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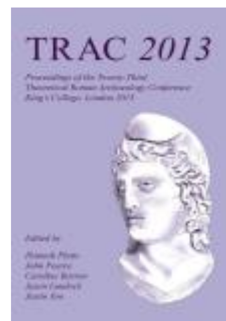

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A Historiography of the Study of the Roman Economy: Economic Growth, Development, and Neoliberalism

Matthew S. Hobson

Introduction

This paper attempts a historiography of the study of the Roman economy over the last forty years. It is argued that a new paradigm, used in the sense of a broad set of values, assumptions and concepts shared by those within the field, began to emerge during the 1980s, reaching its most concrete form in the middle of the last decade with the publication of the *Cambridge Economic History of the Graeco-Roman World* (Scheidel *et al.* 2007a). The new paradigm manifests itself most clearly in the adoption of the ideological outlook of development economics, a body of economic theory which first came into being in the immediate post-war period with the ostensible motive of removing poverty from the 'underdeveloped' parts of the globe (Escobar 1995: 3–12, 21–54). This adoption has resulted in a shared terminological and conceptual framework between institutions such as the United Nations, International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, on the one hand (Chomsky 1999; Goldman 2005; Harvey 2005), and historians and archaeologists dealing specifically with questions of Roman economic history on the other (Garnsey and Saller 1987; Jongman 2007b; Saller 2002; Scheidel *et al*. 2007a).

Aligning themselves with the New Institutional Economics of Douglass North, a recent brand of American economic history that evolved from the cliometrics revolution of the late 1950s and 1960s (North 1981; 1990), the editors of the *Cambridge Economic History of the Graeco-Roman World* state that their aim is to compare the structure and performance of the ancient Greek and Roman economies with those of other historical epochs (Scheidel *et al.* 2007b: 5). In order to achieve this, an overriding concern has become the quantification of past economic growth, pursued through the measurement of *per capita* income, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and, more recently, the evaluation of living standards through other statistical modes of interrogation, such as the Human Development Index (HDI) (Allen 2009; Millett 2001: 20; Scheidel 2010a; b; 2012a). The hegemony of this new system of logic has structured the discourse on the Roman economy in a very distinct way: for the neo-primitivists on the one hand, the Roman empire is apparently now to be viewed as analogous to a 'developing nation', and explanations for the failure of its economy to achieve the kind of 'significant growth' which supposedly could have improved living standards, are to be sought in the structural obstacles provided by its institutions

and the cultural mind-set of its population (Jongman 2007a; b; Saller 2002; Scheidel *et al*. 2007b). On the other hand the modernists, for whom formal neoclassical economics remains entirely relevant and who have been increasingly welcomed back into the centre of discussion, continue to maintain that the Roman world should not be confused with a range of 'primitive' societies whose institutions wreck incentives and stifle ree-market performance (Silver 1995; 2007: 191; Temin 2001; 2013). What is argued here is that these two apparently opposed positions have in fact come to revolve around the same logical axis, and that at root this structural configuration has been directly determined by complex political and ideological adjustments that have taken place since the Second World War. Furthermore, in the wake of the 'great contraction' which began with the subprime loan crash of August 2007, this ideological framework now needs substantial reappraisal: all the more so, given that the political ideology of the second financial hegemony (more commonly referred to as neoliberalism) has precipitated a similarly deep and significant economic crisis to that triggered by the first (namely, the Great Depression of the 1930s). In spite of the economic turmoil of the last five years, neoliberalism remains nothing short of the dominant political and economic orthodoxy across the majority of the globe and, if anything, its political agenda is being pursued more aggressively than before (Duménil and Lévy 2011: 15; van Apeldoorn and Overbeek 2012: 3).

