

# Narrative Economy

## The Contentment of the Form

Ancient economic history has a strong tradition, at least for the last forty years and arguably since the mid-nineteenth or late eighteenth century, of theoretical awareness and sophistication.<sup>1</sup> We have typically shown ourselves to be more aware of debates in cognate disciplines (albeit usually ten or twenty years in arrears), more willing to make explicit use of theoretical concepts and approaches (albeit always as consumers rather than producers of theory) and more sensitive to forms of argument and epistemological assumptions than our colleagues working on, for example, political or military topics.<sup>2</sup> In part this may be seen as the legacy of a succession of totemic figures who maintained their connections and interests outside the usual limits of the discipline; in part, a response of desperation in the face of otherwise intractable and fragmentary evidence; in part, perhaps, a source of prestige and reassurance in the face of those pursuing more accessible and student-friendly aspects of antiquity.

However, this sophistication, self-awareness and even self-satisfaction in one area of historiographical practice disguises and draws attention away from our considerable naïveté in another: rhetoric.<sup>3</sup> Either our reading, or our assimilation, of contemporary theoretical debates has been all too selective: much economics, sociology, anthropology and ecology, little philosophy, literary theory or historiography.<sup>4</sup> This may be explained,

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<sup>1</sup> The longevity of the tradition depends on what account one gives of the history of the subject, and whether such figures as Smith, Marx and Weber are to be co-opted or repudiated. Cf. N. Morley, 'Political economy and classical antiquity', *Jnl of the History of Ideas* 59.1 (1998), pp. 113-14.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the range of approaches to be found in P. Cartledge, E.E. Cohen & L. Foxhall, eds., *Money, Labour and Land: approaches to the economies of ancient Greece* (London, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Key works in this area include: H. White, *Tropics of Discourse: essays in cultural criticism* (Baltimore, 1978) and *The Content of the Form: narrative discourse and historical representation* (Baltimore, 1987), discussed in K. Jenkins, *On 'What is History?'* (London, 1995); J.S. Nelson, A. Megill & D.N. McCloskey, eds., *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences: language and argument in scholarship and public affairs* (Madison, WI, 1987); R.F. Berkhofer, Jr., *Beyond the Great Story: history as text and discourse* (Cambridge, MA, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the absence of an economically-orientated contribution from A. Cameron, ed., *History as Text: the writing of ancient history* (London, 1989). One exception to the generalisation is the recent work (sometimes characterised as 'cultural poetics') of scholars like Lesley Kurke (see e.g. *The Traffic in Praise: Pindar and the poetics of social economy* (Ithaca, 1991)) and Sitta von Reden (*Exchange in Ancient Greece* (London, 1995)); discussed by I. Morris in Cartledge, Cohen & Foxhall, eds, *Money, Labour and Land*, pp. 16-18, offering a

if not excused, by the fact that most of our sources appear less obviously rhetorical (or even textual) than those explored by political or cultural historians — though recent work by Habinek on Cato and Henderson on Columella should warn us against taking apparent artlessness at face value.<sup>5</sup> It is also the case that most historians in other fields remain equally oblivious to the implications of recent work on textuality and rhetoric; we are not uniquely myopic. In practical terms, a pre-Copernican view of language and discourse allows us all to carry on working much as we always have done, offering accounts of the past that do not waste time fretting over their epistemological or literary status.<sup>6</sup> We can treat language as a transparent and straightforward medium of representation, regard style as an optional (and not always desirable) extra, and accept the conventions of scholarly discourse without thought or demur.<sup>7</sup> It is convenient, it is comforting; it is not of course unproblematic.

As Hayden White argued twenty-five years ago, ‘there has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found*.’<sup>8</sup> Such a perspective argues that history offers a kind of story, and that studying a historical account *as a story* (that is, with the tools and techniques of literary criticism) can tell us something about the way that it ‘works’ to persuade a reader of the truth of its depiction of the past. Put another way, literary criticism offers a model for self-understanding.<sup>9</sup> White’s work has emphasised the affiliations of historical and literary forms, in opposition to scientific discourse. Other writers argue that any use of language can be understood in rhetorical terms, as using a range of techniques to produce particular responses in the reader: the scientific paper simply follows different generic conventions. As writers, we do not simply reproduce the past in our text but represent and characterise it, much as a novelist depicts a character or a landscape. As readers, we may not be convinced solely by the

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contrast between their subject matter and the ‘hard’ [solid, real, masculine, active, potent] surfaces studied by economics and sociology.

<sup>5</sup> T.N. Habinek, *The Politics of Latin Literature* (Princeton, 1998), pp. 46-9; J. Henderson, ‘Columella’s living hedge: the Roman gardening book’, *JRS* 92 (2002), pp. 110-33.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. K. Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History* (London, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> ‘What scholars sought was a plain style that presented the truth of its text as its solely ostensible content, thus persuading the reader that it was transparent to reality’: Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story*, p. 91; cf. his quote on p. 28 from F.R. Ankersmit, *The Reality Effect in the Writing of History* (Amsterdam, 1989), pp. 5-6.

<sup>8</sup> White, *Tropics of Discourse*, p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. D.N. McCloskey, *The Rhetoric of Economics* (Madison, WI, 1985), p. xix.

content of an argument but also by the way it is presented. As historians, therefore, we need to consider, in White's phrase, the 'content of the form': the rhetorical effects of our choice of language and of our scholarly and historical conventions.

