3. Beyond 'Romanization': Technologies of Power in Roman Britain

by C. Forcey

...apart from the better sanitation and medicine and education and irrigation and public health and roads and freshwater system and baths and public order...what *have* the Romans done for *us* ? (*Monty Python's Life of Brian* 1992:20).

Rabbi Judah began and said: "how excellent are the deeds of this nation. They have instituted market places, they have instituted bridges, they have instituted baths"...Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai answered and said "all that they have instituted they have instituted only for their own needs. They have instituted the market places to place harlots in them; baths, for their own pleasure; bridges to collect toll"... (Babylonian Talmud *Sabbath* 33b, quoted in Lewis and Reinhold 1966:414).

Introduction

From the time of Mommsen and Haverfield, to the present day, a major theme of discourse amongst Romano-British scholars has been the topic of 'Romanization'. This discourse has (often) used the classic section twenty-one of Tactitus's *Agricola* as an exemplary text (see below for a transcription). The idea of 'Romanization', however, has never been adequately defined and has meant different things to different people. It remains an abstract descriptive term without any evident explanatory power. How this Platonic abstraction of 'Romanization' is related to the real life struggles of the men and women who are the subjects of history, remains a mystery. Moreover, the fossilisation of this term in the discourse of Romanists in the present century, seems to have inhibited any further theorisation of historical process. This is slowly being changed by recent work which has begun to show the inadequacies of the traditional formulation of the idea of 'Romanization' (Hingley 1996; Barrett forthcoming). The time is therefore ripe for new, more credible theories of social change (Scott 1993). By employing the ideas of Antonio Gramsci on domination and hegemony, I hope to restore human actors and action to the scene of Roman Britain. Within this new perspective we will see social history in terms of a continuing negotiation between the dominant power of Rome and indigenous social groups. Incorporation of such groups into the dominant bloc produced new configurations of social forces and produced new oppositions. A narrative that stressed the continuing dialectic and transformation of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic blocs within society would give a more credible account of social change than one that uses the abstract, ambiguous and inert concept of 'Romanization'. Finally, in the light of Gramsci's theory of domination and hegemony

the exemplary text from Tacitus's *Agricola* can itself be interpreted in a more credible and realistic fashion.

The Discourse of 'Romanization'

The discourse of 'Romanization' (or 'Romanizing') was introduced by Mommsen in his seminal work *The Provinces of the Roman Empire* (first published 1885) which included a chapter on Britain (Mommsen 1968:179–205). Mommsen's theme was elaborated in a more rigorous way by Haverfield in *The Romanization of Roman Britain* which was first published in 1906 (subsequent editions 1912, 1915, 1923). Haverfield (following Mommsen) asserted that "the greatest work of the imperial age must be sought in its provincial administration" (Haverfield 1923:9–10). He stressed the benefit to the natives of Britain of incorporation into the civilised community of the wider Roman Empire. This involved the Romanization of Britain in language, material culture, 'art', town life, local government, land tenure and religion (Haverfield 1923:29–73). By stressing the Roman contribution, Haverfield was, in part, reacting against a 'nativist' view which he thought was due to "the revival of Welsh national sentiment" that "has inspired a hope, which has become a belief, that the Roman conquest was an episode, after which an unaltered Celticism resumed its interrupted supremacy" (Haverfield 1923:23). This view was advocated by Haverfield's contemporary, Vinogradoff, in *The Growth of the Manor* (1911). Vinogradoff claimed that Romanization was a superficial veneer applied to an underlying and continuing 'Celtic' social system. The contrasting but complementary positions of Haverfield the 'Romanist' and Vinogradoff the 'Nativist' set the terms for a debate which has continued, intermittently, to the present day. This debate concerned the extent and depth of the Romanization of Roman Britain, and left unquestioned the status of the term 'Romanization' itself. Unfortunately, however, the uncritical use of the word 'Romanization' has itself engendered a series of paradoxes within the discipline of Romano-British studies. This can possibly best be illustrated by the fortunes of the 'town and country' controversy.