Why are these observations significant or important for the discipline? Running concurrently with the alterations in position within Roman economic history, trends in Roman studies more broadly have been characterised by a set of postcolonial reassessments over the last few decades, many of which claim to have successfully identified and rejected imperialist, ideological relics of the colonial period (Bénabou 1976; Hingley 2000; Mattingly 1996; 2006b; 2011; Modéran 2003). Surely, however, it is not overstating the case to point out that there may be a deep logical inconsistency in congratulating ourselves on this achievement, if at the same time we are unconsciously accommodating new models and approaches based on a different but related configuration of power and imperialism (see Faulkner 2008, for some astute criticism). The adoption of developmental economic theory, whether in the form of the New Institutional Economics or from other related sources, has entailed the assimilation of some troubling assumptions about the universal benefits of economic growth in general, which must now be unquestionably shaken by the current financial crisis, and by a string of examples of problematic Western intervention in 'Third World' contexts over the last half-century (Klein 2004; Scahill 2008). In spite of this, there has been a complete lack of interest in the vast body of post-development literature now available, the exploration of which could no doubt provide a useful counterpoint to the dominant voice of development economics (Baudrillard 1998; Escobar 1995; Latouche 2009; Rahmnema and Bawtree 1997; Victor 2008).

Naturally the description given above is a somewhat over-schematised picture, but while there are many who fall in between the two extremes outlined, the crucial fact remains that recent contributions to the debate have done little to alter the basic hegemonic structure of the discourse. Many archaeologists, for example, have simply joined the debate on one side or the other, and discussion has tended to centre on the correct use of this or that form of evidence, rather than on questioning the general validity of attempting to establish accurate measurements of economic performance in the first place, or on examining what the risks or benefits of asking such a question of the distant past might be (Bowman and Wilson 2009; Greene 1986; Harris 1993; Mattingly 2006a; Wilson 2009; 2011). The fact of the matter is that the current debate over the scale of economic growth in antiquity could continue *ad infinitum*, without it ever being acknowledged that a significant transformation has taken place in which both groups, primitivists

and modernists, have come to share some fundamental presuppositions about what economic history is for and how it should be carried out (Morley 2007: xiii, 7–9).

The two factions now appear to share the idea that certain universal laws of economics pertain to all periods of human history. Although more prevalent amongst the modernists, there are those on both sides who believe that many of the economic concepts and methods developed for the analysis of capitalism are relevant to the ancient world, and may be applied to its study without danger of anachronism (Jongman 1988: 36–48; Temin 2013: x). Those modernists originating in American economics departments bring with them all of the same rhetoric about deductive reasoning and hypothesis testing which Hodder, Shanks and Tilley, and others attempted to exorcise from archaeological methodology in the 1980s in their exchanges with Binford (Hodder 1986; Shanks and Tilley 1987; Tilley 1992). The neo-primitivists represent a related, but contrasting, challenge. In their hands, the full weight of development economics, used for decades to inspire and govern economic intervention in the 'Third World', now falls upon all the pre-industrial societies of history with equal force. This mode of economic thought, inextricably linked with the economic imperialism of the Western Powers since the end of the Second World War, belongs to the same spectrum of modern neoliberal economics, but universalises its principles in a slightly altered manner. Whilst maintaining the pretence of greater historical sensitivity, it also develops indices and scales, like GDP or the HDI, or other conceptual machinery such as 'transaction costs', against which economic performance and development can be measured cross-culturally. The result of following this method, however, is that western systems of categorisation are projected onto all other forms of society, both past and present (thus the logic of equivalence can supposedly be discerned within the purely symbolic exchange of the Trobriand islanders: (North 1977; Verboven 2002: 16–20; cf. Baudrillard 1981: 62–87; Boldizzoni 2011: 20–53).

Arturo Escobar has examined the origins of development economics as a hegemonic discourse in the immediate post-war decades, and notes the results of this process rather succinctly:

> '[T]he coherence of effects that the development discourse achieved is the key to its success as a hegemonic form of representation: the construction of the poor and underdeveloped as universal, preconstituted subjects, based on the privilege of the representers; the exercise of power over the Third World made possible by this discursive homogenization (which entails the erasure of the complexity and diversity of Third World peoples, so that a squatter in Mexico City, a Nepalese peasant, and a Tuareg nomad become equivalent to each other as poor and underdeveloped); and the colonization and domination of the natural and human ecologies and economies of the Third World.'
>
> (Escobar 1995: 53)

When used in the study of history, these logical axes delineate and project onto the past a basic distinction between a modern, developed West of the present day, with a high level of *per capita* income and affluence, and a 'Third World' of poverty and underdevelopment, which is seen as lagging behind in a more primitive age. Thus, one encounters the following statement in a work of the New Institutional Economics by North and Thomas:

> '[T]he affluence of Western man is a new and unique phenomenon. In the past several centuries he has broken loose from the shackles of a world bound by abject poverty

> and recurring famine and has realised a quality of life which is made possible only by relative abundance.'
>
> (North and Thomas 1973: 1)

There is in this type of economic history, therefore, a parallel to the process of homogenisation pointed out by Escobar. The characterisation of all historical, pre-capitalist societies as impoverished and underdeveloped allows the entire spectrum of human history to be problematised under the heading of underdevelopment, the analysis of which apparently requires a single, universal body of theory (that of development economics) for its proper investigation.