There is an inkling of this sort of approach in the familiar concern of Finley and others about the appropriate vocabulary (or terminology) for talking about the ancient economy; a concern inspired by such practices as Rostovtzeff's habit of referring to an ancient 'bourgeoisie', or Carandini's wish to detect 'economic rationalism' in Columella.<sup>10</sup> However, hitherto the use of such terms has been understood and attacked as a category error rather than as a rhetorical technique. The argument focuses on whether a given word offers a correct description of the past reality — something that can never be determined, in the absence of universal agreement about what the past was like — rather than on the implications and overtones of the terminology, its role in constructing and legitimising a particular past. Compare the comments of Marx on the same topic:

The materials and means of labour, a proportion of which consists of the products of previous work, play their part in every labour process in every age and in all circumstances. If, therefore, I label them 'capital' in the confident knowledge that 'semper aliquid haeret', then I have proved that the existence of capital is an eternal law of nature of human production and that the Xinghiz who cuts down rushes with a knife he has stolen from a Russian so as to weave them together to make a canoe is just as true a capitalist as Herr von Rothschild. I could prove with equal facility that the Greeks and Romans celebrated communion because they drank wine and ate bread.<sup>11</sup>

For all his belief in the reality of *his* version, Marx recognises that one can always more or less plausibly describe the past in different terms; his (highly rhetorical) critique therefore aims at the hidden agenda of a particular description, the ideological baggage involved in

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<sup>10</sup> M.I. Finley, 'Classical Greece', in Finley, ed., *Second International Conference of Economic History, Volume I: trade and politics in the ancient world* (New York, 1979), p. 13: 'The relationship between trade and politics in classical Greece still seems to be treated most of the time as if there were no conceptual problems, as if, in Rostovtzeff's language, it is only a question of facts. And that means, necessarily, that the concepts and generalizations which are constantly being brought to bear, expressly or tacitly, are modern ones, even when they hide beneath the mask of "common sense".' See also *The Ancient Economy* (London, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn 1985) *passim*, esp. pp. 17-23.

<sup>11</sup> *Resultate des unmittelbaren Produktionsprozesses* [1863/6]; printed as an appendix to *Capital Volume I* (trans. B. Fowkes: Harmondsworth, 1976), pp. 998-9.

the rhetoric of ‘ancient capitalism’. It has been suggested that nineteenth-century historians were more conscious of and willing to exploit the rhetorical dimension of the historical account.<sup>12</sup> For example, Marx’s contemporary (and, with respect to the idea of ‘ancient capitalism’, frequent target) Theodor Mommsen explicitly acknowledged that his modernising vocabulary was deployed for effect: ‘I wanted to bring the ancients down from the fantastic pedestal on which they appear into the real world. That is why the consul had to become the burgomeister.’<sup>13</sup> His successors in ancient history have learnt to be far more circumspect in their choice of language, to the point of forgetting that there is a real choice involved.

Lack of awareness or acknowledgement of rhetoric on the part of contemporary historians does not mean that their writing is free of such ‘trickery’; rather, we have so wholly assimilated the prevailing conventions and metaphors of scholarly discourse that we register only their absence or apparent perversion. ‘Economists use a have-a-nice-day rhetoric that does not know itself or care’: the same can be said of most economic historians.<sup>14</sup> We focus on our colleagues’ inappropriate application of neo-classical economic concepts or implausible interpretations of the evidence, not on their clumsy emplotment or misleading metaphors. In fact, however, as I hope the following examples will demonstrate, the distinction between the form and the content of an argument is not always easily maintained, and both play their part in establishing as credible (at least to certain audiences) a particular account of the past.

## **Trading Rhetoric**

My first example is about as overtly rhetorical as ancient economic history gets, though this has not always been remarked upon by its readers: the 1980 article by Keith Hopkins on ‘Taxes and trade in the Roman empire’.<sup>15</sup> This is an extremely rich and complex piece

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<sup>12</sup> H. White, *Metahistory: the historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973).

<sup>13</sup> T. Mommsen, letter to Herzen; quoted by G.P. Gooch, *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1920), p. 457.

<sup>14</sup> McCloskey, *Rhetoric of Economics*, p. 72. My indebtedness in the rest of this section to McCloskey’s rhetorical analysis of economic texts is enormous. Cf. A Marwick, *The Nature of History* (Basingstoke, 1970), p. 165: ‘In the main, opinion within the historical guild favours the use of everyday language in historical writing; the jargon-laden excesses of much social science exposition has seemed to point a salutary warning’.

<sup>15</sup> *JRS* 70 (1980), pp. 101-25.

of writing, operating simultaneously at several levels of discourse. It is rewarding to explore individual paragraphs in detail, but here I want to focus on a number of themes that run through the article as a whole. One of its most striking aspects is the strong sense of authorial presence, of the writer as character. ‘Hopkins’ (that is, the character presented in the text, whose relationship to the real Keith Hopkins may or may not be problematic) insists on his own role in the production of the material placed before the reader. There are frequent uses of the first person, from the introduction onwards: ‘I have canvassed’ (p. 101), ‘I have stressed’ (p. 103), ‘I shall argue’ (p. 105) and so forth. This might be seen as simple intellectual honesty, but the contrast with the usual impersonal style of academic history is striking; all the more so in the use of footnotes to offer highly personalised and informal asides and commentaries on the main text. Conventional historiography seeks to conceal the role of the historian in interpreting and representing the past; here, his presence is unavoidable.<sup>16</sup>

Compared with the conventional approach, this is a risky strategy; the reader is presented not with ‘the real past’ but with something explicitly labelled as ‘the Hopkins version’, and must then be persuaded that this is indeed a credible account. Of course, the strategy of signposting some arguments as personal interpretations does help other, equally subjective but more conventionally presented, interpretations to pass unchallenged.<sup>17</sup> The main argument, however, requires a different tactic: the historian whose presence has been so strongly signalled must be established as an authoritative and trustworthy figure whose opinions deserve credence. Hopkins therefore offers displays of virtuosity in statistics, numismatics and the philosophical underpinnings of historical arguments, criticises the limited ambitions of archaeologists and the narrow approaches of other historians, and demonstrates an astonishing breadth of reading, in a range of languages.<sup>18</sup> ‘Hopkins’ is clearly an expert, but not a mere specialist: he is

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<sup>16</sup> On voice, see J.P. Hallett & T. van Nortwick, eds., *Compromising Traditions: the personal voice in classical scholarship* (London and New York, 1997), and, more briefly, N. Morley, *Writing Ancient History* (London, 1999), pp. 111-16.

