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*Organisation and Social Order*  
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## Chapter IV

# THE ECONOMIC ORGANISATION OF ATHENS AND ROME

Whatever problems there are in dealing with social and political organisation in Athens and Rome, they are more than matched by what faces one when it comes to economic conditions.

There is even a sizeable initial difficulty about describing, let alone discussing, economic organisation in classical antiquity. It lies in the term 'economic' itself, which, although taken from classical Greek, has none of the meaning or implications it carries for us - something which most historians who have written about 'the classical economy' have discussed at length. 'Economics' for us represents a familiar constellation of ideas and analytical procedures, but its familiarity is less than two hundred years old, although before then 'political economy' was a term in fairly wide use, though applied to those economic arrangements which were open to control, or influence - negative or positive - by government and so relevant to political discussion. But 'economy' continued to stand for 'household management', just as it had in the Greek from which the word was adopted. M.I. Finley<sup>1</sup> gives a fairly precise timing for the changeover: the years between the publication of Frances Hutcheson's *Short Introduction to Moral Philosophy*, with Book III devoted to "The principles of economics and Politics", translated from his original Latin in 1747, and Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776. Hutcheson's Book III begins with chapters on marriage, the duties of parents and children and masters and servants, but is devoted thereafter entirely to politics. For more than two thousand years, that is, 'economics' was about household management. So, in discussing the economic arrangements which obtained in ancient Greece and Rome, we have to use terminology which was totally unknown to people living then - ungraspable, in fact.

It is perhaps worth while to stand aside for a moment and consider the medieval world, which accepted the hierarchical ordering of society (as part of 'The Great Chain of Being') in much the same way as did Greeks and Romans in classical antiquity, and in which 'economics' was also totally unknown. Yet questions about the validity of applying a modern vocabulary to medieval political and economic organisation hardly ever arise. In the case of politics, this is in large part because its transformations have been accomplished within the framework of the historical continuities which we read into the past of modern states. And economic historians (of whatever political complexion),

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<sup>1</sup> M.I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy*, (2nd. ed.) Penguin Books, 1992, p. 20.

practicing a discipline which has become a distinct study only in the last few generations, have accepted the same sort of framework for economic change.

There is one famous exception to this last pronouncement - Fernand Braudel. In the brief introduction to his three-volume work, *Civilization & Capitalism*, he questions the applicability of the modern idea of 'the economy as a homogeneous reality which can legitimately be taken out of context' and applied to the gradual progress of commerce and banking from its origins in pre-industrial Europe 'towards the rational world of the markets, the firm, and capitalist investment, until the coming of the Industrial Revolution, which neatly divides human history into two.'<sup>2</sup> He goes on to argue for the recognition of the existence of separate, though coexisting, 'economies'. In late medieval times - after 1100, say - he suggests that there were three. At bottom, there is what he calls an 'infra-economy': 'that elementary basic activity which went on everywhere and the volume of which is truly fantastic .... the world of self-sufficiency and barter of goods and services within a very small radius.' Superimposed on that was the market economy, a smaller but still extensive world of 'mechanisms of production and exchange linked to rural activities, to small shops and workshops, to banks, fairs and (of course) markets.' Economic science was founded on these latterday "'transparent" visible realities, and the easily observed processes that took place within them', and so 'was from the start confined within this privileged area, to the exclusion of others'. It was on top of this intermediate market economy that 'active social hierarchies' were constructed that could 'manipulate exchange to their advantage and disturb the established order, creating 'anomalies, "zones of turbulence", engaging in far-reaching operations and calculations of which ordinary people were completely unaware. This was the 'favoured domain of capitalism'. Each of the three volumes of *Civilization & Capitalism*, was devoted to one of these three 'worlds', and its interconnections with the others.

But the 'economy' (or 'economies') of classical antiquity stand at an even greater remove from us than does the medieval world. Inheriting as we do the concepts of the Greeks and the institutional vocabulary of the Romans, it is just possible, though always hazardous, to examine and discuss their socio-political arrangements without losing touch with the realities of then and now. And there is the comforting notion so often repeated by historians that 'all history is really about today'. With economic arrangements, the gap is almost unbridgeable, so much so that it can shake our belief in the durability, perhaps even the ultimate rationality, of the global economic system we believe our lives now depend on.