The adoption of this body of theory by historians determines and limits the sorts of questions that can be asked of the past to a very narrow and specific inventory. Jongman, for example, recently asks:

> '[W]hy were the Romans not as prosperous as we are... Were they poor because they or their rulers failed to maximise their incomes, because they lacked the economically rational desire to improve their lot, or were they poor because they did not have any alternatives?'
>
> (Jongman 2007b: 237–238)

Another author opens his examination of average income rates in a strikingly similar manner (Allen 2009: 327–329), while Scheidel has contributed this revealing statement:

> '[A]s far as I can see, ancient historians have not even begun to structure their enquiries in accordance with the basic concepts and questions of human development studies… Our ultimate goal has to be a comparative evaluation of different 'poverties': not just the poverty of whoever counted as poor at the time (or by our own standards), but also by the relative poverty (and hence the wealth) of nations…'
>
> (Scheidel 2006: 58–59)

There is a danger that such broad-brush, comparative questions, which relate to concerns originating from outside of the discipline of Roman history and are essentially meaningless to it, will begin to drown out more pertinent and interesting problems. Although never explicitly stated, one is constantly being encouraged to conceive of the Roman world as a development economist would any foreign, 'underdeveloped' country, with institutions and industry apparently less efficient than our own, and populated by people labelled as less rational and less well-organised than ourselves. In this manner all pre-industrial societies are subordinated to the same semantic categorisation, developed by the Western imperial powers from the end of the Second World War to the present day, which effectively erases their qualitative differences.

The orthodoxy of the 1970s and the 'New Economic History'

All this is a very long way from the theoretical framework that predominated in ancient history during the 1970s, in which there was a strong resistance to the idea that modern economic analysis could be applied to the ancient economy in any meaningful way at all. This resistance was, of course, mounted chiefly by a school of historians based in the United Kingdom, headed by A.H.M. Jones and Sir Moses Finley, successively Professors of Ancient History at the

University of Cambridge (Finley 1999; Jones 1964; 1974). A substantial portion of Finley's most influential book, *The Ancient Economy*, put forward a detailed argument against the applicability of modern economic theory to the ancient world (1999, 1st ed. 1973). The ancient economy, Finley proposed, was far less integrated and the ancient mind-set far too different for such anachronistic modern analysis to be of any relevance at all. He put it simply: different concepts were needed to analyse a qualitatively different object (Finley 1999: 27). In rejecting abstract economic theory, Finley was following the argument made by Marx repeatedly against the classical economists: that is, that they mistook their observations of economic affairs under capitalism for economic affairs *per se*, and made of them universal and natural laws which they believed would hold true throughout history (Godelier 1972: xiv–xv; Marx 1993: 83–85; Meillassoux 1972: 93–96).

On the contrary, an obvious conclusion for Finley was that, as there was no identifiable conception of the economy in antiquity, it obviously did not exist as the same kind of phenomenon experienced and studied in the modern era (Finley 1999: 21–23). Karl Polanyi, with whom Finley had developed close contact during his time at Columbia University, had discussed the problem of the anonymity of the economy in ancient societies at length in *Trade and Market in the Early Empires* (Polanyi 1944; 1947; Polanyi *et al*. 1957). It is evident that in his analysis he drew heavily on the work of his contemporary and one-time childhood friend, the Hegelian Marxist Georg Lukács (Burawoy 2003: 211–212). Both Polanyi and Finley are commonly invoked as being fixedly Weberian, but the influence of Lukács is clearly referenced by Finley after the time of his departure from the United States (1999: 50 n. 34, 155 n. 9). It would no doubt have been politically difficult, if not impossible, for Polanyi to reference Lukács at the time of his writing in the US. In fact, his altered terminology allowed him to introduce much orthodox Marxist theory of the 1920s into the America of the 1940s and 50s more or less undetected (Polanyi 1944; 1947; Polanyi *et al*. 1957). Finley, of course, was eventually forced to flee the persecution of McCarthyism during this period, his active involvement with the Frankfurt School making him an obvious target (Shaw and Saller 1981: xi–xvi). The references to Lukács which Finley makes in *The Ancient Economy* are to an essay published in *History and Class Consciousness* titled 'Class Consciousness' (Lukács 1971: 55–59), and much of what he says about the autarky and cellular self-sufficiency of Roman society could equally be drawn from what Lukács asserts about pre-capitalist societies in general (also of fundamental importance on the point of historical method is another essay within the same book, titled 'The Changing Function of Historical Materialism,' Lukács 1971: 223–255).