<sup>17</sup> Compare the style of argument in ‘Figure 4 indicates that the whole Roman empire was integrated into a single monetary economy. At least, that is my interpretation.’ (p. 112) with ‘In the long term, as we know, the inner-core provinces were not impoverished by the Roman conquest’ (p. 103).

<sup>18</sup> On ‘virtuosity’, see McCloskey, *Rhetoric of Economics*, pp. 70-1; note Hopkins’ casual deployment of the phrase ‘variance explained is the correlation coefficient squared’ (p. 111), almost certainly (with all due respect) incomprehensible to the majority of readers of the *Journal of Roman Studies*. Hopkins on archaeologists, n.13 and n.41; on other historians, n.9 and n.10. Striking displays of erudition in n.9

someone who can be trusted to pronounce with authority on a variety of subjects, master of both the grand theory and the telling detail. At the same time, this formidable intellect is given a human face: footnotes are used to establish a less formal relationship with the reader, creating the illusion that this is a conversation or a tutorial rather than a lecture, while ‘Hopkins’ interjects expressions of modesty (‘since I am not a numismatist . . .’, p. 106) and self-deprecation (‘it is disappointing to confess at the outset that one’s case is unproven’, p. 101), and displays his fondness for irony: ‘What we dig up are, rather sadly, hoarders’ unrecovered savings. Their loss is our gain.’ (p. 114).<sup>19</sup>

This sense of the author’s presence is reinforced through his distinctive style of argument. The dominant rhetorical trope is *procatlepsis*: the anticipation of criticism. This begins with the opening sentence — ‘this essay is speculative and tentative’ (p. 101) — and continues throughout; the up-front acknowledgement that the reader is being offered interpretation rather than fact exemplifies the trope. ‘I suspect (though how could one prove?’ (n.7); ‘it is plausible to assert (though difficult to prove)’ (p. 103); ‘the concept . . . is purposely vague’ (n.8); ‘data do not always work out exactly as one would like’ (p. 105); ‘I thought it best to express the result as a round number to underline its vagueness’ (n.51). Hopkins highlights how far some of his procedures are ‘arbitrary’ (n.35, p. 118), his assumptions ‘questionable’ (p. 107) and his comparative evidence ‘incongruous’ (p. 107). The aim of such a rhetorical strategy is of course to disarm the critic: if the author has already acknowledged the faults in his paper, what can one do except nod in agreement — and be shipwrecked against the author’s unassailable conviction that nevertheless — indeed, *a fortiori*, since the objections have already been considered and rejected — the argument stands.

However, given an audience whose expectations of a historical argument are shaped by the conventions and traditions of the genre, one might doubt the efficacy of Hopkins’ rhetorical strategies — assuming, of course, that his aim really is to persuade people to accept his account of the past. The way that self-consciousness about forms of argument shades into a constant emphasis on the uncertainty of these and any other arguments makes it clear that the article is at best only partly concerned with the ancient

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(Philostratus and the *International Yearbook of Agricultural Statistics*), n.11 and n.58 (works on China), n.55 (Hyginus, Appian and a book on taxation in Asia Minor under the Ottomans), n.72.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. p. 114 (‘Paradoxically . . .’) and p. 122 (‘Ironically . . .’). The suggestion that the ‘most exciting’ documents on ancient Mediterranean trade are tenth-century papyri (n.10) may be another example of this trope.

world. Hopkins is at least as much interested in attacking and undermining scholarly conventions, in questioning historians' assumptions about how arguments should be put forward and how they can be supported. Early footnotes offer ironic comments about scholarly habits, distancing himself from them: 'some of the conventional sign-posting is missing' (n.1); 'this argument also illustrates scholarly ingenuity when confronted with a plausible generalization' (n.17); 'let us deal with relationships between probabilities, rather than with the well-documented "facts" which are the normal building bricks of conventional history' (p. 111); 'it is a reflection on scholarly concern with detail, rather than with broad problems' (n.46). This is succeeded by a direct assault on the way that historians make use of ancient evidence — ironically, and certainly deliberately, exemplified in the way that a Roman inscription was used in the previous footnote.<sup>20</sup>

Hopkins doesn't offer any explicit argument to support these philosophical and methodological criticisms, but leaves the body of his article to highlight scholarly conventions and assumptions through its ostentatious departures from them. His direct comments on the subject are not intended to persuade so much as to provoke (as if conventional historians would not already be annoyed) and to flesh out the character of 'Hopkins' as scholarly iconoclast and mischief-maker. They also serve to establish his credentials with those of similar opinions outside ancient history, and to create a new audience within the subject, formed of those whose reaction is one of recognition and enthusiasm rather than outrage.<sup>21</sup> The article seeks to exemplify the exciting possibilities of an alternative approach to historiography, dramatising the thought-processes of the theoretically self-conscious historian. Interpretation and argument are presented almost as a high-wire act, emphasising the constant risk of failure or frustration as well as the potential rewards: 'I shall try, rather rashly, to estimate . . . ' (p. 104); 'I have jumped the gun', followed by an agonising wobble over 'questionable assumptions' (p. 107); 'I do not know', 'I wish I knew' (p. 111); 'Can we estimate the gross product of the Roman empire? At first sight it seems hopeless. But . . . ' (p. 117); 'Can we go further?' (p. 119). The tightrope-walking historian dares to go beyond the conventional, to step out across the chasm of uncertainty; he seeks the attention of an audience, certainly, even if only

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<sup>20</sup> n.62, n.61.

