

On the Foundations of Athenian Democracy: Marx's Paradox and Weber's Solution

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Abstract

Marx's unresolved reflections in 1857 on the apparent dissonance between the level of economic development and cultural and political achievements of ancient Greece serve as a poignant introduction to the '*oikos* controversy' of some four decades later which had a major impact on Weber's intellectual development. This paper reconsiders Weber's thought in the light of his two-decade-long preoccupation with the methodological and substantive issues raised by that debate. It presents Weber's culminating contribution, the 1909 edition of *The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilisations*, as a resolution of 'Marx's paradox' as well as his most rounded attempt to overcome the tension between history and theory in accordance with the approach advocated in the methodological essays of 1903–1906.

Keywords Weber, ancient capitalism, *oikos*, evolutionary, democracy, Marx, political economy, history, theory

Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape. The intimations of higher development among the subordinate animal species... can be understood only after the higher development is already known. The bourgeois economy thus supplies the key to the ancient, etc.

Does not the true character of each epoch come alive in the nature of its children? Why should not the historic childhood of humanity, its most beautiful unfolding, as a stage never to return, exercise an eternal charm? (Marx 1973: 105, 111).

It is well known that following the completion of his doctoral thesis on Democritus and Epicurus, Marx never examined systematically any aspect of the Graeco-Roman antiquity (see, however, de Ste Croix 1985). Yet, Marxism remains central to the modern debates in history, sociology, and politics on the 'nature' of the ancient world and its place in history. Perhaps nowhere else the paradoxical question that underpins these debates is better posed than in *Grundrisse's* unpolished and unpublished fragments. As the passages above indicate, in these unguarded reflections Marx grapples with the problem of explaining the apparent dissonance between Greece's overdeveloped

cultural and political superstructures and its underdeveloped economic base. In the first part of this essay, Marx is seen approaching this paradox from the Romantic as well as his favoured evolutionary perspectives. He does not, as will be shown, so much resolve it as abandon it, having effectively reassured himself that it does not seriously undermine historical materialism and the evolutionary ascendance of socialism.

The second part turns to Weber. Unlike Marx, Weber was a trained historian, and involved in a major academic dispute, the 'oikos controversy'. This concerned precisely the issues raised by Marx's paradox, and Weber pursued the issues for about two decades. His final work on the ancient world, the third edition of *The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilisations*, contains a solution that has remained generally misunderstood when not neglected altogether. Weber readily conceded that the fascination with the 'pinnacle of the Hellenic culture, i.e. the period between Aeschylus and Aristotle' was ultimately an 'entirely subjective view' arising from 'our interest which is oriented towards "values"' (1949a: 156). For him, this 'value rapport' referred to individual autonomy and creativity which he feared was caged by bureaucratic rationalization inherent in modern capitalism. But as the only feasible alternative to capitalism, socialism was, in this respect, more insidious: it promised the intensification of bureaucratic domination. What sustained Weber's interest in the ancient world was the contrasting roles and fates of bureaucratic kingdoms and the non-bureaucratic city-states in ancient developments and the evidence they provided for advancing the struggle against the rising tide of statism and socialism.

At this 'end of history', these classical Weberian preoccupations have been laid to rest: actually existing socialism has evolved into capitalism and capitalism has tamed bureaucracy, at least the statist forms most feared by Weber and his fellow liberals. However, rather than exhausting the contemporary political import of Weber's ancient studies, this turn compels their re-examination from the standpoint of a question hitherto marginalized in the Weberian tradition: the capitalism–democracy relationship (see, however, Thomas 1984). In contrast, the question of direct or 'substantive' democracy has been a defining concern of critical Marxism and the sources of its fascination with ancient Athens. Yet, the postponement of the moment of liberation to the aftermath of the revolution and the axiomatic presumption of the intrinsic dissonance between capitalism and 'real' democracy for long reduced the critical position into a rhetorical closure, rather than the focus of a genuine research programme or politics. This essay

does not pursue this question. But in re-presenting Weber's account of antiquity as the resolution of Marx's abandoned paradox, it attempts to clear this particular ground for doing so.

Marx's Paradox

The first clue to the significance of the two opening quotations from *Grundrisse* lies in the question, why did Marx replace the ape of the first passage with the beautiful, forever receding, child of the second? Having first viewed the ancient–modern journey from the familiar nineteenth-century evolutionary vantage point, Marx had to face the fact that

in the case of the arts, it is well known that certain periods of their flowering are out of all proportion to the general development of society, hence also the material foundation, the skeletal structure as it were, of its organization (1973: 110).

Shakespeare is mentioned in this regard, but it is the cultural achievements of ancient Greece that concentrate Marx's attention. Considering the presumed lowly position of Greece on the evolutionary ladder, such achievements appeared to repudiate Marx's evolutionary holism. His response to the question is contradictory. First, Greek art and the primitive nature of material life in ancient Greece were said to be consonant. Not just the Greek economy, but Greek art is said to be the ape to the man of modern capitalism:

Is the view of nature and of social relations on which the Greek imagination and hence Greek [mythology] is based possible with self-acting mule spindles and railways and locomotives and electric telegraph? What chances has Vulcan against Roberts & Co...Hermes against the *Credit Mobilier*?' (1973: 110).

Although comforted by this observation, Marx recognized its limits—or rather the sway of the elevated nineteenth-century view of Greek art and culture was too strong for him to remain satisfied with it:

But the difficulty lies not in understanding that the Greek arts and epic are bound up with certain forms of social development. The difficulty is that they still afford us artistic pleasure and that in a certain respect they count as a norm and as an unattainable model (1973: 111).

The normative, or what I prefer to call the utopian, appeal of Greek art thus perplexes Marx. It is in order to explain this quality that he is forced to discard the ape of the first passage, and replace it with the child, as viewed by a nostalgic aging adult, of the second. This leads

to the rhetorical question and the answer with which the reflections of the 1857 introduction are brought to an end:

Why should not the historic childhood of humanity, its most beautiful unfolding, as a stage never to return, exercise an eternal charm? There are unruly children and precocious children. Many of the old peoples belong in this category. The Greeks were normal children. The charm of their art for us is not in contradiction to the undeveloped stage of society on which it grew. [It] is its result, rather, and is inextricably bound up, rather, with the fact that the unripe social conditions under which it arose, and could alone arise, can never return (1973: 111).