In *The Ancient Economy*, therefore, Finley was fighting a battle on two different, but related, fronts. Firstly, he was joining one side of a long debate that had been building since the end of the nineteenth century within the study of Roman history itself. Opposed to Finley were those who saw commercial interests as key to Roman expansion, particularly during the course of the second century B.C. (Rostovtzeff 1926; Toynbee 1965). With Finley were those who felt that a completely alien, and in some senses irrational, mind-set had dominated in antiquity (Badian 1968; Brunt 1971: 17–26; Frank 1921). This latter group naturally saw the claims of the former with regard to the ancient economy as highly anachronistic. On the second front, however, Finley was engaging with an unrelated, but equally anachronistic trend in American economic history which emerged during the late 1950s. It is with this second point of confrontation that we shall be most concerned here.

Inspired by the mathematical formalisation of economic theory and utilising new econometric methods, 'The New Economic History', or 'Cliometrics', as it came to be known, benefited

from the willingness of both private and state bodies to fund projects that would encourage the use of newly-available computer technology in academia (Williamson and Lyons 2008: 1–42). The problem was that in spite of a high level of optimism and enthusiasm for the endeavour, this new branch of economic history often lacked any kind of historical sensitivity to the particular period upon which it focused (Hudson 2009). While these scholars were operating mainly within economics departments in the United States and focusing primarily on American economic history they were seen as little threat to the sort of economic history being practised in the United Kingdom, Europe, and elsewhere. In his Marshall lectures given in 1980, for example, the eminent historian Eric Hobsbawm was able to dismiss the entire discipline of cliometrics very briefly as merely 'neoclassical theory – projected backwards' (Hobsbawm 1997: 127). In a recent book, however, Francesco Boldizzoni has pointed out that over the last decade this situation has altered radically, with 'a burgeoning of armies of American-trained PhDs on European soil' (Boldizzoni 2011: 5). While the editors of the *Cambridge Economic History of the Graeco-Roman World* single out the New Institutional Economics of Douglass North as an example to be followed, Boldizzoni devotes an entire chapter to discrediting North's particular brand of American economic history (Boldizzoni 2011: 18–53). This situation merits some further investigation.

Douglass North was one of the central figures in the cliometrics revolution of the 1960s (Shaffer 1961: 708–709), and, in keeping with the times, his early work was directed at examining growth in the American economy during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries (North 1966). However, he quickly came to generalise his approach to a much broader scale of human history (North and Thomas 1973 covers the period A.D. 900–1700), and the aim of his more recent work has been to explain the inability of 'developing' nations to achieve the economic goals set for them by organisations like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (North 1990). As the editors of the *Cambridge Economic History* mention, North was awarded the Nobel economic prize by the Bank of Sweden in 1993 for the introduction of quantitative methods to economic history. This same prize, however, has recently been strongly criticised by David Harvey for its neoliberal associations.

> '[T]his particular prize, though it assumed the aura of Nobel, had nothing to do with the other prizes and was under the tight control of Sweden's banking elite.'
>
> (Harvey 2005: 22)

One of the major consequences of the great inter-war depression was that it destroyed the academic credibility of liberal economic theory for almost half a century (Hobsbawm 1994: 94), but as Harvey points out, it was the presentation of this economic prize to Hayek in 1974 and to Friedman in 1976, that helped neoliberalism achieve its remarkable recovery over the last three decades (Harvey 2005: 5–38; see, Lazear 2000, for an example of the most extreme brand of neoclassical theory being advocated by the former chief economic advisor to George W. Bush). Boldizzoni has recently argued that North's work has been instrumental in protecting and preserving the neoclassical outlook, by claiming to update and improve it in response to criticism (Boldizzoni 2011: 6, 18).