<sup>21</sup> As has been argued for the work of Robert Fogel: see McCloskey, *Rhetoric of Economics*, pp. 133-7. As Fogel sought to draw together economics and history, shuttling between different rhetorics, so Hopkins balances between sociology and ancient history: cf. B.D. Shaw, 'Social science and ancient history: Keith Hopkins in partibus infidelium', *Helios* 9.2 (1982), pp. 17-57.

those who wish or expect to see him fall, but he also seeks to inspire a few to emulate him.

There could scarcely be a greater contrast to this display than one of the most important critiques of Hopkins' argument, Richard Duncan-Jones' chapter on 'Trade, taxes and money' in *Structure and Scale in the Roman Economy*.<sup>22</sup> It offers, one might say, a return to normality: the almost complete absence of any authorial voice or presence, the calm, straightforward presentation of evidence and facts, with footnotes focused on providing vital references rather than chatting to the reader or insulting other historians. But the apparent absence of rhetoric is misleading; it is simply that we are so accustomed to this style that we accept its effects as natural. Duncan-Jones has his own, unobtrusive, rhetorical techniques: the display of virtuosity in numismatics and statistics to establish his scholarly authority (without any Hopkinsesque disavowal of expertise); an emphasis on details, specific instances, regional studies, concrete examples; the piling-up of ancient evidence to emphasise that 'this is how it was', in contrast to abstract generalisations and hypotheses.

One aspect of Duncan-Jones' presentation is, at least for ancient historians, less familiar and thus rather striking: his use of numbered paragraphs. They are intended to emphasise, I would suggest, structural solidity, clarity of thought and a reassuring predictability in the argument (X follows Y as 3 follows 2), as well as its affiliation with the scientific or social-scientific report (presenting 'real facts' rather than opinions and interpretations); all of this in marked contrast to the staged uncertainties and hesitations of Hopkins. The chapter includes a few rhetorical flourishes, mainly *paramologia* (conceding a small point to emphasise the larger one): some trade did take place, but it is doubtful whether it was due to the flow of money; that is not to say that coin did not ever travel, but the flows were slow and small-scale.<sup>23</sup> For the most part, it faithfully reproduces the conventional tropes of historical discourse, so familiar that they are all but invisible: the self-effacement of the historian, allowing the presentation of his interpretations as factual statements, and the representation of ancient evidence as a mirror, 'reflecting' (in a straightforward, direct manner) the ancient reality (pp. 31, 34, 37, 40, 41), and as an eye-witness, 'suggesting' or 'not suggesting' that something is the case (pp. 34, 39, 40, 44, 46, 48).

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<sup>22</sup> Cambridge, 1990, pp. 30-47.

<sup>23</sup> Pp. 42, 45.

In other words, the contrast between Hopkins and Duncan-Jones is not between rhetorical and unrhetorical texts, but between different rhetorical techniques (reflecting their rather different aims) and different degrees of rhetorical self-consciousness. The rhetoric of one piece stands out because it confounds and confronts generic expectations; that of the other is almost invisible, because it conforms to how we expect history to be written. The two arguments cannot of course simply be reduced to their means of expression, but neither can their rhetorical dimensions be ignored: Hopkins makes his style one of the issues at stake, while Duncan-Jones' disagreement with the Hopkins approach is expressed in both content and form. We may not be persuadable by rhetoric alone, but we cannot discount the possibility of influence. The same may be said of one of the most important attributes of historical texts, including economic history: their construction of, and dependence upon, narrative.

### **Plotting Development**

Once upon a time, all history was narrative history: written by the elite for the elite, focusing almost exclusively on rulers, battles and politics; event-centred, highly partial and thoroughly ideological. In the 1930s, inspired partly by developments in other human sciences, historians like Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch brought about a revolution in historiography: abandoning the study of *histoire événementielle* to focus on change in the medium- and long-term, offering synchronic explorations of the 'structures' of economy and society, restoring the experiences of the vast majority of the population to the centre of historical interest. Narrative history slunk off to its stronghold of school textbooks and television series; academic history could now hold its head up as a critical, analytical and even radical discipline, fit to take its place among the social sciences.<sup>24</sup>

Once upon a time, all history was narrative history. This is, after all, how we actually experience the past and make sense of it; it is what makes the past meaningful, binding a community together through collective memory and shared stories; it is what leads people to become interested in history. Historians used to be artists, advancing their arguments subtly in the course of their narration, bringing the past and its characters to life. Since the mid-twentieth century, however, the historical consensus has been

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<sup>24</sup> The inspiration for the opening of this section was Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story*, p. 26.

assaulted by successive waves of Marxists, economists and sociologists, feminists and post-modernists; narrative has been unjustly displaced in favour of social-scientific jargon and static 'models' of society, with the result that the subject as a whole has been completely marginalised.

Once upon a time exactly as above, but with a return to narrative in recent years; something to be celebrated or bewailed, depending on one's view of Simon Schama.

Once upon a time always both in varying measures: never just one or the other, but a matter of a choice of genre and presentation as much as of intellectual approach.<sup>25</sup>

The key argument of modern theories on historical narratives is that the story is not inherent in the facts. One can easily construct different narratives from the same set of events, depending on how they are interpreted and represented: the 'story' of the first century BC might be the downfall of the Roman Republic at the hands of over-ambitious notables, or the heroic struggle of Octavian to save Rome from itself—or the ironic tale of how a blood-thirsty thug reinvented himself as the bringer of peace and justice.<sup>26</sup> Part of the historian's task, whether or not she is conscious of it, is to produce a convincing story from the available materials: emphasising particular events and disregarding others, imagining connections between them, identifying underlying themes. Hayden White has argued that historians approach the past with a idea of the sorts of stories that might be told about it (which of course need not be limited to White's four plots of tragedy, romance, comedy and satire), and with personal and cultural preferences for a particular plot. Every narrative is an interpretation, and is founded on a succession of interpretations of pieces of evidence and events; but at the same time narratives shape our understanding of the past, and so whether we find a particular historical interpretation convincing may depend on whether it tells the story we want to hear.