This solution evidently poses more questions than it solves. But, first, it is notable that, as with Marx's view of Greek art itself, it is directly rooted in the Romantic tradition which, since the discoveries of Winckelmann, had been in thrall to the glory that it took Greece to have been. According to Marx's own teacher, August Schlegel, 'the art and poetry of the Greeks was the expression of the perfect health of their existence' (von Staden 1976: 83). And long before Marx, Schiller had raised and answered a similar question in broader terms: 'Why was it that the individual Greek was able to be a representative of his age and why can no single modern man make a claim to be such?... [Because] the Greeks combined the first youth of the imagination with the maturity of reason in a glorious manifestation' (cited in Plant 1983: 17-18). In contrast to fragmented modern Europeans, the ensuing harmony ensured the ancient Greeks' full cultural and personal integration.

The problem for Marx was how to reconcile this incontrovertible view of his time (see Butler 1958; cf. Jenkyns 1980) with other major strands of his thought, namely evolutionism and 'holistic' or, more precisely, reductionist materialism. The Romantic celebration of Greek art as analogous to the youthful perfection of children presents itself as just the solution Marx was looking for.

The normative appeal of the Greeks' achievements has not been confined to art. Greek philosophy, education, language and democracy, too, have been celebrated with equal enthusiasm. In his articles on press censorship, Marx himself consistently counterposed the reactionary values and institutions of contemporary Prussia, from censorship and monarchy to Christianity, to freedom, democracy, paganism and perfectly proportioned art of ancient Athens (von Staden 1975: 134). Indeed, his vision of the disalienated man of the future arguably owes far more than an accidental resemblance to the reintegrated creature of the romantic longing. 'Communist man', as von Staden suggests, may be seen 'in his full efflorescence as neo-Greek man' (1976: 85).

Before pursuing this line any further, there remains a question that arises from the shift in *Grundrisse* from the ape-man to child-adult. Is this displacement robust enough to hold together the centrifugal tendencies of Marx's own thought as well as illuminate the multifaceted utopian appeal of ancient Athens? The answer must be no. Although insightful, Marx's resolution rests on unsustainable or contradictory assertions. Notwithstanding anthropology's fascination with the noble savage, it may, for instance, be asked why such normative qualities were not found in other 'primitive' societies. Surely not because, as Marx suggests, the Greeks were 'normal'; indeed the only normal offspring of the earliest communal formations, with the rest being unruly or precocious? This is simply an inversion of the notion of normality in order to explain the exceptional appeal of Greek art. It points also to a more general problem that preoccupied Marx in *Grundrisse*: the tension between the universality of his theory of history and the apparently non-evolutionary character of 'Asiatic' societies. The concept of 'normal' thence had the general function of salvaging the universality of Marx's evolutionism by excluding the formations (whether artistic or economic) which undermined it as in some way stunted or abnormal.

The child-adult metaphor does not, in any event, salvage evolutionism. In contrast to the ape-man trajectory, the stages of individual human growth do not merely point to a more evolved and presumably more desirable stage of adult maturity. Aging and death follow such a stage with a universal certainty that is not matched by any other human trait including adulthood and maturity. Herein lay the nostalgic appeal of youth with all its multiple connotations for the romantics in the first place. Marx's solution therefore fails, especially as it appears to sanction equally the rival cyclical view of historical change. Birth and growth are followed by decay and death. There may be a 'rebirth' of sorts, but no necessary progress, unending or toward some normative state such as modern capitalism or communism.

There is an option left: discard the child-adult metaphor and with it the reductionist holism that insisted on the intrinsic consonance between the artistic or cultural superstructures and the level of economic development. Who says, Marx might have asked, that there is a paradox here? Greek art is supreme, whereas the Greek economy is rather primitive; why should this require a theoretical explanation and why should such an explanation, if it were forthcoming, demonstrate their fundamental consonance or identity? This approach raises problems of its own. Above all it bypasses, rather than solves, Marx's

problem, and, more generally, the whole range of questions in response to which holism was developed in the first place. But, in any case, this option did not arise for Marx. Economistic holism's grip on Marx's thought was even stronger than that of Romanticism. Had he accepted that the artistic superstructure is an autonomous sphere with peculiarities of its own, its damaging implications would not have been confined to art as a transcendental sphere; the determinacy of his general theory could have been cancelled altogether.

These concerns point to another key issue: the unit and perspective of analysis. Regardless of the metaphor employed to describe its distance from modern capitalism, did Greek antiquity constitute a unitary stage, or, as classical Athenians themselves saw the matter, their *polis* stood at the apex of a long, if barely traced, process of development (Thucydides 1954 : I.1-25; Aristotle 1984: Chs 1-42; cf. Meiksins Wood 1988; Davis 1997). Here the problem does not so much lie in the evolutionary accounts as in the unacknowledged tension between the theoretical articulation of the variety of paths taken by the ancient Greek formations and the endorsement of the slave mode of production (or any other privileged element) as their defining essence.

Once the irreducible plurality of both the developmental trajectories of ancient societies and the cultural, political and economic processes within and between those societies is acknowledged, then the general theories of history and historical change appear as highly suspect. As nomological concepts, 'ancient civilization' or even 'ancient economy' would have to be derived from the common features of variously differentiated societies of 'antiquity'. But this in turn begs the question of whether even a widely read political economist such as Marx could claim sufficient mastery of the historical evidence concerning ancient arts, religions or even economies to provide an acceptable account of antiquity in these particular spheres, let alone as 'a whole'. This is another way of asking whether theorists would not have had to give up the right to pronounce on the overall character of historical periods and at the same time leave accounts of particular spheres to specialist historians? If so, what, if anything, would be left to theoretical political economy and its laws in explaining and predicting historical phenomena? We are thus back with the question that had troubled Marx in the first place: the apparent failure of economic institutions or laws to determine the character of cultural and political superstructures.

These questions are not seriously pursued in Marx's subsequent writings. In fact, the famous introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, for which the unpublished introduction to

Grundrisse may have served as a draft, evinces no trace of the doubts expressed in the earlier work. On the contrary, notwithstanding certain ambiguous formulations, Marx simply reasserted in the published introduction the base–superstructure model that he had intended to explore further. The other threatened, naturalistic–evolutionary plank of Marx’s position, too, is eventually reinstated. As he emphasises in the preface to *Capital*:

My standpoint, from which the evolution of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history, can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he socially remains, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them (Marx 1974: 21; cf. 1973: 105-111).

