists that the volume and complexity of economic activity in the ancient world, especially under the Roman Empire, must demonstrate the sophistication (not to say modernity) of its economic organisation and above all the development of its market system, thus ‘disproving’ those historians who persist in following a modified version of Finley’s emphasis on the distinctiveness and relative otherness of antiquity – an idea which rests wholly on the assumption that economic growth is possible only on the basis of a modern market system, crudely conceived.²² Professional ancient historians have generally offered a more nuanced view on this topic than Peter Temin and his claims to have established the incontrovertible existence of a market economy in the Roman Empire – but that is, one might argue, because of their innate preference for detail and particularity, and a certain aversion to generalisation, rather than because they have startlingly different assumptions on economic matters, or a different model of the ancient economy to present.²³

II. WHERE ARE WE GOING?

Accounts of disciplinary development, in any discipline, are always at least partly teleological and polemical. Some offer an account of the past that represents the present as the logical, inevitable culmination of scholarly endeavour and the gradual refinement of understanding. Thus the *CEHGRW* orthodoxy is presented (by its admirers as much as by its editors and contributors) as a triumphant synthesis of earlier perspectives: learning from their mistakes, rejecting their misconceptions and recognising the ways in which they were unduly influenced by contemporary political and historical circumstances, in order to break free from unproductive ar-

- 20 Which does not of course preclude such studies producing interesting findings, e.g., Terpstra (2013); it is simply the risk that such an approach is believed to offer a *complete* account of its subject.
- 21 See the discussions of quantification, its advantages and limits, in de Callatay (2014).
- 22 And cf. Bang (2008) 32: ‘Words such as complex and sophisticated often appear in texts mainly as apologetic or defensive value markers.’
- 23 Temin (2013); the characterisation of historians’ broadly ‘humanistic’ approach to generalisation is drawn from Morris (2001).

guments and ideological impasse. Others offer an account of the past that seeks to critique the present, showing how things might have developed differently – one might argue that the ideas of Finley were not defeated intellectually so much as they fell out of step with the times, especially the triumph of the neoliberal project in Europe and the United States – and to argue for a change of direction. This is, obviously, the sort of account offered here. Any attempt at imagining the future development of the discipline – to imagine how some future historian might identify our present as a period of transition, in which the first green shoots of new approaches and understanding can, in retrospect, be discerned amidst the frozen, unproductive wasteland of discredited neoliberal assumptions – cannot help but be more polemical still, based solely on an idea of what I find interesting and imagine might be productive. But I shall attempt this anyway, by identifying three themes on which ancient historians might profitably concentrate – or continue to concentrate – their attention in future.

(1) Firstly, we need to maintain a broad comparative focus, reuniting the study of Greece, Rome and other contemporary societies. There has been a certain tendency in recent decades to treat the Roman economy, and especially Rome under the Principate, as quite separate and distinct from the rest of classical antiquity; its modernity and sophistication are emphasised, in contrast to earlier periods (this often provides grounds for denigrating Finley's account of the ancient economy, as being excessively based on the less developed societies of Greece). Sometimes perception of a more developed Rome is then reflected back onto Greece, or onto certain periods of Greek history, insisting that they too should be considered in more modern terms; the contrast between Rome and the rest of antiquity is presented as to some extent the product of modern historiography rather than a reflection of historical reality, so that – as in the quotation from Scheidel, Morris & Saller above – Roman historians are seen to have recognised the need to focus on performance earlier than did the Greek historians, who now need to learn from them.²⁴ In other words, 'antiquity' is to be defined by the periods and states that look most modern and advanced; and the interesting questions for historians are understood to be those relating to growth and development. However, if classical Greece cannot easily be made to conform to this paradigm – and, while there are of course some historians who do interpret it in these terms, the fact that there is a *debate* means that it cannot so easily be incorporated into the narrative of consensus about the level of development of the ancient economy discussed above – then it simply has to be ignored. Greek historians who offer alternative and less 'optimistic' accounts of ancient economic behaviour and structures, with implications for the economies of the ancient world more generally – I think particularly of the work on the development of money by scholars like Sitta von Reden, Lesley Kirke and Richard Seaford – tend then to be marginalised within the discipline as a whole, as if their accounts apply at best only to the more primitive, pre-Roman societies.²⁵ Studies of the economies of the Hellenistic world – which have, understandably, sought to

24 In preliminary discussions among contributions to *CEHGRW*, this view was more or less explicitly stated on one occasion.