Studies of historical narrative have normally focused on political and military history, since these are most obviously narrativised and event-led. Economic and social history was at the vanguard of hostility to narrative in the twentieth century, and has

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<sup>25</sup> Narratives of narrative in L. Stone, 'The revival of narrative', *Past & Present* 85 (1979), pp. 3-24; P. Burke, 'History of events and the revival of narrative', in Burke, ed., *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 233-48. Generally, G. Roberts, ed., *The History and Narrative Reader* (London, 2001).

<sup>26</sup> Briefly on ancient narratives, Morley, *Writing Ancient History*, pp. 100-11.

often eschewed the narrative form in favour of synchronic analysis. This is not to say that it can thereby escape the implications of narratological theory; indeed, the fact that economic historians tend to avoid and even despise narrative may mean that they are less sensitive to its operation and effects, even or especially in their own work. In the first place, even the most determinedly synchronic analysis is both produced and interpreted with the aid of pre-existing narrative structures, the 'historical context' of its subject.<sup>27</sup> More often than not, it simply replicates traditional periodisation: slavery in 'classical Athens', Italy in 'the late Republic', women in 'late antiquity'. As Jordanova has suggested, 'through periodisation particular views of history are naturalised': in ancient history, a view that gives primacy to political development (seen most clearly in the conventional divisions of Roman history) and second place to culture (the 'classical' and its antitheses, such as 'archaic' or 'post-classical').<sup>28</sup> A striking example of the persistence of this habit is the forthcoming *Cambridge Economic History of Greco-Roman Antiquity*: relatively innovative in its division of material according to the categories of 'production', 'distribution' and 'consumption' rather than 'trade', 'slavery' or 'agriculture', but utterly conventional in its chronological organisation. It might seem problematic to regard politics and culture as the basic context for understanding economic and social structures, and few historians today would explicitly argue this case; but their practices tell a different story.

This is easily explained. In most cases, even today, students are introduced to antiquity through a traditional political-military narrative, to 'give them a framework' for understanding other aspects of ancient society. It is hardly surprising, then, that we continue to conceive of the past in these terms, nor that the dominant plots of traditional history continue to exercise a pervasive influence on our interpretations. One of the most persistent themes is that of characterising political change as 'decline' and of seeking confirmation of this in other areas of life. To take just one example, it is not clear why a study of the demography of Italy and the Roman census should conclude in A.D.14 (rather than earlier, when the nature of Roman citizenship changed significantly, or later, when the evidence peters out) unless the intention is, consciously or unconsciously, to connect it intimately with the narrative of the fall of the Republic.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> On contextualism and historicism, see esp. Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story*, pp. 28-40, and his references.

<sup>28</sup> L. Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London, 2000), p. 115 and generally pp. 114-39.

<sup>29</sup> P.A. Brunt, *Italian Manpower 225 B.C.-A.D.14* (Oxford, 1971).

That is not to say that demography has nothing to contribute to that debate, but it is surely problematic to present population change in the form of a story running parallel to and mutually reinforcing the conventional political account. Conversely, alternative interpretations of Italian demography may be at a disadvantage in winning adherents because they do not fit so neatly with the pre-existing story of decline.<sup>30</sup> We cannot escape (though we might try to subvert or exploit) the fact that many readers will interpret what we have to say in terms of the conventional framework of periodisation and its traditional narratives; but we can at least try to be more conscious of the way that they may shape our own understanding of the past, and hence influence our readings of the ancient economy.

In the second place, economic history does produce its own narratives (albeit often rather fragmented and poorly-plotted ones) whenever it discusses change; from the history of an individual workshop to grand theories of world economic development. The former, the micro-narrative, is rarely controversial, except when criticised for triviality or pointlessness: for example, Finley's suggestion that 'the history of individual ancient towns is a cul-de-sac'.<sup>31</sup> The 'grand narrative', on the other hand, carries an *excess* of meaning and significance: it claims to explain too much.<sup>32</sup> It is therefore treated with suspicion and even hostility by most historians, who regard it as overly speculative, ideological and metaphysical — and not at all the preserve of 'proper' historians.<sup>33</sup> In between, we find a variety of 'mid-range' narratives, of the kind involved in giving an account of 'Athenian slavery' or 'the ancient spice trade', offering an acceptable combination of detail and generalisation. The two questions raised by narratological theory are, firstly, how such accounts are put together and work as stories, and, secondly, how far they remain dependent on implicit grander narratives in making sense of the past and conveying that to their readers.

For the sake of argument I shall consider three examples which offer broad, synoptic accounts of aspects of the ancient economy; I am aware of the risk that some readers may then conclude that these 'literary' theories apply only to such 'demi-grand' narratives, rather than to all historical accounts. The first case is Tenney Frank's *Economic*

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. N. Morley, 'The transformation of Italy, 225-28 B.C.', *JRS* 91 (2001), pp. 50-62.

<sup>31</sup> 'The ancient city: from Fustel de Coulanges to M Max Weber and beyond', in Finley, *Economy and Society in Ancient Greece*, B.D. Shaw & R. Saller (eds.) (London, 1981), p. 20.

<sup>32</sup> Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story*, pp. 38-9.

<sup>33</sup> On 'grand narrative', besides Berkhofer, see A. Callinicos, *Theories and Narratives: reflections on the philosophy of history* (Cambridge, 1995).