It is all as if Marx had found his earlier doubts too inconvenient to contemplate beyond the furtive confines of *Grundrisse*. There is, however, a less conjectural explanation to consider. It is well known that two major theories of history can be found in Marx’s writings, before and after as well as in the unpublished *Grundrisse*: one stressing the forces of production, the other the class struggle. Without entering into the debate about their respective flaws or whether they in fact present different facets of a more comprehensive theory, two points are notable here. First, both approaches appear to express certain salient features of the spread of industrial capitalism as Marx witnessed or read about it. The new system was the most technologically evolved and its accelerating expansion presupposed, as well as intensified, the formation of a class of (‘doubly free’) wage labourers increasingly organized and engaged in struggle over its share of output. Second, the Graeco-Roman zone, or more precisely its classical ‘golden age’, represented from either of these theoretical standpoints the least developed stage of *social* evolution to arise from the earliest putative kinship-communal orders. This double confirmation of evolutionary or ‘historical’ materialism, it seems to me, is what kept such disturbing questions as those raised in the *Grundrisse* at the unpublished and subsequently discarded margins of Marx’s thought.

In respect of the development of productive forces and technology, subsequent scholarship has confirmed that, in terms of the conventional epochs of Western history, the ancient world was the most ‘primitive’, with many of its inventions remaining unused or underutilized until the mediaeval period (Finley 1965; Pleket 1967; Shaw and Saller 1981: 274-75). And in the case of the status of labour, the primitivism of the Graeco-Roman formations is obtained in the very formulation of the question. Conceptually, as well as from the historical vantage point of the ‘formally’ free wage-labour of capitalism or

'substantively' free labour of communism, a less 'evolved' form of social labour than slavery is conceptually unavailable.

There was, in other words, no basis in the socio-economic 'reality' to move Marx to revise his evolutionary view of economic development. Greek art and democracy or Roman law, to be sure, remained problematic, but only for the 'holistic' claims of Marx's theory concerning the overall determination of economic, cultural and political processes. Even here Marx was probably reassured by the way modern capitalism, his main preoccupation, appeared to remould all political and cultural values and institutions in accordance with its requirements for expansive valorization.¹ Thus, the aborted outcome of Marx's reflections in *Grundrisse*.

Grundrisse was not published, much less seriously studied, until long after the outbreak of the *oikos* dispute in 1890s through which Weber's resolution of Marx's paradox was gradually conceived. Yet, its account of Marx in private debate with himself serves as a more telling and concise introduction to that dispute than anything produced by the direct protagonists themselves.

Weber and the Oikos Controversy

Weber's early academic career is marked by three overlapping disputes in his two major fields of interest, political economy and history. The first, the *Methodenstreit*, pitted Gustav Schmoller and his associates in the so-called German Historical School of Political Economy against Carl Menger, the pioneer of the neo-classical turn in 'cosmopolitan' political economy, over the nature of economic laws and the use of deductive or inductive methods in political economy (Schumpeter 1954; Schön 1987). The second took place in history and ranged the whole of the German historical establishment against the maverick historian Karl Lamprecht over what was considered the latter's illicit construction of collective agencies such as 'social psyche', naturalistic reduction of individual action, and misuse of historical evidence (Whimster 1987). The third dispute, and the one that concerns us here, was perhaps the first major inter-disciplinary debate in the modern academy in which historians and political economists faced each other over the nature and boundaries of their disciplines with direct reference to ancient history. Various descriptions of the dispute between political economists/theorists and historians, primi-

1. On this point, Marx of course had Weber's full agreement (see Weber 1930: 181-83).

tivists and modernizers or simply Bücher and Meyer, the *oikos* controversy first broke out in the last decade of the nineteenth century over Karl Bücher's three-stage theory of world history (Bücher 1901), according to which the rise of 'national economy' or modern capitalism is the result of a nomological evolutionary processes comprising the earlier stages of household (*oikos*) economy and city economy.

In its methodological aspects, this debate replicated the Schmoller-Menger dispute but with an ironic difference. A prominent historical political economist, Bücher now had to defend himself against a charge earlier laid by Schmoller against Menger, namely the failure to take rigorous account of historical evidence. In particular professional ancient historians led by Eduard Meyer vehemently objected to Bücher's unitary household-based account of the ancient stage on both empirical and conceptual grounds (Meyer 1924). Like Marx, but in fact under the direct influence of Marx's older rival Rodbertus, Bücher claimed that the classical world, with all its apparent glories, rested on 'primitive' economic foundations, the lowest in terms of the evolution of civilizational forms. The historians countered by presenting classical Athens as a developed market economy whose emergence could be compared to the rise of modern European states. They charged the political economists with cutting history to size to fit their theories rather than the available evidence. In turn, they were accused by Bücher and his associates of the failure to understand the role of theory or distinguish between the essential and inessential in their undertheorised collection and classification of facts. Bücher reproduced Marx's evolutionary paradox, whereas Meyer insisted on a cyclical view according to which classical Greece (and Rome) represented antiquity's own modernity and not a rude stage in the rise of our modernity (see Nafissi 1994: Ch. 2; cf. Austin and Vidal Naquet 1977: Ch. 1; Love 1991: Chs. 1 and 2).

Professionally, Weber had a foot in both camps. A star pupil and presumed heir of Theodor Mommsen, the doyen of German ancient historians, Weber had gone on, after a short spell at Freiburg, to become the youthful occupant of the Chair of Political Economy at Heidelberg following the retirement of Karl Knies, considered the most rigorous of the founding members of the German School (Hennis 1988; Tribe 1989; Schön 1987). Weber was thus ideally placed to understand and settle the dispute. This took many years, starting with a major address, 'The Social Causes of the Decline of Ancient Civilization', delivered in 1895 (and published in 1896; henceforth SC, English translation 1976b) and culminating in the third edition of *The*

Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilisations (AG here always refers to this edition, English translation 1976a, unless otherwise stated) in 1909.

Although registering the force of the historians' case, careful reading of SC reveals it as a sophisticated defence of the political economists' 'primitivist' view of antiquity. The first (1897) and the second (1898) editions of AG are notable mainly for expansion of Weber's scholarly interests from Rome to Greece and Near East rather than any significant conceptual shift.² Grown fifteenfold and displaying a new perspective, structure and set of ideal types, it is the 1909 edition of AG that embodies a synthetic resolution of the *oikos* dispute drawing on the contributions of both sides.