25 See, e.g., von Reden (2010); Kurke (1999); Seaford (2004).

draw on ideas from Roman history in seeking to understand the operations of complex, globalised state organisations – tend to be treated as precursors to the Roman development that reinforce its modern nature.²⁶

In important respects, Rome *was* different from the world of the Hellenistic kingdoms, let alone from classical or archaic Greece. There clearly are serious problems with any notion of a single ‘ancient economy’ covering a thousand years, just as there are serious problems in assuming homogeneity across all the different regions that were, at one time or another, incorporated into the world of classical antiquity. On the other hand, there were also clear similarities and continuities. It certainly makes sense, as scholars like Peter Bang and Walter Scheidel have argued, to consider Rome in comparison to other pre-modern empires and states, and to look eastwards to India or China as well as forward in time to the more familiar (and more temptingly proto-modern) societies of western Europe in later periods.²⁷ But equally we are talking about a particular state formation that developed out of earlier systems, within longer-term structures of environment and culture that united it to the world of the archaic and early classical periods. Rome, and to a significant degree also the Hellenistic world, pushed further against the ‘limits of the possible’ than other classical societies, especially those in earlier periods; but to understand the nature of those limits, both physical and cultural, and the different human responses to them, the study of those other societies is at least as important as the study of the development of other imperial systems in different contexts.

(2) Secondly, there is the clear importance of engaging with social scientific approaches to the study of the economy. This imperative is of course a truism of the current consensus, acknowledging Finley’s pioneering work in this area while rejecting what is seen as his irrational and ill-informed dismissal of modern economic theory in favour of ideas drawn from sociology and anthropology. However, this consensus is, considered in terms of its theoretical assumptions and preferred analytical concepts, remarkably narrow. There may now be an agreement that social-scientific methods and ideas are appropriate and useful, if not indispensable – but in practice only certain methods and ideas are adopted or even considered. Above all, as discussed above, this means the approach of NIE, which frequently serves simply as a means of insisting that all the elements of ancient society that appear unusual and context-specific are actually just manifestations of the same old universal principles of ‘economic man’. It is not just that the consensus adopts the perspective of mainstream economics rather than that of other disciplines that engage with economic issues such as sociology or anthropology, which are scarcely mentioned in recent volumes like *CEHGRW* or Scheidel’s new *Companion to the Roman Economy*. Rather, it adopts only a narrow range of approaches from mainstream economics, for the most part rather dated. Ancient economic historians remain, it seems, largely oblivious to many new developments in the field of economics over the last two decades, that actually raise serious questions about the assumptions conventionally made by other economists and as a result by themselves about

26 On Hellenistic economies, see, e.g., Archibald et al. (2001), Archibald et al. (2005) and Archibald (2013).

27 Bang (2008); Scheidel (2009).

human motivation and behaviour, the determinants of economic performance and the operations and limitations of markets.