*Survey of Ancient Rome, Volume V: Rome and Italy of the Empire.*<sup>34</sup> As the title indicates, this forms part of an account of long-term development, and its compilation of evidence on the economy of the Principate is introduced by three chronological chapters and rounded off with an epilogue on the ‘economic decay’ of Rome, compiled posthumously from lectures. Frank presents his material according to blocks of imperial reigns, a decision which might be justified in so far as he regards the actions of emperors as essential to economic development — though one might query whether it was not rather this traditional approach to chronology that inclined him to emphasise imperial agency.<sup>35</sup> In fact, his periodisation is slightly unusual: he begins, conventionally, with Augustus alone (replicating the political view of that reign as a crucial turning-point), lumps together the Julio-Claudians and the Flavians and concludes with ‘Nerva to Alexander Severus’, implicitly rejecting the idea, common since Gibbon, that the age of the Antonines deserves special consideration.

The story progresses in a straightforward linear manner until the epilogue looks back to consider reasons for the downfall of the empire. At first glance, Frank offers a fairly traditional plot of restoration and recovery under Augustus, expanding prosperity into the second century and a tragic decline thereafter under the weight of totalitarianism, moral decline and miscegenation. However, there are already hints that not all is as it seems, in the conclusion to the first chapter and in comments on the state of Italy in the first century.<sup>36</sup> The epilogue makes it clear that Frank’s conception of Roman history was essentially ironic: decline turns out to have been inherent in Rome since the early republic, even if concealed for centuries behind a façade of prosperity and success (p. 304). This is satire, the anti-narrative, undercutting romantic or tragic readings of the past (no ‘golden age of the Antonines’; Diocletian may be the saviour of Rome, but his new Rome was scarcely worth saving).<sup>37</sup> Indeed, satire questions the possibility of history having any sense or meaning at all: Frank emphasises the unpredictability of a system of hereditary monarchy, and argues that it was ‘mere chance’ that Diocletian became emperor in time to salvage something from the wreckage of the third century (p.

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<sup>34</sup> Baltimore, 1940.

<sup>35</sup> The chronological chapters are organised around colonisation, public finances and coinage.

<sup>36</sup> p. 18: ‘the new regime *promised* to be stable, an era of peace and good faith *seemed* assured, and men unearthed their hoards and went about their business in security and *good hopes?* (my italics); cf. p. 29. p. 89 on the apparent prosperity (from the remains of towns and villas) and hidden weakness of Italy.

<sup>37</sup> The Antonine period is characterised, in opposition to Gibbon, as prosperous but unoriginal, and clearly already in decline (p. 298); on Diocletian, p. 303.

90). On the other hand, a passing comment suggests that the past may have useful lessons for us: 'if we knew the real meaning of the Antonine period, perhaps we should find a formula of some value for our own future' (p. 298). This apparent incoherence may be attributed to the circumstances in which the epilogue was added to the unfinished text. As it stands, there is something a little dissatisfying about a story organised around imperial activity and initiative that concludes that emperors were always ineffectual in the face of the selfishness of the gentry. Some 'twists in the tail', if one may so term this sudden shift in perspective, devalue, rather than transform, all that went before.

My second example, Rostovtzeff's *Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, is also organised around a political narrative.<sup>38</sup> Four chapters cover 'Italy and the civil war', 'Augustus and the policy of restoration and reconstruction', 'The Julii and Claudii' and 'The rule of the Flavians and the enlightened monarchy of the Antonines' (the chapter titles themselves help to carry forward the plot); four chapters survey the state of the empire under the Flavians and Antonines and review their economic and social policy (taking it for granted that they had one); four chapters chart the process of decline (seen in terms of 'military monarchy', 'military anarchy' and 'oriental despotism'). Rostovtzeff's chapter titles do more 'work' than Frank's plain descriptors, while his chronological divisions convey a very different message: the Augustan restoration is given more credibility by emphasising the lamentable state of Italy before his reign, while 'the brilliant life' of the second century is enshrined at the heart of the book.

Although Rostovtzeff uses the term 'evolution' to characterise the developments he narrates, this seems to be intended to emphasise their 'naturalness' (compare his use of other biological metaphors) rather than to evoke the common (mis)understanding of evolution as unstoppable progress.<sup>39</sup> On the contrary, his narrative falls into two clear halves: the romance of development, as the energies and capitalist instincts of the 'businessmen' are set free by Augustus, succeeded by the tragedy of its failure and the

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<sup>38</sup> First published in 1926, revised second edition 1957, Oxford.

<sup>39</sup> Evolution: pp. xi, xiv, 537 (where it is understood in terms of 'cycles of evolution'; clearly not unilinear progress). Nature and naturalness: the Western provinces 'were too young to develop at once a brilliant economic life' (p. 59); provincial urbanization was 'a natural process of development' (p. 83, p. 93), development under the Julio-Claudians due to 'the free play of natural forces' (p. 91), 'the organism of the Roman state' (p. 423).

gradual relapse into barbarism.<sup>40</sup> However, he does not develop this story in a purely linear fashion, but offers both flashbacks and glimpses of the future: the Roman empire is frequently presented in relation to the preceding Hellenistic period (emphasising that Roman developments are actually a revival) and to modern Europe (which both celebrates the achievements of antiquity and implicitly diminishes the pretensions of modernity).<sup>41</sup> The overall effect is to portray global history as cyclical, constantly repeating a pattern of expansion and decline; creative instincts may be found in every society, but so too are the forces which smother creativity: 'we are not at all sure that a violent catastrophe might not bring the modern capitalistic world back to the primitive phase of house-economy'.<sup>42</sup> The perspective is almost unrelentingly pessimistic: 'is not every civilisation bound to decay as soon as it begins to penetrate the masses?' (p. 541). This is history as tragedy, a spectacle with lessons for future generations: the first eight chapters establish the Roman Empire as tragic protagonist, powerful, magnificent and worthy of admiration but, as is subtly hinted through references to its ill-fated Hellenistic predecessor, doomed to have hidden flaws exposed and so to perish ignominiously. Rostovtzeff's often-criticised 'modernising' vocabulary, seen as a literary technique, serves to create a 'hero' that transcends its historical context, with which we can identify and whose fate should resonate with us all.