In a recent reflective piece, looking back at the cliometrics revolution, Hudson reminds us that this sort of approach to economic history had traditionally been unpopular in the United Kingdom because of a general suspicion of the validity of abstract, free-market modelling and of a lack of statistical rigour due to incomplete and fragmentary data sets found in the historical

record (Hudson 2009: 780; see, for example, Whittaker 1980: 235, who criticises Lassère 1977 for his level of statistical analysis in examining demographic trends in Roman North Africa). This, however, only constitutes a partial explanation. Finley brought with him to Cambridge an understanding of continental philosophy and of historical method that was far more sophisticated than any sort of mere sceptical empiricism. The universalising and anachronistic approaches to the past which he criticised were, more or less, of precisely the same type that Marx attacked the political economists for in the nineteenth century (Marx 1993: 85–86; 1999), and which Polanyi and Lukács had continued to battle against later on (Lukács 1971; Polanyi 1947; Polanyi *et al.* 1957).

The initial break from Finley and the emergence of development economics

How then did this orthodoxy at Cambridge come to be so thoroughly disregarded? A crucial turning point came with the work of Keith Hopkins in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Hopkins noted that the Jones/Finley model stressed the cellular self-sufficiency of the ancient world: each economic unit, be it farm, town, city or region, supposedly produced mainly for its own needs (Hopkins 1983: x–xiv). In Finley's opinion, this alone was reason enough to put a significant brake on extensive production for export (Finley 1999: 138). As a student of Finley, and eventually to follow him into the chair of ancient history at Cambridge, Hopkins was careful not to criticise this model too directly. However, he correctly pointed out that having a single model to cover such a long and diverse period posed an obvious problem: the model risked being 'too uniform, almost static in composition' (Hopkins 1983: xiv). Finley would have been in no way ignorant of this fact, but nonetheless, by choosing to interrogate the ancient economy thematically as a whole, his book had largely ignored the question of chronological and regional variation within the period (Morley 2006: 42). In his 'Taxes and Trade' article of 1980, Hopkins attempted to add some dynamism to the Finley/Jones model by focusing on the subject of economic growth, and in doing so, he broke away from Finley's theoretical framework in a number of key ways.

With a previous background in the social sciences, Hopkins had already indicated in his book *Conquerors and Slaves* in 1978 that, in contrast to Finley, he believed that the achievements of the Roman world needed 'to be interpreted with empathetic understanding of what the Romans themselves thought and with concepts which we ourselves use' (1978: ix). In other words, as far as Hopkins was concerned, at least some modern economic theory might be applicable. From this moment onward Hopkins began to construct a new approach to the study of the ancient economy, drawing on methods borrowed from other disciplines within the social sciences. Controversially for the time, he suggested that the 'imposition of taxes paid in money greatly increased the volume of trade in the Roman Empire' in the period between 200 B.C. and A.D. 400 (1980: 101), and that this period could be seen to have experienced gradual *per capita* economic growth (1983). Hopkins used several ingenious, but hugely inexact methods to attempt to quantify *per capita* economic growth under the Roman empire. The problem was that in placing his focus on economic growth, he opened the door simultaneously to the sort of cliometric approach which Finley had been at such pains to shut (Finley 1999: 24–25). It is with the work of Hopkins that the new trajectory, angled more towards the outlook of development economics, has its origin. He is also partly responsible for the current fashion for comparing the Roman empire with China, or with other ancient empires (Bang 2008; Hopkins 1980: 121; Scheidel 2009b), which perhaps was an attempt to bring an end to the ethnocentrism of Weberian-style comparisons with Medieval and Early Modern Europe. The unfortunate consequence of

the adoption of developmental economic theory for comparative history, however, is that one set of ethnocentric biases has simply been exchanged for another.