Haverfield's disciple Collingwood, saw urbanisation as the first fruits of Romanization. However, possibly due to 'the deep rooted Celtic tradition of life' and despite 'the most earnest efforts of the Roman governors', urbanisation had failed by the third century AD (Collingwood & Myres 1937:207). According to Collingwood the failure of Romanization in the towns was compensated for by a second wave: a Romanization of the country (for the elite only) represented by the spectacular growth of large villas with Classical style mosaics, hypocausts, baths etc. in the fourth century (Collingwood & Myres 1937:207–225). Collingwood's Romano-British synthesis remained an unchallenged orthodoxy for many years. Eventually, however, a nativist counter-attack on Collingwood's view of the villas was led by Smith in his article: *Villas as a key to social structure* (1978). Smith maintained that the form of the villas has no clear Italian prototype and suggested that their 'unit system' of duplicate rooms and buildings reflected and embodied Celtic social structure (i.e. partible inheritance). The nativist theme is continued by Richard Reece (1980, 1988) who follows Collingwood's view with regard to the failure of Romanization indicated by the decline of the towns. According to Reece's well known organic metaphor, the town was 'a tender Mediterranean plant' which did not take deep root in the stony Celtic soil of Britain and withered in the storms of the third century (Reece 1980:78). Reece, however, disagrees with Collingwood's view that the villas represent 'Roman style' country-living and the final triumph of Romanization; according to him they represent, by contrast, the re-assertion of long held Celtic values. Hingley (1989) confronts,

but fails to overcome, the Roman/native dichotomy. He agrees with Collingwood that the villas are the product of a Romanized elite who attempt to supersede and transgress established Celtic social practice in the matter of landholding. On the other hand, he also seems to agree with Smith that the form of the 'unit system' of the villas reflects and embodies Celtic social structure (!).

The trend of much recent work is a reversion to the views of Vinogradoff. Once again the 'Roman veneer' is applied to a Celtic woodwork (Cunliffe 1995:116–7; Burnham 1995:121; for a graphic illustration of the 'Roman veneer' in action see Simon James' classic cartoon in Reece 1988:ii). The continued use of such homespun metaphors, and the continued uncritical use of such terms as 'Romanization' only serve to demonstrate the poverty of theory in Romano-British studies. They result in historical conundrums which are less to do with the nature of the evidence, than with the inadequacies of our own conceptual framework. I think that the concept or (to use Max Weber's terminology) the 'ideal-type' denoted by the term 'Romanization' is of limited use and that we should replace it with terminology which adequately delineates the dynamic of social change. According to Max Weber:

> there are sciences to which eternal youth is granted, and the historical disciplines are among them – all those to which the eternally flowing stream of culture perpetually brings new problems. At the heart of their task lies not only the transiency of all ideal types but also at the same time the inevitability of new ones (cited in Albrow 1990:152).

Stressing 'eternal youth' rather than eternal verities, I think we should take a rest from the sterile discourse of 'Romanization' and engage in the more stimulating, productive and contemporary discourse of power (Scott 1993). To do this I will draw on some of the ideas of the Marxist philosopher and social theorist Antonio Gramsci (the influence of Foucault – the most profound analyst of power since the time of Gramsci – will also be apparent in what I say below).

The Meta-narrative of Romanization (White 1973)

It is notable that the terms used in the discourse of Romanization are essentialist and de-historicizing. 'Native' and 'Roman' are opposed as abstract, timeless essences linked by the ambiguous middle term of Romanization. The actors in this drama apparently remain the same whether we are talking of the first or the fourth century: the construction of urban facilities in the AD 50's and the belated building of an extension on a villa in the AD 390's can equally be adduced as the operations of the mysterious, timeless force of 'Romanization'. And although the Romanist and nativist paradigms are opposed, the characters and much of the method of employment are similar. Roman and native are engaged in a comedy of errors involving the various attempts to Romanize the latter. There are many misunderstandings, Boudiccan revolts, failures of urbanisation, intransigent highland lifestyles and such like, until the eventual final reconciliation or 'happy ending'. There are different accounts, however, on the nature and time of this reconciliation. According to the classic Romanist view (for instance Frere 1987 or Salway 1981), the natives, after initially asserting their inherent Celtic dignity under the aegis of Caratacus, Boudicca, Venutius and the disgruntled Silures, decide that they cannot beat the system and so settle down and decide that it is probably the best policy to do as the Romans do. However, according to the nativist view (Hingley 1989) this is a misapprehension, the natives have been engaged in an elaborate charade, and only wore a Roman mask in order to get ahead in