## I

Behind the aggressive militarism of Rome lay the proceeds of war. Even by the year 200 B.C., three-quarters of the revenue of the city came from outside its borders; by Julius Caesar's time, the revenue was six times as great and the proportion coming from the provinces much bigger. The money came from booty, including any treasure in the possession of kings and cities, from reparation ('indemnities') paid by the conquered, the

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<sup>2</sup> F.Braudel, *Civilization & Capitalism*, Vol. I, *The Structures of Everyday Life* (tr. S.Reynolds), Collins, 1981, p.23.

proceeds of the sale of prisoners sold as slaves. After conquest, there was a steady flow of proceeds in the taxes levied on the conquered people of the empire. It seems that some of the booty itself, and much of the income from taxes went on paying for the army, which meant that it returned to - in practice, stayed in - the provinces in which the taxes were collected. (It would be nice to know something of how the Romans dealt with the accounting problems this must have generated.)

Individuals also profited, with generals by far the greater beneficiaries. Crassus (said to be the richest man in Rome at around 60 B.C.) had something like 192 million *denarii*, but Pompey's fortune is reckoned to have been bigger. The legates and quaestors of Pompey's army were awarded a million *denarii* each at his triumph in 66 B.C., The winnings of tribunes and centurions were more modest, but even so five hundred times as much as the 1,500 each soldier received.<sup>3</sup> To this one must add an unknown quantity of booty brought back by individual officers and men. Veterans of the armies led by Caesar and Augustus also benefited from land grants in the colonies created at the end of their campaigns, but this was not something which was frequently on offer in earlier or in later times.

The official proceeds and the publicly authorised profits of war and conquest which went to individual officers and men of the army were at least matched by the amounts extracted from the conquered by private persons (all of them, naturally, men of senatorial rank) by means of bribes, extortion and moneylending. Caesar and the two other triumvirs were paid 36 million *denarii* by the ruling Ptolemy for recognising him as King of Egypt in 59 B.C.. Exorbitant rates of interest were charged for loans to cities and kings in the provinces unable to pay the taxes imposed by Rome and the different kinds of extortion to which they were subjected by Roman governors. The 48 per cent that Brutus demanded from the Salamians is best known, but there is nothing to show that this was exceptional; a hundred years later, Seneca lent the Britons 10 million *denarii* at a rate of interest said to be 'exorbitant'.

There was nothing exceptional about the methods employed by the Roman Republic and Empire in extracting wealth from the peoples their armies conquered. They followed a practice customary among the Greeks and other contemporary societies. What was exceptional was the extent of their success - and also both the wholesale, ruthless and protracted nature of their exploitation of conquered peoples and the relentlessly unequal distribution of the proceeds.

The same methods have been applied throughout European history in general for most of the time since the end of the Western Empire, although no later predator matched Rome in the duration and exorbitance of its exploitation of empire. Spain went as far as it could for two hundred years or more in America, and France did almost as well for itself as Rome, although only for the twenty years after 1794. Britain followed the same Roman lead in India throughout the eighteenth century and beyond. Western history is peppered

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<sup>3</sup> A.H.M.Jones, "Ancient Empires and the Economy: Rome", The Roman Economy, Blackwell, 1974, p.116.

with minor and not so minor instances of the pursuit of war for profit, or the defence of profits.

Frederic C. Lane made some observations on this topic some fifty years ago, during the Second World War when the spectacle of military aggression was rather less ambiguous than it is now (or we were less muddled). He was, as a historian, concerned largely with the later Middle Ages and the mercantilist period, when it was regarded as perfectly feasible to treat war as "an instrument which can and should be used to increase national prosperity."<sup>4</sup> His economic historian's cast of thought rendered him liable to regard 'national prosperity' as related exclusively to profitable entrepreneurship, which for the most part, of course, meant banking, trade and industry. Yet Lane was struck by the way in which belligerence and aggressive commercialism dovetailed in the case of the North Italian city-republics, especially Venice. It is just as striking later on, when it comes to sixteenth century Spain, seventeenth-century Holland, and eighteenth-century Britain. And he was acute enough to see beyond the 'trade follows the flag' cliché.

"It may be argued that under some circumstances war is the employment which will be most productive of national income. Although economists have done little to define the conditions under which the use of force may be the most advantageous of occupations, their usual method of theoretical analysis seems applicable to this problem so long as it is admitted that the use of force may be productive of a utility. That utility is protection." Further, "When we adopt this point of view we can hardly avoid stretching the meaning of the word protection to include aggressive action."<sup>5</sup>

Lane's fairly tentative thesis was taken up and developed by a number of historians and political scientists, culminating in a essay by Charles Tilly contributed to a conference on the research implications of current theories of the state sponsored by the Social Science Research Council of the United States. Its opening sentence says it all: "If protection rackets represent organized crime at its smoothest, then war making and state making - quintessential protection rackets with the advantage of legitimacy - qualify as our largest example of organized crime."<sup>6</sup> It is a view which could be said to have been endorsed long ago by Weber in his pronouncement (echoing Trotsky) about states being founded on violence, and by his inclusion of the claim to a monopoly of violence among the defining characteristics of the state. But so far as we are now concerned, while there are perhaps qualifications to be made to the 'organised crime' version as a universally valid definition of the modern state, there are none when it comes to the Roman Empire

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<sup>4</sup> F.C.Lane, "National Wealth and Protection Costs", in J.Clarkson and T.C.Cochrane (eds.), *War as a Social Institution*, New York, 1941, p.32. See also M.I.Finley, 'War and Empire' in *Ancient History*, Chatto & Windus, 1985.