The new influence of development economics is most clearly identifiable in a slightly later work, again produced by former students of Finley: *The Roman Empire: economy, society and culture* by Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller (1987). In Garnsey and Saller's chapter on the Roman economy a range of Finley's arguments regarding technological stagnation, cellular self-sufficiency, lack of trade, differences in economic rationality, and so on, designed to stress the qualitatively different nature of the ancient economy, were recast using the terminology and principles of development economics:

> '[T]he next step is to ask how far it is possible to progress beyond a broad characterization of the Roman economy as underdeveloped toward a delineation of the peculiarly Roman form or forms of underdevelopment.'
>
> (Garnsey and Saller 1987: 43)

This new terminology was not adopted unconsciously. Garnsey and Saller titled their chapter on the Roman economy 'An Underdeveloped Economy' (1987: 43–63), mirroring exactly the framework of debate in development economics as it had taken form within institutions such as the United Nations during the immediate post-war period, and which had entered a much more aggressive phase in the 1980s with the transition to neoliberal policies of intervention in the 'Third World' (Escobar 1995: 3–20, 55–101. See, for example, the report 'Measures for the Economic Development of Underdeveloped Countries', published by the United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs in 1951). The shift in this direction can also be detected in the continental literature at this time, in the work of Albert Deman (Deman 1975; with criticism from Freis 1980), for example, who borrowed some of his conceptual machinery from Yves Lacoste's study *Les Pays Sous-développés* (1959). Whether arguing for development or underdevelopment, this sort of terminology remains to a large extent unquestioned in more recent work (Leveau 2007; Trément 2011), and it has been the impact of Garnsey and Saller's chapter to spread its use further in English-speaking scholarship.

In responding to Hopkins's assertions about the possibility of economic growth, Garnsey and Saller re-emphasised this topic as a primary focus for future study. If growth was to become the central issue of debate within the study of the Roman economy, then it made little sense to ignore the huge body of ideological machinery that had been created and fine-tuned by the Western Powers since the end of the Second World War, ostensibly for the purpose of combating poverty in the 'underdeveloped' parts of the modern world. In order for this to take place, a system of logic which distinguished between a rich, developed West and an underdeveloped, poverty-stricken Third World had to be created, and the notion of economic growth as the miraculous cure for that poverty and backwardness had to be ideologically sold and exported to those regions (Escobar 1995).

Garnsey and Saller quickly explained what they meant by describing the Roman economy as underdeveloped:

> '[R]esources that might in theory be devoted to growth-inducing investment are diverted into consumption or into unproductive speculation and usury… Backward technology is a further barrier to increased productivity.'
>
> (Garnsey and Saller 1987: 43)

The words 'backward' and 'underdeveloped' are used repeatedly throughout this chapter, and references to modern 'developing countries' for the purposes of comparison are seen as entirely relevant to the discussion (Garnsey and Saller 1987: 44–45). All the presuppositions of development economics regarding the conditions that supposedly foster or hinder economic growth were assimilated.

Naturally it is also at this historical conjuncture that the word 'poverty' begins to appear in ancient history, to broadly characterise Roman society. One can compare, for example, Finley's statement that the 'widespread prevalence of household self-sufficiency in necessities was enough to put a brake on extensive production for export' (1999: 138), with Garnsey and Saller's assertion that 'the poverty of the masses restricted demand' (1987: 52), or with Hopkins's variation, that 'the market for such prestige goods was necessarily limited by the poverty of most city-dwellers and peasants' (1983: xii).

The ideology of economic growth and living standards

> '[D]eveloping Hopkins' arguments, Richard Saller has suggested that *per capita* economic growth averaged around 0.1 percent per annum in the western Roman empire between 200 B.C. and A.D. 100, raising *per capita* consumption 25 percent or more higher than it had been before 200 B.C. – trivial by modern standards… but surely a tremendous boon for those who experienced it.'
>
> (Scheidel *et al.* 2007b: 5)