the world (Millett 1990); finally they achieve their inclination to resume the good old Celtic tradition of country living (Reece 1980). I do not think that the use of a comedic meta-narrative to tell the story of Roman Britain is absolutely necessary. That an alternative to the dominant comedic narrative is possible is shown by the work of Tacitus (for Britain see *Agricola*; *Annals* XII: 31–40, XIV:29–39; *Histories* I: 59–60; III: 45) who writes in a mode of tragic-irony. This savage tone of Tacitus's writing has, however, caused great offence to the sensibilities of Romanists, at least since the time of Mommsen (Mellor 1993) and the modern optimistic school of Romano-British narrators have desperately tried to mitigate its impact (see further below where I examine the selective readings of *Agricola* 21 given by both Romanist and nativist narrators before I attempt a re-assessment of it in the light of Gramsci's insights into social theory, which I consider next).

Domination and Hegemony

According to Gramsci, the maintenance of the rule of a government involves a dual process of *domination* and *hegemony*. *Domination* is the imposition of force by the ruling class as a means of maintaining their power. This is commonly achieved through the use of an army. The ruling group will try to hold the monopoly of such 'means of destruction'. However, the maintenance of rule cannot be achieved without some form of consent and collaboration from at least certain classes of the governed. *Hegemony* involves obtaining such consent from within the governed. This entails complex forms of interaction, of political, cultural and ideological negotiation in which the dominant power appeals to at least some of the interests of the governed whilst always holding the upper hand (*argumentum ad baculum*). Hegemony is a dynamic process and has to react to changing circumstances within social groups. There must be constant re-negotiation between the ruling group and subaltern groups if hegemony is to be maintained. Hegemony does not embrace all aspects of society and has to engage with other counter-hegemonic forces within society. Engagement with counter hegemonic forces – resistance – modifies the nature of domination and is partly constitutive of it (Gramsci 1971; Boggs 1976:36–55; Mouffe 1979; Eagleton 1991:112–123).

Roman *domination* was achieved through the use (actual or potential) of the Roman army (Lutwakk 1976). However, the continued maintenance of Roman rule and the Roman peace in the civilian sphere could not be ensured by military means alone and the exigencies of cost in a pre-industrial society limited the numbers of imperial government officials. On the political level some involvement of native elites was necessary for the efficient functioning of the empire. Concomitantly, such involvement legitimated Roman rule to a certain extent in the eyes of some sections of the native elite. Roman *hegemony* was achieved by incorporating native elites within the dominant ruling bloc to some extent (see Tacitus *Annals* 11.22–25 for the success of Rome in this respect compared to the disastrous imperial policies of the Athenians and Spartans). The Roman state and the Roman upper classes, whose interests it upheld, had the leading role. However, the Roman system of rule allowed native elites some local autonomy within the sphere of local government of the *civitates* at least (Lintott 1993). By this means the provincial elite maintained and enhanced their status within the new Roman social order (Millet 1990). As part of this process there was an overall increase in the size of the ruling elite within the empire (Lewis & Reinhold 1966:410). The combination of domination and hegemony is well expressed by the ancient author Aelius Aristides in his panegyric *To Rome* written in the mid-second century:

> You have no need to garrison their citadels; the biggest and most influential men every-
> where keep watch over their own native places for you. You have a double hold upon
> those cities – from right here and through the Roman citizens in each (Aelius Aristides
> *To Rome* quoted in Lewis & Reinhold 1966:136).