The fact of a break coinciding with his severe nervous breakdown in 1899 is not disputed in commentaries on Weber's intellectual development. What remains at issue is what it represents. For the preeminent historian of ancient historiography, Arnaldo Momigliano, it concerns history and historians and refers above all to Weber's liberation from an initial stage dominated by Mommsen's (and Meitzen's 'converging') agrarian, technical and juridical interests via the half way station of the first edition of AG with its attention to Greece, urban developments and socio-economic concerns to a distinct 'Weberian' approach to history (Momigliano 1980: 286). The problem with Momigliano's account is not that it is mistaken, but that it is one-sided.³ The recognition of the importance of Meyer (and other historians) in Weber's development is a welcome corrective to the way that the former is, if at all, usually mentioned only to be dismissed as the target of Weber's critique of the limitations of 'traditional' political history (see Weber 1949a; Tenbruck 1987). Nevertheless, the segregation of history and political economy (or, subsequently, sociology) as if they represented two different phases in Weber's development disregards his early professional and intellectual involvement in political economy and policy.

This is the side of Weber that focuses the attention of W.G. Runciman, one of the few contemporary sociologists to at all approach Weber in his command of historical evidence. Runciman considers Weber developing out of an initial 'Marxian' phase concerned with

2. In the first edition of AG, Weber makes it clear that he stands by Rodbertus and Bücher. In a very brief literature survey he suggests that especially in case of Rome, Meyer has to modify his views and notes that he still finds Rodbertus's views which had once inspired him 'on the whole valid now' (1897: 18).

3. Although the overwhelming influence he claims Mommsen had on young Weber is open to serious dispute (see Deininger 1986).

the economy and modes of production into a 'Nietzschean' phase concentrating on the role of religious ideas and ideal interests, from SC to *The Protestant Ethic* and beyond. Taking SC as the representative work of Weber's first phase, Runciman finds it:

Marxian not merely in substance but even in phrasing: the description of the 'signs of feudal society' as already apparent in the later empire, the reference to 'organic structural changes' occurring, and occurring of necessity, in the 'depth of society' and the interpretation of the Roman economy in terms of the contradiction engendered by a mode of production resting on slavery more or less parallel the account of Marx himself (1972: 4).

There is a misunderstanding here that indicates the success of Marxism in the twentieth century in appropriating the legacy of the German School of political economy, its more influential nineteenth-century rival. What Runciman, following a long and illustrious line beginning perhaps with Troeltsch, calls Marxist is only valid if Marxism is taken as the generic term to include all economic or economicist or even 'structural' approaches to antiquity which stress the importance of slavery in ancient developments.⁴ It is also understandable in that in the debate with historians, orthodox Marxism was in every controversial position—from primitivism of the slave-based ancient economy to nomological law-abiding approach to historical change—identical to that of Bücher and Rodbertus. This is precisely why

4. Parsons acknowledges other 'historical economists' in Weber's development, but concentrates on Marx and Sombart and appears to confuse various editions of AG. He suggests that it represents 'perhaps the culmination' of 'the earlier phase' of Weber's work. Wolfgang Mommsen in his generally insightful account of Weber's development takes a position radically at odds with Runciman when he says that 'up to 1906 he referred primarily vulgar Marxist interpretations' (1989: 55) and goes on to claim that in the 1909 edition of AG 'Weber came the closest ever to using a Marxist model of explanation' (p. 149). On both these counts he appears mistaken. On the basis of careful examination of Weber's unpublished pre-breakdown lecture notes, Keith Tribe has found greater familiarity with the original writings of Marx and Engels than assumed by Mommsen (Tribe 1989). As we shall see below, with its emphasis on political factors and criticisms of primitivism, rather than Marxism, AG has all the hallmarks of a distinct Weberian research programme. Runciman is thus justified in considering SC the closest Weber came to producing a Marxist analysis which is why de Ste Croix finds it, and not AG, 'Weber's best piece of historical writing' (1981: 85; cf. Roth 1971; Scaff 1989: Ch. 11). But then the 'Marxism' of SC owes more to Rodbertus, Bücher and other historical economists and the positions they shared with Marxism, than Marx and Marxism as such.

Weber's eventual resolution of the *oikos* debate at the same time resolves Marx's paradox.

Again, this ultimately minor qualm apart, our problem with Runciman is not that he is misguided, but that he only notices that which Momigliano ignores and ignores what the latter emphasizes. Runciman neglects to take account of the crucial role of historiography and professional historians in Weber's first 'Marxian' or 'political economy' phase of development. Perhaps the point is ignored because it is so obvious. Be that as it may, what distinguished Weber's ancient writings from those of Rodbertus and Bücher (and Marx) was precisely their recognized specialist quality which made historians from Mommsen to Meyer to treat him, even when finding him on the opposite side, as a fellow professional.

This leads to Moses Finley, the most influential social historian of ancient Greece in the latter half of the twentieth century and a keen follower of and commentator on Weber in matters ancient. His account does not suffer from either of the above blindspots. In fact, it offers just the sort of double corrective to the conflicting views of Runciman and Momigliano that completes the stage for the return to Weber himself. Contra Momigliano, Finley emphasizes the crucial place of political economists, and Bücher in particular, in Weber's development. AG, we are thus reminded, 'opens with a powerful defence, though not an unqualified acceptance of Bücher's *Entstehung der Volkswirtschaft*' (1981a: 13). The influence of Bücher on Weber's other historical (and non-historical) writings is also variously emphasized in Finley's writings (1981: 12-21, 252 n. 41; 1980: 42-44). Finley fully recognises that Weber's writings on ancient history after his *habilitation* is best understood in the context of the *oikos* controversy and that Eduard Meyer was not

particularly concerned with Marx's work...he normally spoke contemptuously of "die Nationalökonomien" (the political economists) as a group, reserving his obsessive fury (that is the right phrase) for Karl Bücher, not Karl Marx (1980: 45-46).

Yet Finley's Weber is perhaps ultimately more problematic than the figure who emerges from the writings of Runciman and Momigliano. For rather than the synthetic Weber who carefully negotiated his way to a final compromise settlement in AG, Finley's Weber is a partisan of the primitivist cause, a precursor or, more precisely, a slightly paler imitation, of Finley himself (1985: 52-61; 1980: 48-49; 1962: 11).⁵ Now if

5. Although Finley 'officially' identified with the primitivist cause, much of

SC represented Weber's last word on antiquity, Finley's portrait would not have been far wide of the original. The problem lies in the fact that Finley's main reference is to AG, which he rightly considers Weber's most important work on antiquity by far. Between the two lies the turn in Weber's development that allows him to settle rather than prolong the *oikos* controversy.