A large part of the problem with the current focus on economic growth is that historians have inherited the assumption of development economics that economic growth is more or less always a positive thing, which passes on down material benefits to the population as a whole. This is visible in the consistency with which economic growth is assumed to have had a beneficial impact on the population of the Roman empire, or to be a worthy achievement regardless of the historical context. This line of progression has now reached its culmination in a series of works published since the year 2000, most notably the recent *Cambridge Economic History of the Graeco-Roman World* (2007a), edited by Walter Scheidel, Ian Morris and Richard Saller, all professors of classics at the University of Stanford (Auletta 2012; Callinicos 2006, for the neoliberalisation of universities). The way in which Hopkins, and others who followed him, have attempted to quantify economic growth is through the examination of a range of different datasets that can supposedly act as proxy indicators, such as alterations in the level of pollution observable in stratified ice-cores, the total number of Mediterranean shipwrecks recorded per decade, quantities of animal bone (implying varying levels of meat consumption), and estimations of stature derived from the analysis of human skeletal remains (Hopkins 1980; 2002; Scheidel 2009a; 2012b). There are a number of limitations in using these sorts of data in the way in which these historians have been attempting (many of which are outlined very ably by Wilson, 2009, in a recent response to Scheidel), but there are other grounds upon which to base a critique of this methodological approach.

In the chapter referred to in the above quotation, Saller states that:

> '[I]t seems beyond doubt to me that some regions of the Roman Empire increased aggregate production as the population increased (as Finley and Rostovtzeff recognized), but it does not follow that the *per capita* productivity noticeably increased. It is in

> the latter type of growth that development economists are interested, because it is the only type of growth that raises living standards in the long run.'
>
> (Saller 2002: 258)

How do development economists know that this type of economic growth raises living standards in the long run? Is it proven in countless historical cases, or rather in some abstract theoretical model, which universalises economic laws throughout space, time, and history? Numerous publications contesting this issue, coupled with the emergence of an anti-growth or 'de-growth' political movement over the last two decades would appear to suggest that it is the latter (Chomsky 1999; Escobar 1995; Klein 2004). There seems to be, however, little acknowledgement that this is a controversial, ahistorical presupposition with which to begin historical analysis. Latouche argues that we are faced with confronting a deeply ingrained ideological and semantic structure, something akin to a religious fanaticism of growth (Latouche 1997; 2009: 8), while others argue that the explanation of the persistence of neoliberal doctrine is far more simple: it functions to permit private interests to maintain and expand their control of as much of social life as possible, in order to maximise their personal profit (McChesney in Chomsky 1999: 7; Duménil and Lévy 2011: 1, 7–32; Harvey 2005: 15).

In spite of, or perhaps due to, the protests about the logic of the benefits of economic growth which first emerged at the end of the 1960s, attempts to demonstrate historical examples of a link between past economic growth and improvements in living standards now seem to abound in Roman studies. Willem Jongman, for example, in an article titled 'Gibbon was right: the decline and fall of the Roman economy', has recently used these sorts of proxy data for economic growth to try to demonstrate that the condition of the human race during the second century A.D. really was, as Gibbon claimed, the most 'happy and prosperous' in human history (Gibbon 2000: 83; Jongman 2007a). In another recent article, he claims that:

> '[A]t the peak of its political and military power in the later Republic and the early Empire, Rome could not only maintain an unprecedented population, but it could also provide that population with a standard of living which may well have been at the top of what an advanced organic economy could achieve.'
>
> (Jongman 2007b: 252)

Scheidel then quickly followed with his own slightly altered interpretation of the same sorts of proxy data, placing the greatest period of economic growth and prosperity during the late Republic instead (Scheidel 2009a). He also tries to examine what he describes as 'real incomes, which are the critical determinant of well-being' (Scheidel 2009a: 63). In the further pursuit of this question he has even adopted the use of the United Nations' Human Development Index (Scheidel 2006; 2010a; b), a statistical measure that, along with GDP, cannot be separated from the issues of economic imperialism and exploitation in which development economics is so deeply embroiled (Millett 2001: 20–26; Thornton and Thornton 2008: 8–16). Latouche has recently described the HDI as 'a collection of Western prejudices put together', arguing that the new rhetoric does little to disguise the fact that the general outlook of Western economics has in fact altered very little (Latouche 1997: 135–136). It is Scheidel's conviction, however, that 'historians need to be aware' of these sorts of indices if they want to make progress in understanding 'the dynamics of the Roman economy…what it accomplished and how it related to other forms of development' (Scheidel 2012a: 14).