Two lines of investigation seem especially relevant and potentially fruitful for ancient economic historians. The first is to reinstate an interest in the role of culture in shaping the economic motivation and behaviour of ancient actors, at the heart of our discussions. As discussed above, the neoliberal consensus seeks to downplay this theme, despite its importance within the traditions of the discipline since the days of Karl Marx and Max Weber, above all because of the perception that it over-emphasises the differences between antiquity and later periods, and calls into question the application of modern economic models. However, this is based on a number of misapprehensions. In the first place, as is increasingly recognised in mainstream economic discussions, economic models do not represent the realities of *modern* motivation and behaviour either – they are simplified abstractions developed for the sake of isolating certain variables and their implications, and the vagaries of ‘the human thing’ are almost invariably among the first complexities to be assumed away for the sake of the argument – and so there is no more of a case for rejecting their (sensitive and qualified) application to antiquity than to the present. At the same time, there is a growing volume of work in economics and related disciplines exploring economic motivation and the influence of cultural conceptions and values on decision-making, which we can usefully draw upon in analysing ‘ancient economic thought’ – which should be imagined in far broader terms than the little ancient writing that resembles modern economic theory – and its likely consequences for behaviour.²⁸ Finally, it seems strange to wish to play down the differences between classical antiquity and later periods, except insofar as the motive is an ideological one, simply to enlist it as another minor example in support of modern assumptions – trade and the profit motive must be universal because even Greek and Roman society operated in those terms. The main opportunity for ancient historians to make a constructive contribution to the understanding of human economic behaviour and organisation is surely to be found in the study of particularity and difference, as part of a comparative study of how different societies and cultures organise their world, both mentally and materially, in different ways. We will understand the present better through a combination of comparison and contrast with the past, rather than simply reducing the past to a pale imitation and supposed forerunner of the present.²⁹

This, one might say, is the presiding spirit of the book that suggests another fruitful line of investigation. Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, although published in English barely a year ago, has been hailed as the most important work in political economy for many years.³⁰ While much of its reception has involved excessive hype and political point-scoring, and numerous reviews where the reviewer has evidently not read the entire book, there is no doubt that Piketty’s work makes a significant contribution to the understanding of inequality and wealth

28 See for example Kahneman & Tversky (2000); Bronk (2009); Beugelsdijk & Maseland (2011).

29 This is the underlying argument of Morley (2009).

30 Piketty (2014). For an excellent review of his major arguments from a writer with knowledge of the historiography of the ancient economy, see Grewal (2014).

in the present, and has reinstated those themes as central to the interpretation of economic systems. He also offers a striking new way of approaching the workings of the economy, drawing as much on historical sources and nineteenth-century novels as on abstract equations. Piketty makes only a few passing mentions of pre-modern societies, including classical antiquity, generally emphasising their lack of significant development in comparison to the modern era. However, his work does have significant implications for research in ancient economic history as well as modern, and at the very least offers a stimulating starting-point for debate that goes beyond the traditional polarities of modernism and primitivism. From this perspective, it is clear that the dynamics of growth under the Roman Empire have scarcely been considered, as historians have largely contented themselves with establishing its existence and assuming that this demonstrates antiquity's relative modernity. Piketty's study highlights the need to disaggregate public and private wealth, and to compare rates of capital accumulation with rates of productivity growth, in order to understand the real social consequences of a developing economy. Insofar as some other ancient historians have taken a more pessimistic line, emphasising the persistence of massive inequalities within ancient society, Piketty offers a means of understanding the roots and effects of this inequality within the organisation of the economy, and its relation to demographic structures and processes. These two strands together offer the possibility of developing a new understanding of the specific dynamics of the economy of classical antiquity, and of the role of economic theory in this study. Again, ancient historians have the opportunity to make a serious contribution to wider economic debates, exploring the particular dynamics of ancient societies in relation to these broader themes and thus testing Piketty's general theses against concrete evidence.

(3) In recent decades, the dependence of human society on its environment and hence its vulnerability to the ongoing consequences of climate change and environmental degradation have been ever more unmistakable. This dependence and vulnerability were still greater in pre-modern societies, even those as complex and sophisticated as the Roman Empire. Reliance on organic sources of energy (above all, human and animal muscle power and wood) left them at the mercy of the productivity of land, with strict limits on how far this productivity could be increased, especially over the medium and long term. While the Romans displayed considerable ingenuity in such areas as agriculture and the management of water, they lacked the technological and scientific capacity to insulate themselves to any significant degree from the forces of nature, and hence lived in a world that was dominated by risk and uncertainty.