Weber's Solution: The Methodological Framework

SC and the first two editions of AG (1897, 1898) are separated from its final edition by the methodological essays of 1903–1906. These essays represent Weber's response to the aforementioned debates in historical sciences which in his view amounted to a crisis of identity. Not a methodologist by inclination or training, his first reaction was to emphasize that 'only by laying bare and solving substantive problems can sciences be established and their methods developed' (1949a: 115–16). Yet, he could not avoid direct intervention in a period when 'something like methodological pestilence prevails within our discipline' (cited in Oakes 1975: 13; cf. Weber 1975: 275 n 93), and when:

as a result of considerable shifts of the 'viewpoint' from which a datum becomes the object of analysis, the idea emerges that the new 'viewpoint' also requires a revision of the logical forms in which the 'enterprise' has heretofore operated, and when, accordingly, uncertainty about the 'nature' of one's own work arises (1949a: 116).

In short, history and political economy were destabilized along the lines indicated by the *oikos* debate (and the overlapping disputes in political economy and history) so that what Weber notes in his methodological critique of Meyer's methodology applies to himself: despite 'the insignificance in principle of methodology, [he was] rightly busy-ing himself with methodology' (1949a: 116). Before taking on the historical aspects of the debate, Weber thus attempted to sort out the conflicting methodological (including social and ontological) assumptions that underpinned it.

At the broadest level, Weber unifies the research programmes of the historians and political economists by taking a simple but radical step: remove the search for and formulation of laws, he demanded, as the ultimate aim (rather than mere means) of social sciences. Weber thus parts company not only with Menger and Bücher, but even with Schmoller who whilst in practice engaged in what amounted to no

his work substantially and insightfully diverges from all variants of primitivism (see below and, for a detailed account, Nafissi 1994: Chs. 9–11).

more (and no less) than economic history, still justified the effort by claiming that it was the means to eventual adduction of concrete realistic laws (Weber 1949b: 106).

The unified social science promised by Schmoller for the distant future is already in place and it shares with history-writing the aim of

understanding the *characteristic uniqueness of the reality* in which we move. We wish to understand on the one hand the relationship and the cultural significance of individual events in their contemporary manifestations and on the other hand the causes of their being historically so and not otherwise. (1949b: 72, emphasis added).

Thenceforth, as Thomas Burger remarks, 'in Weber's terminology "cultural sciences", "history", and "social sciences" are interchangeable terms; they all denote historical sciences whose concept formation is individualizing' (1987: 68; cf. Weber 1949b: 80). Weber, in other words, reverses the history-theory relationship most clearly asserted by Bücher, but only after simultaneously changing the acquired meaning of both terms. According to Bücher, history's task was data collection on literally everything, from which the theorist would then select 'the normal, simply ignoring the accidental' and thereby 'discover... the laws of development' (1901: 85-86). Ironically, in Weber's view, this division of labour between history and theory in which history is subordinated to the theory or 'scientific work' as its 'handmaiden' was shared by mainstream historians, and to that extent reflected the existing reality (1949a: 115).

Weber thus sets out to both disabuse Bücher and other theorists from their 'naturalistic' inclinations, and help historians raise their ambitions. History had to stop playing the 'role of a servant of theory instead of the opposite role' (1949b: 102). Such a reversal, however, entailed no less than conscious incorporation of theory into history in the broad sense of the term. What, in other words, Weber takes with one hand, he returns with another, albeit in a new conceptual context. Envisaged in Weber's methodology as a complex division of labour, this approach allocated to almost all the warring disciplines and theoretical traditions a place defined by their respective contributions to the final aim of producing causal accounts of historical individuals. The general moments of this division of labour may be presented logically in the following way.

The historical individuals are constructed as subjectively grounded 'valued' segments of historical reality, so defined through 'value analysis' or simply assumed as such in the routinised discourses and research programmes of various historical disciplines (Weber 1949b:

52). Causal or scientific accounts of historical individuals, whether given in the existing research programmes or defined afresh, employ theoretical constructs in order to organize and select from the 'source materials' the causally relevant elements. Although in 'our age of specialization', theoretical construction and collection and critical classification of historical data may be carried out as tasks undertaken by segregated specialists and disciplines, ultimately they must be brought together as interconnected stages of an overall division of labour. From this perspective, scientific history is thus the final product of a teleological production process starting with the ('subjective') design of the historical individual and ending with 'a science of concrete reality... [which] conceives aspects of given reality—the analytical determination of which can only be relative—as "real" components of the concrete causal relations' (Weber 1949a: 173). In between, the process is mediated by the two stages of general concept formation: the construction of ideal types, heuristic laws, empirical regularities—the subject matter of political economy or sociology, on the one hand and, on the other, the collection and critical classification of data—the major task of traditional history.

This logically necessary division of labour was, however, threatened continuously with breakdown resulting from the extension of the particular aim of each stage to the point of replacing the final aim of the process as a whole. Mainstream historians declared the independence and self-sufficiency of their discipline by maintaining the ideal of history as 'a "presuppositionless" mental "photograph" of all the physical and psychic events occurring in the space-time region in question...' In fact, such a standpoint was consonant with the antiquarian practice of collection and classification of historical data, a necessary moment in the production of scientific history, but which, when treated as the latter's ultimate aim and pursued with the least inconsistency, would reduce it to 'the level of a mere chronicle of notable events and personalities' (Weber 1949a: 171, 164; see also 115). Without the aid of general concepts and empirical laws, however, no genuinely scientific, i.e. causal, history was possible. The 'naturalistic' theorists, on the other hand, assumed that their conceptual constructs and developmental sequences were sufficient for understanding the 'essential' aspects of 'concrete reality'. But this essentialization was unsustainable. At best an illicit generalization from particular historical conjuncture wherein the 'essential' moment had become dominant, the economy in the modern period or religion in the mediaeval, this stance (in evidence in Weber's own earlier work) was now discarded altogether. His new position entailed instead an open-ended,

multi-causal approach in which the selection and weight of each factor would vary with the question asked. No factor would be privileged outside and prior to historical investigation.

However inadequate from the point of view of professional philosophers and methodologists, or even the descendants of the historians and political economists to whom it was addressed, this approach cleared Weber's path to revive historical political economy (in the strict and perhaps originally intended sense of the term) in the guise of a new, 'Weberian', sociology. More specifically, Weber was now equipped to implement his methodological strictures in settling the *oikos* dispute, which had raised most of the issues that had occasioned them in the first place. Liberation from evolutionary economism meant, *prima facie*, that even if the ancient economy was 'primitive' in the way assumed by Marx and Bücher, the ancient achievements in culture or politics were not necessarily paradoxical. But then perhaps Greek economy was not primitive after all.