The active co-operation of native elites in the imperial system was not, however, a foregone
conclusion. The process was facilitated by various interlinked political, economic, cultural and
ideological strategies (Webster 1996). In the political sphere, the extension of the franchise – i.e.
the Roman citizenship – to the provincials was a tried and trusted way of associating them with the
dominant power of Rome. If we believe Livy, this policy can be traced back to the incorporation
of the Sabines at the time of the foundation of Rome (Sherwin-White 1973). Such political
'Romanization', however, was supplemented with other economic, cultural and ideological strat-
egies. This is well brought out in the well known, but, nonetheless, illuminating passage from the
Agricola by the Roman historian Tacitus:

> The following winter was spent on schemes of the most salutary kind. To induce a people,
> hitherto scattered, uncivilised and therefore prone to fight, to grow pleasurably inured to
> peace and ease, Agricola gave private encouragement and official assistance to the build-
> ing of temples, public squares [fora] and private mansions. He praised the keen and scolded
> the slack, and competition to gain honour from him was as effective as compulsion.
> Furthermore, he trained the sons of the chiefs in the liberal arts and expressed a prefer-
> ence for British natural ability over the trained skill of the Gauls. The result was that in
> place of distaste for the Latin language came a passion to command it. In the same way,
> our national dress came into favour and the toga was everywhere to be seen. And so the
> Britons were gradually led on to the amenities that make vice agreeable – arcades, baths
> and sumptuous banquets. They spoke of such novelties as 'civilisation', when really they
> were only a feature of [their] enslavement (Tacitus *Agricola* 21 trans. Mattingly 1948).

This important text has provided a locus for debates on 'Romanization' and apologias for the benefits
of Roman civilisation from at least some Romanists (Frere 1987:98–99; Henig 1995:31). Such
apologias, however, commonly discount the last sentence of this text: "*They spoke of such novelties
as 'civilisation', when really they were only a feature of [their] enslavemen.*". This passage is not
a piece of cheap cynicism on the part of Tacitus, but rather informs and subverts the whole preced-
ing passage and transforms it from a benign discourse on 'civilisation and its benefits' into a radical
discourse on power politics (Webster 1996:5). In Gramsci's terms, Roman hegemony is established
by the socio-cultural policy of urbanisation and the adoption of Roman culture and behaviour, as
symbolised by wearing the toga. The Roman ideology is instantiated in everyday life, becoming
part of what the sociologist Bourdieu has called the *habitus* (Bourdieu 1972). Also the tools of
education – the ideological state apparatus (Althusser 1971:136–65) – are used to indoctrinate the
elite with Roman attitudes. The establishment of the imperial cult in the provinces is another ideo-
logical strategy (Price 1984). The power of the Romans is not just repressive, but creates new
instruments of domination. However, the success of the Roman technologies of power (for a theo-
risation of creative 'technologies of power' see Foucault 1990:92–102) was subject to negotiation
with the indigenous population and was, in part, determined by the nature of this response. These
responses could be unpredictable; novel forms of subordination could be translated into novel forms
of resistance, as seen in the drastic response to the cult of the Divine Claudius at Colchester (Tacitus
Annals XIV:31–32).

For the positivist historian and antiquarian archaeologist, Tacitus's account of Britain in the *Agricola* is frustratingly imprecise and laconic on details of names and locations. However, as a realistic analysis of power politics Tacitus's work is of urgent contemporary relevance to the student of imperialism. A constant leitmotif in the *Agricola*, the *Histories* and the *Annals* is the devious nature of power politics and the use of lies, propaganda and distortion by the imperial power to cloak the nature of its rule. Tacitus attempts to unmask the inner workings of power (Mellor 1993). However, Tacitus's tragic irony has proved unpalatable for those who believe in Rome's civilising mission and an optimistic view of life (see for instance Frere 1987:98–99). The realities of power are equally unpalatable to those archaeologists who would have us believe that beneath the 'Roman veneer' the natives had considerable autonomy in the way they organised their lives (Millett 1990). The bland rubric of 'Romanization' serves to defuse the radical insights into power politics provided by Tacitus. I believe that a new analysis is necessary which stresses (with Foucault) that Roman power was not merely external and repressive, but, rather, that the Romans created new instruments of domination and that these had a dynamic and creative role in processes of social change in the province of Britain.