My third example is M.I. Finley's *The Ancient Economy*.<sup>43</sup> This work is resolutely synchronic in structure and chapter titles; the only hints of narrative development lie in the list of 'Some dates for orientation' (a curiously miscellaneous collection of wars,

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<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, capitalist instincts are seen as inherent in a particular class (cf. p. 57), rather than a natural human instinct; they are timeless but not universal.

<sup>41</sup> Looking back to Hellenistic examples and the 'ancient tradition' (p. 19) of capitalism: e.g. pp. 2, 3, 53, 57; looking forward to modernity, pp. 3-4, 142-3, along with the use of modernising terms like 'capital' 'industrialization' and 'bourgeoisie'. Only in the case of industry is it acknowledged that antiquity did not 'reach the heights of development attained in the modern world' (p. 349). Note, finally, that this essential continuity of European development is set up in contrast to the non-European past and present: Roman cities 'all looked like some of our modern Western cities rather than like the cities and villages of the East at the present day' (p. 142); see B.D. Shaw, 'Under Russian eyes', *JRS* 82 (1992), p. 226, on Rostovtzeff's Orientalism.

<sup>42</sup> p. 538. On p. 537, Rostovtzeff had noted, in opposition to the more linear narratives and emphasis on 'house economy' of Bücher and Weber, that the ancient world 'went through many cycles of evolution, and . . . in these cycles there occur long periods of progress and other long periods of return to more primitive conditions.'

<sup>43</sup> London, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn 1985.

rulers, political events and the dates of publication of the Roman agronomical treatises) and in the final chapter of the second edition entitled 'Further thoughts' (though the story here is that effectively nothing much has changed).<sup>44</sup> This avoidance of narrative is quite deliberate, and not simply because Finley has chosen not to write an 'economic history' (p. 9); rather, the object of his study is presented as something which did not significantly change during the period.<sup>45</sup> There is no narrative both because the idea of development is excluded and in order subliminally to persuade the reader of this assumption. Discussion of whether 'the ancient economy' is an appropriate category of analysis therefore focuses on regional variation, on contrasts with the medieval and modern periods and with non-Western societies, and on the question of 'interdependence', ignoring altogether the question of chronological variation within the period.<sup>46</sup> This impression of continuity is reinforced through the presentation of different aspects of the economy.<sup>47</sup> Sources from all periods of classical antiquity are happily combined to characterise 'ancient attitudes to wealth and poverty' (Homer, Petronius, Aristophanes, Cicero) and the like; exceptions and variations are sometimes explicitly acknowledged, but in such a way as to emphasise an underlying cultural uniformity and continuity.<sup>48</sup> Elsewhere, casual juxtapositions pass without fanfare: Xenophon and Tacitus (p. 72), Pliny and Hesiod (p. 39), Aristotle and Vitruvius (p. 149).

Classicists are all too familiar with the assumption that 'classical culture' unifies the disparate texts they study, and with the consequences of that idea for their

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. Finley's comments in the Preface to the Second Edition, p. 10. One could certainly try to construct a narrative out of his selection of dates, but it would be a distinctly odd one, perhaps most revealing in its absences: no mention of Athenian democracy, for example, or of the assassination of Caesar, although the latter's stay in Gaul is mentioned.

<sup>45</sup> Regardless of the express statement that 'change and variations are constant preoccupations, and there are many chronological indicators' (p. 9).

<sup>46</sup> E.g. pp. 27, 33, 181.

<sup>47</sup> A partial exception is the discussion of the 'decline' of slavery, pp. 84-7, though with numerous comments intended to downplay the extent and significance of the change; and note the refusal to discuss the rise of slavery (p. 71) or to acknowledge significant differences between Greek and Roman slave systems.

<sup>48</sup> See especially p. 38, arguing that 'our concern must be with the prevailing ideology' [*sc.* of antiquity] and that 'Trimalchio was a more authentic spokesman than Plato'. See also p. 27 — 'even casual acquaintance with the sweep of European history gives an unmistakable sense of qualitative differences among the traditional periods (whatever further differences there may be within the periods)' — with the parenthesis acknowledging but down-playing such changes.

understanding of the past.<sup>49</sup> It both depends on and helps to create an opposition against other, similarly-conceived entities — the ‘archaic’, the ‘post-classical’, the ‘medieval’ — and invariably involves differential valuation of these entities. This is essentially Finley’s position: the absence of development and hence of narrative in his text is predicated on his understanding of the place of antiquity within a much grander narrative of historical development. The ‘ancient economy’ is distinguished from the archaic (to which it returns at the end of the later Roman empire): ‘there was, in effect, a reversal of the process that had transformed the archaic world into the classical’ (p. 87). It is also contrasted with medieval society, at least as regards the nature of its cities and the organisation of industry (pp. 137-8).

Above all, Finley identifies a fundamental break in continuity between the modern world and what went before. His first chapter sets up the mid-eighteenth century as the turning point, understood in terms of a change in the vocabulary used to discuss ‘economic’ matters (the meanings of old words, the coining of new ones) and hence a ‘cultural’ change’ in the broadest sense.<sup>50</sup> His text moves backwards and forwards in time, from Hutcheson (1742) to Xenophon (mid-C4 B.C.) to Wolf Helmhard von Hohenberg (1682), establishing a fundamental continuity between pre-modern economic conceptions; it moves then (emphasising that ‘there was no road’, no intellectual continuity) to Adam Smith (1766), Francois Quesnay (of 1758, not 1736) and Adam Marshall (1890), before returning, via Molière, to Aristotle, emphasising the limitations of his ideas when considered in the light of the political economists. Elsewhere in the book the contrast between ancient and modern is conveyed more subtly, through passing references: Homer is contrasted with Shaw (p. 35), Petronius with *Alice in Wonderland* (p. 36), antiquity with 1950s Germany (p. 106) and Louis XIV’s France (p. 148), while Cato’s ideas are compared with those of an (equally pre-modern) nineteenth-century Russian landowner (pp. 109-10). ‘No one today boasts in a persuasive way of the size of his income tax, and certainly not that he pays three times as much as the collector demands’ (pp. 151-2); what matters here is not the academic question of whether such a socio-cultural difference also reflects significant economic differences, but the rhetorical effect of emphasising *difference* at every opportunity.