Over the last twenty-five years, a small number of pioneering works have established the study of the ancient Mediterranean environment as an essential field, while archaeologists and scientists have amassed impressive amounts of data on climate, changing plant life, agricultural practices and the like. Towards the end of the millennium, a number of pioneering publications seemed to be about to establish environmental and ecological approaches at the heart of ancient history. Robert Sallares established the revolutionary potential of an ecological perspective, challenging conventional views of ancient society and conventional, anthropocentric

approaches to its history.³¹ Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell offered an enormously rich and broad account of different aspects of the society, economy and environment of the region, establishing the centrality of terms like connectivity and the fragmented, unpredictable nature of the climate and topography, and exploring the implications of this for conventional accounts of ancient history.³² This work, particularly that of Horden & Purcell, has been quite widely read and cited within ancient history, and there have been several subsequent conferences on their ideas.³³

However, remarkably little attention has been paid to this in accounts of the Roman economy, which continue to perceive the environment as a passive background to historical developments, merely a source of raw materials, rather than an active force shaping and limiting Roman society. The Romans may sometimes be ascribed a heroic role in transforming and controlling nature (the possible negative effects of this are rarely considered), but they are not seen as merely part of a complex, dynamic system. There is a chapter by Sallares on ecology in *CEHGRW*, but it sits in isolation and seems to have little connection to the other chapters, whereas it should by rights be informing the entire discussion. The new *Cambridge Companion to the Roman Economy* does include ‘ecology’ in its index, but all the references are to demography (a particular interest of Scheidel, the editor); there is some passing attention to the sources of raw materials, but certainly little sign of a serious engagement with ecology or with the relation between economic structures and the environment more generally.³⁴ The potentially revolutionary or subversive impact of ecological approaches, demanding – as Sallares argued – a complete re-thinking of all our conceptions of ancient history, has instead resulted just in the establishment of a new sub-field, relatively isolated from other areas. Ancient economic historians draw on the material gathered by archaeologists and environmental historians where it suits them, but they incorporate this data into pre-existing scholarly paradigms rather than use it to question existing assumptions more thoroughly. As the importance of ecological and environmental considerations in shaping the economic structures of the future – above all, in bringing human society up against the ‘limits of the possible’ – become ever harder to ignore, ancient historians once again have an opportunity to contribute to the debate.

The future of ancient economic history: comparative, cultural, ecological and engaged with fundamental issues of structural inequality and the limits of development. A discipline that could scarcely be more different from the present neoliberal consensus, and which is yet unmistakably the product of the same traditions of thought. *Oikonomia* rather than *chrēmatistikē*.

31 Sallares (1991).

32 Horden & Purcell (2000).

33 Harris (2005); Harris (2013b).

34 Scheidel (2012) 10–12 and index for ‘ecology’.

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AFTERWORD

This chapter was completed in March 2015, and its critique of the ‘present’ state of ancient economic history must be read in that context. Of course I would not write in exactly the same terms today, although the last six years have produced plenty of publications that tend, I think, to support my characterisation of the *CEHGRW*, *NIE* and quantification consensus (e.g., Ober 2015; Droß-Krüpe 2016; Bowman & Wilson 2017; and see the overview in von Reden 2015 and the recent critique offered by Bowes 2021). It has been heartening to see exciting new research in precisely the areas which I polemically suggested should be the focus of future activity: comparative approaches to the study of the ancient economy (e.g., Scheidel 2017; Bang, Bayly & Scheidel 2021); the use of a wider range of social-scientific methods and theories, including different branches of economics (e.g., Canervaro et al. 2018; Elliott 2020; Rosillo-López & García Morcillo 2021; Verboven 2021); and much greater attention to the role of environmental factors (Manning 2018; Bowes 2020). This is only a small and somewhat random selection of recent publications, and I have no idea whether it yet represents a new consensus rather than just a powerful challenge to the old one, but it is at the least a cause for optimism.