Weber's Solution: The Historical Outline

The original title of Weber's final and most comprehensive contribution to the study of antiquity, *Agrarverhältnisse im Altertum* (The Agrarian Conditions of Antiquity), as well as the title chosen for its English translation (*The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilisations*), has been questioned as both 'awkward' and 'misleading' in view of its actual substance. According to Guenther Roth, 'the title [the German and English alike] hides...a developmental history of economy and polity in antiquity...(1981: xxii n. 18). Finley, on the other hand, claims that 'for all Weber's concern with the dynamics of social institutions and social-cultural interrelations, the *Agrarverhältnisse* is not a history, whether of ancient agriculture or ancient society'(1981a: 14). Somewhat curiously (considering his rejection of the English title as 'even worse' than the German one), Finley eventually settles for Marianne Weber's view, which 'characterized it, not inaccurately as "a sort of sociology of antiquity" prefaced by "an economic theory" of the world of ancient states'(1981a: 14; cf. Roth 1981: xxii n. 18; Momigliano 1980: 435).

Evidently the problem of title raises the more important question of the complex nature of the work itself. A key to the latter is provided by Weber's methodology whose aim was, as we just saw, a reconciliation of history and economic or sociological theory in a unified division of labour. It should therefore not be surprising if AG embodies both Marianne Weber and Finley's 'a sort of sociology' and Roth's

'developmental history'. This duality directly refers to Weber's claim that since causal historical accounts are necessarily mediated by general concepts and ideal types, it pays to construct or borrow the latter in a deliberate fashion.

In AG, Weber aims to construct such ideal types and employ as well as illustrate them in a differentiated history of antiquity. This twofold task is carried out throughout AG, but one or the other is given prominence in the way the text as a whole is divided into two main parts. The first, briefer, section is primarily devoted to 'Economic Theory and Ancient Society', whilst the second, 'The Agrarian History of Major Centres of Ancient Civilization' is itself divided further into seven more or less chronologically ordered accounts of politico-economic developments in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Israel, Greece, the Hellenistic age, the Roman Republic, and the Roman Empire. Now whether one joins Alfred Heuss and Finley in proclaiming AG 'the most original, boldest, and most vivid portrayal ever produced of the economic and social development of antiquity' (Finley 1985: 88), or accepts de Ste Croix's verdict on its uneven, fragmentary and opaque quality (de Ste Croix 1981: 85), its author's programmatic intention should not be in question. AG was conceived and structured as a work of sociological (or politico-economic or theoretical) history in which the general concepts and developmental sequences employed by the historian are constructed in the same text that employs them. Accordingly, the first part ends with the construction of a variety of ideal types such as fortress kingdom, aristocratic polis, hoplite *polis*, bureaucratic city kingdom and so on, which 'allow us' to classify the individual states and 'ask whether a particular state at a particular time more or less approximated to one or another of these pure types' (Weber 1976a: 77). The answer is provided in the second part where 'a sketch will be given of what is known about the agrarian history of those states which are historically most significant' (1976a: 79).

AG thus represents the substantive counterpart to the methodological critique of professional historians and economic theorists and as such critically draws on their respective contributions. The political economists are criticized substantively for failing to see the depth of the ancient developmental sequences and neglecting the role of 'free labour' and other factors that undermined the designation of ancient economy as primitive (Weber 1976a: 46-47; cf. Love 1991). Furthermore, he replaces their approach, in which the past is seen as the less evolved prefiguration of the present, with a historical perspective that accommodates the autonomous developmental trajectory of the past and periodizes antiquity itself. This in turn requires broadening the

economic concepts used in evolutionary periodisations so as to make them applicable to antiquity. The concept of capitalist economy that 'needlessly' limits it to its modern form is thus replaced by a generic definition: 'where we find property as an object of trade utilised by individuals for profit-making enterprise in market economy, there we have capitalism'. On this basis he finds it 'perfectly clear that *capitalism shaped whole periods of Antiquity*, and indeed precisely those periods we call "golden ages" (Weber 1976a: 27, emphasis added; cf. Runciman 1983).

This rather perplexing conclusion, however, does not refute the economic theorists' position so much as shifts it to another level of what thereby becomes a multi-layered analysis (and solution to our paradox).⁶ From political factors to banking and commercial practices and from the character of productive labourers and aristocratic rentiers to the grain policies and the nature and social implications of military technologies, Weber underscores the differences that distinguish various ancient institutions and processes from mediaeval and modern ones. The tables are therefore turned against the historians precisely on the point on which they mounted their strongest challenge against the political economists: the question of attention to difference, individuality and detail:

A genuinely analytic study of comparing the stages of development of the ancient *polis* with those of medieval city would be welcome and productive... Of course I say this on the assumption that such a comparative study would not aim at finding 'analogies and parallels...' The aim should, rather, be precisely the opposite: to identify and define the individuality of each development, the characteristics which made the one conclude in a manner so different from that of the other. This done, one can determine the causes which led to these differences (1976a: 35).

A key question remains. If the differences between ancient *polis* and mediaeval and modern cities were as pronounced as Weber himself indicates, should one not stop calling both capitalist. The answer would have a qualified yes, if Weber had (like Bücher and Marx) viewed classical economic developments almost entirely from the comparative perspective of modern industrial capitalism. But what appears primitive or, in Garnsey and Saller's terms, 'underdeveloped' (1987: 43) from this perspective, may seem 'advanced' from another

6. Weber does not make the shifts in the levels of analysis clear. This has made AG susceptible to two types of interpretation. The first, as in de Ste Croix's case, considers it inconsistent and confused. The second, as in Finley's case, neglects the significance of certain levels of analysis in favour of others.

vantage point. This points to the relativizing limitation of the comparative approach. Weber treats this problem by extending the usual (a) ancient–mediaeval–modern comparative perspective with (b) Graeco-Roman–Near Eastern, or indeed (c) Athenian–Roman and (d) Egyptian–Babylonian comparisons as well as providing (e) separate historical accounts of developments in these and other ancient formations.