Conclusion

In my view the compromise between Roman Imperialism and native society resulted in a complete *transformation*. Emergent entities such as the villas were the product of this transformation. The opposition of Roman and native broke down, but this did not produce a 'Romano-British' synthesis. Rather, new hegemonic structures were created to replace the old; new forms of subordination were created, but new forms of resistance also. What was once dominant became residual and was either subsumed into a new configuration of social forces or was the focus of resistance. Opposition was not confined to residual elements: the re-negotiated social order itself created a dialectic of opposition. Roman hegemony had to be constantly re-negotiated to take account of changing conditions within society. Social change from the first to the fourth century produced new hegemonic structures and elements of the Roman heritage, which once fiercely resisted by the Britons, were internalised and became the focus of new oppositions.

Acknowledgements

Bibliography

Albrow, M. 1990. *Max Weber's Construction of Social Theory*. London: Macmillan.
Althusser, L. 1971. *Lenin and Philosophy*. London: New Left Books.
Barrett, J. C. forthcoming. Romanization: a critical comment. In *Dialogues in Imperialism*. (ed. D. Mattingly).
Boggs, C. 1976. *Gramsci's Marxism*. London: Pluto Press.
Bourdieu, P. 1972. *An Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Burnham, B. 1995. Celts and Romans: towards a Romano-Celtic society. In *The Celtic World* (ed. M. J. Green). London and New York: Routledge, pp. 121–144.

Collingwood, R. G. and Myres, J .N. L. 1937. *Roman Britain and the English Settlements*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cunliffe, B. 1995. *Iron Age Britain*. London: Batsford.

Eagleton, T. 1991. *Ideology*. London: Verso.

Foucault, M. 1990 *The History of Sexuality: Vol 1, An Introduction*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Frere, S. S. 1987. *Britannia: a History of Roman Britain*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Gramsci, A. 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (ed. and trans. by Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith). London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Haverfield, F. 1923. *The Romanization of Roman Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Henig, M. 1995. *The Art of Roman Britain*. London: Batsford.

Hingley, R. 1989. *Rural Settlement in Roman Britain*. London: Seaby.

Hingley, R. 1996. The 'legacy' of Rome: the rise, decline and fall of the theory of Romanization. In *Roman Imperialism: Post-Colonial Perspectives* (eds J. Webster and N. Cooper). Leicester: University of Leicester Archaeology Monographs No. 3, pp. 35–48.

Lewis, N and Reinhold, M. 1966. *Roman Civilisation Sourcebook II: The Empire*. New York: Harper and Row.

Lintott, A. 1993. *Imperium Romanum*. London and New York: Routledge.

Luttwak, E. N. 1976. *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*. Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press.

Mattingly, H. 1948. *Tacitus on Britain and Germany*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Millett, M. 1990. *The Romanization of Roman Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mellor, R. 1993. *Tacitus*. New York and London: Routledge.

Mommsen, T. 1968. *The Provinces of the Roman Empire: the European Provinces*. (ed. with an introduction by R. S. Broughton.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Monty Python's The Life of Brian 1992. London: Mandarin.

Mouffe, C. 1979. Hegemony and ideology in Gramsci. In *Gramsci and Marxist Theory* (ed. C. Mouffe).London, Boston and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp. 168–204.

Price, S. R. F. 1984. *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Reece, R. 1980. Town and country: the end of Roman Britain. *World Archaeology*, 12 (1): 77–91.

Reece, R. 1988. *My Roman Britain*. Cirencester: Cotswold Studies 3.

Rykwert, J. 1976. *The Idea of a Town*. London: Faber and Faber.

Salway, P. 1981. *Roman Britain*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Scott, E. 1993. Writing the Roman Empire. In *Theoretical Roman Archaeology: First Conference Proceedings* (ed. E. Scott). Aldershot: Avebury, pp. 5–22.

Sherwin-White, A. N. 1973. (2nd edition)*The Roman Citizenship*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Smith, J. T. 1978. Villas as a key to social structure. In *Studies in the Romano-British Villa* (ed. M. Todd). Leicester: Leicester University Press, pp. 149–185.

Vinogradoff, P. 1911. *The Growth of the Manor*. London: George Allen and Unwin.

Webster, J. 1996. Roman imperialism and the 'post imperial age'. In *Roman Imperialism: Post-Colonial Perspectives* (eds J. Webster and N. Cooper). Leicester: University of Leicester Archaeology Monographs No. 3, pp. 1–18.

White, H. 1973. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.