Whatever the conclusions these historians are drawing about the scale or rate of past economic growth, it is plain to see that the connection between the rhetoric currently being used in ancient history and in the political sphere has become uncomfortably close. Neoliberalism has recently been described as follows:

> 'a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.'
> (Harvey 2005: 2)

These are precisely the parameters by which the New Institutional Economics aims to judge past societies: in terms of 'property rights, the nature of transaction costs, and the role of the state' (Scheidel *et al.* 2007b: 9).

It also seems that a certain kind of circular logic is immanent in these arguments. Are we now trying to prove that economic growth happened because people got healthier (that is, by the logic of the argument, if they became taller or appear to have consumed more meat), or that people got healthier because there was economic growth? Regardless of how one interprets the chronological implications for economic growth indicated by these sorts of data, it is too simplistic a notion to equate growth in GDP with prosperity, happiness or well-being and any attempt to do so is ideologically driven. It should be plain to see then, that when the editors of the *Cambridge Economic History of the Graeco-Roman World* tell us that the *per capita* economic growth within the Roman Empire was trivial by modern standards, 'but surely a tremendous boon for the people who experienced it', we are receiving an ideological statement, imbued with the value system of development and neoliberalism.

Conclusion

It has been argued here, following recent post-structuralist critique, that development economics is deeply implicated in neocolonial and neoliberal political discourse (Escobar 1995; Spivak 1999: 3). A logical corollary of this is that its use must be jettisoned if the project to 'decolonialize the discipline of classical studies' is to be successfully completed (Mattingly 2011: 270, 26–42). An attempt has also been made to demonstrate that the theoretical standpoint taken by Finley in *The Ancient Economy* was far more sophisticated than that currently being recommended by the Stanford school, and that it is more relevant to today's scholarship than is generally acknowledged. This is not to suggest that Finley was correct in all of his assertions. Indeed, the contribution of archaeology to the study of economic changes during the Roman period over the last few decades now allows us to move far beyond the static picture once painted by Finley, Jones, and others. The acknowledgment of a dynamism to economic forms under the Roman empire does not, however, have simply to turn on the issue of economic growth as it has been defined over the last few decades by historians ingrained with the ideological outlook of development theory. The debate over the rate of ancient economic growth has in any case reached a complete impasse. One honestly cannot see what the difference between a recent modernist estimate of 0.5 per cent growth per annum, provided by Silver, and a 0.05 per cent estimate given by Scheidel translates to in terms of meaningful conclusions about Roman history

(Scheidel 2009a: 62; Silver 2007: 207). Even if we agreed that this quantitative assessment of growth was the most pertinent of questions to ask of the ancient economy, the exercise has quickly become completely unproductive. There is no doubt that Finley overstated the static nature of ancient society, but reducing the hugely significant changes which did take place during the Roman period to abstract and tiny shifts in *per capita* production simply highlights the overwhelming explanatory weakness of this method.

With regard to the New Institutional Economics and its current followers in ancient history, examining the social context in which the Roman economy was embedded is no bad thing, provided this is achieved without recourse to current neoliberal doctrine which results in, either the homogenised perception of all pre-industrial societies as impoverished and underdeveloped (erasing their difference), or, with respect to cases where individual property rights can be seen to have been protected by the state, the troubling assumption that this would inevitably have resulted in economic growth and increased well-being for all. There are many more promising ways to discuss the dynamics of economic and social change during the Roman period without reliance upon, or reference to, this sort of modern economic theory (Hobson forthcoming; Savage *et al.* 2013). During the course of its history the empire no doubt experienced the emergence of qualitatively new economic and social classes, and new forms of power and class tension must have developed between them. The challenge now is to implement newly available archaeological data in fleshing out the picture of chronological change over time in the different regions of the Roman Empire. Instead of dealing with growth on an abstract and empire-wide level, which barely improves upon Finley's initial characterisation, we need to ask how economic change affected the social make-up of those regions, and whether or not this had further implications for the trajectory of Roman history itself. If we can see the grounding of existing social and political power on an altered economic basis in the different regions of the empire, then this could perhaps have an impact on how we view broader historical processes such as the decline and fall, for example, or it may even reveal processes of change of which we were previously ignorant. This is the power and potential of archaeological data. Evidence, however, does not simply speak for itself; it has to be interpreted in the context of the present, making a thorough critique of our current theoretical and methodological approaches continually necessary.

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