The typologies presented at the conclusion of the ‘theoretical’ part of AG are the products of this complex operation, even though the nature of this operation is not spelt out by Weber. Various referred to as ‘pure types’ and ‘stages’, they in fact qualify as both. ‘Aristocratic city’ or ‘bureaucratic city kingdom’ and other such constructs may be considered as ‘ideal types’ to be used or discarded in historical accounts of ancient or other formations. On the other hand, once rearranged only slightly they appear as stages of historical development of respectively Near Eastern and Graeco-Roman centres constructed in view of the evolution of their state forms. This choice of periodization requires further elaboration. First, it reflects a rather general consensus about the ‘primacy’ of politics in antiquity. Second, it indicates Weber’s break with the reductionism that nevertheless classified these societies on the basis of modes of production. Third, it reflects, his view that political factors initiated and sustained as well blocked ancient developments. Finally, it is these factors that offered the normative lessons of the kind that had made antiquity an interesting or valued object of study for him.

At the broadest level, Weber retains antiquity as a useful general concept with a basis in the history of ancient societies. Acknowledging the lack of reliable evidence about the social organization of the earliest agrarian orders, he nevertheless insists that certain early stages of development are ‘recapitulated by all the peoples in Antiquity from the Seine to Euphrates among whom urban centres developed’ (1976a: 69). Culminating in the rise of ‘fortress kingdoms’, the significance of this universal starting point becomes only fully apparent in the light of antiquity’s final period when it is once again unified, this time by the Roman Empire. The initial ‘unity’ of course refers to the relatively homogeneous character of localized segmentary orders from the Seine to the Euphrates, whereas in its imperial phase, Rome actually unified this vast area in a single polity. Centred on the primacy of kingship, there is an affinity between early fortress kingdoms and the late bureaucratic phase of the Empire which encases antiquity as a unitary stage. With its emphasis on the king’s *oikos* (replicated at other levels of the social hierarchy), it is this conception that underpinned the primitivists’ evolutionary position in the grand scale of universal his-

tory. Weber does not deny this, but he is interested also in the periods in between the early kingdoms and the Roman Empire, where the ancient world is differentiated along radically distinct lines.

Whilst there is an underlying continuity in the Near East, antiquity loses its homogenous character as a consequence of the rise of the aristocratic *polis* and the abolition of monarchy in Greece. The slavery in the East is mainly a domestic occupation in a broader politico-economic context in which the boundaries between slaves and others are fluid. Neither have citizenship rights, and politics as the domain of public interaction over common affairs of citizens is absent. In the exercise of political power, some slaves of the king may be far more influential than notables located at greater distance from the throne. At this, second, level of analysis the East represent a genuine *oikos* economy whose centre is the king's household. From the assumed universal stage of fortress kingdoms, the Near East produces three more developed forms of state: 'bureaucratic city-kingdom', 'authoritarian liturgical state', and the 'world empire'. All three have in common the 'decisive' role played in their formation and continuity by bureaucracy. Weber does not elaborate what he means by decisive; nor does he demonstrate bureaucracy's predominance over other factors. But what is clear is that bureaucracy is a major contemporary preoccupation of Weber and perhaps a decisive factor in Weber's decision to return to the *oikos* debate. Put differently, bureaucracy may be seen as the continuous element that turns antiquity into a valued object of study for Weber. The crucial point about the aforementioned developmental typologies or stages is that in a certain precise sense they represent variants of the same type or stage. Strictly speaking, at least from Weber's historical perspective, there is no structural development at all:

Oriental despotism of this sort [which] generally developed in the ancient Near East directly out of the more primitive forms of bureaucratic city kingdom differed from the latter only in its *more rationalized* organization (1976a: 74, emphasis added).

What changes in subsequent 'stages' is the reorganization of the king's 'personal retinue' into a hierarchical officialdom and army as demanded by territorial expansion and external force, without thereby losing their character as instruments of the patrimonial king. After all, strictly speaking, there is no other 'person' (or universally recognized institution such as the *polis*) in the realm, or indeed in the 'whole world' in reference to which the emerging bureaucracies could legitimize their position or dispose of their functions. From bureaucratic

city-kingdoms to world empires, different forms of Near Eastern monarchies do not so much represent developmental stages as rationalizations of the same primordial form. On closer scrutiny, this form appears to be none other than the extended household from which the term *oikos* originated. The patriarch's 'natural' monopoly of economic, ideological and political power in the extended household is subsequently retained in what Weber pointedly calls the 'royal *oikos*'. Presided over by the divine or the divinely sanctioned monarch, this particular type of *oikos* includes the army, bureaucracy and the temple.⁷

In contrast, even the most 'primitive' aristocratic polities represent a new stage in ancient developments insofar as the mutual recognition of the otherwise inherently warring lords, kinglets or tribal chiefs creates a new political space independent of their respective households. The subsequent evolutionary developments of the *polis* is thus measured by the extent to which it is able to appropriate and transform the functions and values associated with the royal *oikos*, which in turn depends on the degree to which it is able to resist bureaucratization. From this perspective, Western antiquity, too, produces three stages following the universal stage of fortress kingdom: the aristocratic, the hoplite and the democratic *polis*. In contrast to the Eastern sequence, these represent a genuinely evolutionary pattern in which political rights are extended to non-slave males whilst ancient feudalism gives way to ancient capitalism.

Weber is careful to distinguish the primarily 'urban' feudalism of the 'Greek Middle Ages' from both the subordinated feudalism of bureaucratic monarchies and from the rural feudalism of the mediaeval Occident. Yet, as with capitalism, he frees feudalism from its mediaeval manifestations. The aristocratic *polis* is considered feudal because, *politically*, 'the city was in fact a league of great "clans"'. Only those men were admitted who could live the life of a knight and take part in the city's military institutions. *Ideologically*, 'it was at this time that great value came to be placed on "blood" and high birth'. Fertile 'land to sustain rental payments [and] proximity to coast to allow profits from commerce' were the major *economic* preconditions for the rise of a 'class of money lenders' who subsequently turned into a 'class of

7. This recalls Marx's remark that 'the despot here appears as the father of all the numerous lesser communities, thus realizing the common unity of all' (1964: 69). Various other elements of Weber's account of 'Oriental Despotism' such as the role of irrigation and the riverine basis of Near Eastern formations also drew on nineteenth-century orientalist scholarship shared by Marx, and suffered from its limitations (see Anderson 1974: 462-551).

landowners' whilst 'most peasants fell into debt, then slipped into a form of debt slavery'. Thus:

the open land outside the city came to be divided, part of it being farmed by independent peasants outside the aristocratic families, the rest being worked by a large class of debt slaves. Sometimes the latter were legally distinguished from free men as a separate order, but generally the same effect was achieved by the debt and trial law of early times, combined with aristocratic domination of the courts and the associated institutions of clientage' (Weber 1976a: 71-72).