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<sup>49</sup> On the ‘problem of the classical’, see, briefly, M. Beard & J. Henderson, *Classics: a very short introduction* (Oxford, 1995).

<sup>50</sup> Pp. 17-21; cf. p. 21: ‘it was the French, apparently, who first made a practice of speaking of *l’économie politique*, and even they normally meant by it politics rather than economics until about 1750’.

Antiquity is repeatedly characterised in negative terms as not-modern, and hence as lacking in the usual attributes of the modern: change, dynamism, productive power, mastery of nature, unlimited growth and potential.<sup>51</sup>

Finley's account is constructed in opposition to those, like Eduard Meyer or Rostovtzeff, who are prepared to put antiquity and modernity on the same level and to see the differences between them as quantitative rather than qualitative. There is certainly a danger in that approach of eliding all difference between past and present, and taking the contingent structures of our own society to be universal. On the other hand, Finley's emphasis on uniqueness of the modern experience tends to enshrine the triumph and effortless superiority of modernity in romantic terms; primitivism, as Peter Bang has argued, is often simply an inverse modernism, based on the same Eurocentric assumptions, unable to consider the possibility of alternatives beyond the modern / not-modern dichotomy.<sup>52</sup> The emphasis on difference, on the existence of a society free from capitalism, may serve as a challenge to us to imagine such a future for ourselves; but it may also be, as in Weber, a form of evasion, a fondly-imagined always-unattainable utopia, in the face of the apparently inescapable 'iron cage' of modernity.<sup>53</sup>

## **Narratives of the Future**

Narratives give shape and meaning to the past, and hence to the present as the outcome of past processes; they also point us towards the sequel, the continuation of the story, whether characterised as a further succession of accidents (Frank), the inevitable downwards phase of the developmental cycle (Rostovtzeff) or the ongoing triumph of modernity (Finley). Such visions of the future both reflect their author's attitudes (Rostovtzeff's brand of Russian liberalism and his later nostalgic quietism, for example) and also carry implications for the present.<sup>54</sup> The past may be used to legitimise the status

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<sup>51</sup> Cf. M. Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (New York, 1982); N.S. Love, *Marx, Nietzsche and Modernity* (New York, 1986); A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, 1990); D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 10-38, 121-283.

<sup>52</sup> P.F. Bang, 'Antiquity between "primitivism" and "modernism"', published on the web, 1998. URL: [www.hum.aau.dk/dk/ckultur/DOCS/PUB/pfb/antiquity.htm](http://www.hum.aau.dk/dk/ckultur/DOCS/PUB/pfb/antiquity.htm).

<sup>53</sup> A. Mitzman, *The Iron Cage: an historical interpretation of Max Weber* (New York, 1970); L.A. Scaff, *Fleeing the Iron Cage: culture, politics and modernity in the thought of Max Weber* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1989).

<sup>54</sup> Rostovtzeff's politics: Shaw, 'Under Russian eyes', pp. 222-8; M.A. Wes, *Michael Rostovtzeff, historian in exile: Russian roots in an American context* (Stuttgart, 1990).

quo or to inspire radical action; it may give us a sense of who we are, but it may equally be drawn upon to show us what we might be. The classic example of this is Marx, whose reading of antiquity as definitively non-capitalist is intrinsically bound up with (and to some extent serves to legitimise) his hostility to modern capitalism and his belief in the possibility of a new form of society.<sup>55</sup>

Narrativisation, like rhetoric, is never innocent, even if it is often naïve or unaware. This is certainly true of self-serving historiographical accounts: “The present theoretical consensus of the discipline, or possibly some polemical version of what that consensus should be, is in effect taken as definitive, and the past is then reconstituted as a teleology leading up to and fully manifested in it. Past authors are inducted into the canon of the discipline as precursors or forebears . . .”<sup>56</sup> Aldo Schiavone’s recent book *The End of the Past*, with its exemplary sensitivity to the narratives of other historians and its willingness to develop alternative stories, might then be figured here as the first green shoot of spring, or as an Antaeus-like revival, or as a genetic ‘sport’ which will inevitably be driven out and shunned by the rest of the herd.<sup>57</sup> My fear is that the latter will prove the most apt characterisation; attempts at telling new stories and developing new metaphors risk stirring up opposition for drawing attention to aspects of the historian’s task which most prefer to conceal or ignore.

Historians, even economic historians, do not have a choice about their dependence on narratives, just as there is no rhetoric-free means of communication available to them. Rather, we have a choice about which narratives and which forms of rhetoric we use, made in fuller consciousness of their overtones and implications. I am not presenting this simply as an obligation, if we wish to maintain our reputation for theoretical sophistication and self-awareness, but as an opportunity: we do have a choice, we do not have to accept the inherited conventions unquestioningly. Many of the historians I have discussed above exemplify ways in which the economic past may be presented and discussed differently, and thereby made more exciting and engaging (at least to an audience willing to accept something a little less conventional). We have to accept that the dry, ‘unsexy’ reputation of economic history may be largely a consequence of the ways that we have chosen to talk about it; there are alternatives.

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<sup>55</sup> N. Morley, ‘Marx and the failure of antiquity’, *Helios* 26.2 (1999), pp. 151-64.

<sup>56</sup> S. Collini, D. Winch & J. Burrow, *That Noble Science of Politics: a study in nineteenth-century intellectual history* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 4.

<sup>57</sup> *The End of the Past: ancient Rome and the modern West* (Cambridge, MA & London, 2000).