After the aristocratic *polis* come the second and third stages in the Occidental developmental sequence, the 'hoplite' and the 'democratic' *polis*. The hoplite *polis*, as the name suggests, arises from the relative democratization of warfare and extension of citizenship to the 'free citizen yeomanry' who formed the core of the hoplite army. In this stage, class conflict between the aristocratic creditors and dependent or debt-ridden peasants is ameliorated, citizenship becomes tied to landownership, expansion of large estates is curtailed and generally '*polis* pursued policies designed to preserve its yeomanry' (Weber 1976a: 74-76). Finally, in the democratic *polis* the army service and the citizenship rights were separated from ownership of land. In this stage the classical *polis*

did away with all communal forms of ownership and with all forms of feudal tenure... What remained in effect was the right to rent land for money or part of the crop, an arrangement made solely for profit and subject to cancellation by either owner or renter. Once these conditions had been established the *flowering of capitalism* followed. Slaves ceased to be recruited from debtors and were instead purchased (Weber 1976a: 75-76, emphasis added).

This (non-bureaucratic) developmental typology thus ends with what could only be described as the stage of a slave-owning capitalist democracy. Although Weber does not draw the implications of this view fully, they must be clear by now. Ancient slavery once examined historically or from the inside, as it were, differentiates as an element with varied significance. Rather than the lowest status in a continuum, with free labour standing at the highest point, slavery in the *polis* becomes a component of the most advanced stage in antiquity. The expansion of the market for slaves not only represented further commercialisation of the economy, but was also an outcome of the successful struggle of indigenous peasantry to resist or eliminate 'serfdom' and extend political rights to the *demos*. As Finley remarks, the 'most fundamental difference' in the bifurcation of the developmental trajectories in the ancient world lay 'in the shift among Greeks and

Romans from reliance on the half-free within to reliance on chattel slaves from outside, and as a corollary the emergence of the idea of freedom' (1981b: 128; 1980: 67-93; cf. Meiksins Wood 1988).

In concluding his discussion of the 'democratic *polis*', Weber refers to the decline of the 'classical *polis*' and the rise of Hellenistic and Roman empires. These developments, however, do not entail new ideal types (or developmental stages) in addition to those presented above. On the contrary, the Hellenistic kingdoms and the Roman Empire are placed in the same category as the Near Eastern liturgy states and world empires:

by protecting subjects and by establishing peace, the Roman Empire condemned ancient capitalism to death... In the liturgy state created by Diocletian, capitalism found no anchorage for itself, no chance for profit. Bureaucracy destroyed economic as well as political initiative, for the opportunities for gain were gone (Weber 1976a: 366).

By thus downplaying the evolutionary characteristics of the Roman Empire and viewing it in its final bureaucratic phase as a variant of Near Eastern liturgy states, Weber provides a cyclical reading of ancient history which overlays the evolutionary trajectory of its western half prior to its bureaucratic transformation. Thus the aforementioned final reminder to both sides of the debate in the very last passage of AG that the history of 'Mediterranean-European civilization does not show either closed cycles or linear progress'. Or, put differently, Western antiquity shows both cyclical and evolutionary developments (cf. Finley 1981b: 132). These developments evinced features that entail and validate the use of general concepts such as capitalism and feudalism but with specifications that partake of the contextual and intrinsic elements mediating their emergence in antiquity.

Conclusion

Weber achieves three major objectives in AG. First, he manages more completely than any of his other works to consistently apply the methodological approach elaborated in the essays of 1903–1906. Secondly, he settles the *oikos* debate.⁸ He shows the ways in which both sides were right (and wrong). The political economists were right inasmuch as they were focused on the beginning and the end of antiquity, when the royal household dominated the political economy, and pointed to the ways in which the intervening feudal and capitalist

8. Weber's settlement was not final and new rounds of debate followed the publication of AG (see Nafissi 1994).

stages were different from their mediaeval and modern counterparts. The historians rightly insisted on the long-term evolution of the Graeco-Roman world and the cyclical rise and decline of antiquity taken as a whole. From the standpoint of modern capitalism, however, antiquity represented a primitive first stage. The mediaeval period picked up the pieces of a decimated civilization which it injected with Christian universalism and church organisation, which in turn played a key role in the rise of modern industrial capitalism.

In settling the *oikos* debate, Weber also dealt with Marx's paradox. Greece was not the childhood of humanity but underwent, especially in case of Athens, a long evolutionary process of its own, as the Athenians themselves insisted. In terms of political power and constitutional inclusiveness, as well as in the extent of its capitalist sector (and Weber's own scholarly expertise), Rome far surpassed classical Athens. Yet, in developmental terms it is democratic Athens that is the reference point for the most advanced of Weber's typologies. Put simply, Athens achieved modernity which, like its capitalism and democracy, overlapped with, yet remained radically distinct from, our variants of modernity. The intense dialogue (before and after Marx) with ancient Athenians would have soon faded, if their modernity was identical with ours. Nor, however, would it have been sustained without recourse to a language and predicament shared in some fundamental sense by the offspring of Enlightenment (see Castoriadis 1992; Meir 1990; Williams 1993).

Thirdly, Weber found evidence and confirmation for his opposition to bureaucratization, one of his main preoccupations. In the year 1909 when AG was published, in a particularly provocative speech to *Verein für Sozialpolitik*, Weber sharply criticized the Prussian bureaucracy in terms almost identical to those he employed in lamenting the bureaucratization of Rome. As Beetham notes:

Weber's analysis of the likely character of a totally bureaucratized society was not based on contemporary evidence alone, but also depended largely on historical analogies, particularly those of ancient Egypt and the Roman Empire... These historical examples not only provided general evidence for the inescapability of bureaucracy, for the fact that once it had developed it 'disappeared only with the decay of the total surrounding culture'. They also offered more precise analogies to give substance to Weber's image of future in a socialist society. Rome provided an example of the stifling of capitalism by the state, with consequent economic stagnation and cultural decline, where Egypt offered an image of a society living without freedom under a single bureaucratic hierarchy (1985: 86).

Looking at the ancients during and in the aftermath of the collapse of bureaucratic socialism, new lessons might be on offer (see, for example, Ober 1997; Williams 1993). Capitalism not only has won but, if our Weber is broadly right, it has proved to be the only viable companion to democracy, ancient as well as modern. For those whose 'value rapport' with 'the pinnacle of the Hellenic civilization' is based primarily on citizenship and direct democracy, this raises a tantalizing idea: capitalism is not necessarily incompatible with direct democracy; it may even be tamed by it.

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