<sup>5</sup>F.C.Lane, "The Economic Meaning of War and Protection", *Journal of Social Philosophy and Jurisprudence*, Vol.7, 1942, p.254 and p.259.

<sup>6</sup> C.Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime", in P.Evans, D. Rueschmeyer, T.Skocpol (eds.) *Bringing the State Back In*, C.U.P., 1985, p. 169.

## II

Other differences in emphasis which show up in the economic perspective and in the measures and procedures so readily and familiarly adopted in Rome and Athens amount almost to fundamental changes in the dimensions of the economic relationships recognisably similar to those we know. Taxation, for example - especially direct taxation - is the most obvious, pervasive and constant relationship between the state and its citizens in modern times.

Not in classical Athens or republican Rome.

Direct taxes were not entirely unknown. Republican Rome levied a war-tax - *tributum* - on its citizens, but only up to 167 B.C., after which it stopped altogether. In Athens, wars often made demands for expenditures beyond those of supplying the army (individual soldiers supplied their own arms and equipment); these had to be met by extraordinary taxes on wealth, but they were usually strongly 'progressive' (i.e., the wealthier paid more) and the poorest were exempt. All those officials and magistrates who were chosen by lot to serve for a year were paid some minimal wage, as were the poorer citizens who manned the warships. But taxation ordinarily took the form, for the most part, of indirect taxes: customs duties and tolls regularly imposed on exports as well as imports, and levied on all traffic through straits like the Bosphorus, where it was ten per cent, when Athens commanded there, as against two per cent at the Piraeus.

"Athens was never tempted, at least she resisted any temptation, to convert the irregular wartime levy on wealth....into a regular land tax.... 'Tempted' has no moral connotations: the choice did not exist in reality. Direct taxes, whether on income or on land, were politically impossible."<sup>7</sup> They were impossible in Rome, too, so far as Roman citizens were concerned (Finley notes that Tertullian called direct taxes 'marks of bondage'), although Augustus did manage to impose a five per cent death duty which was, and remained, immensely unpopular.

"Tax exemption," Finley also suggests, "was an important underpinning for that novel and rarely repeated phenomenon of classical antiquity, the incorporation of the peasant as a full member of the political community."<sup>8</sup> It is also arguable that the same conjunction of tax exemption with full participant membership of the political community underlies the perpetual instability of the Greek polis and the centuries-long struggle of the plebs against the growing over-mightiness of the Roman patricians during the early and middle periods of the Republic.

There were, naturally, no inhibitions about imposing 'marks of bondage' in the form of regular, and, under the Roman Empire, increasingly heavy, taxes on the property and produce of conquered peoples. Although it is commonly pleaded in mitigation by historians that the tribute exacted in money and in kind by Rome was no heavier than that

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<sup>7</sup> M.I.Finley, *The Ancient Economy*, p.175

<sup>8</sup> M.I.Finley, *The Ancient Economy*, p.96.

demanded by previous conquerors, there is no reason to suppose that it was lighter, or that it was less than the maximum compatible with the economic survival of the producing classes. (In the later Empire, it tended to exceed that maximum.) These became - for the same reasons as in Italy in the late Republic - increasingly the tenants of rich landowners who were themselves usually protected from taxation by Roman citizenship or lived in cities which often had acquired some immunity of their own - or both.

Under the Republic, and for a short time afterwards, such taxes were farmed out to *publicani*, grouped in consortia, who bid for the right to collect them in designated provincial territories. As wealthy citizens, they took on the responsibility for paying the amount due, on the assessment of a censor in Rome, from a particular tax levied on a city-district or whole province, into the Roman treasury. This meant that the Roman treasury got its own tax revenues in advance. It also meant that publicans were more or less free to levy as much as they thought they could extract from the provincials. Few stopped at the 'illegal but customary' commission of 6 per cent in kind or in cash; "Cicero produced precise figures which show that some Sicilian cities were obliged to accept *pactiones* which fixed the sum they paid to the contractor at more than double the sum that he had paid for the tithes."<sup>9</sup> Their exactions made them more unpopular than provincial governors and magistrates under the Republic.

The same people formed companies, roughly joint-stock in form, to manage the finances of large-scale public works, including naval transport for the army. Through their societies, they were able to exercise a good deal of political influence, which in the end obtained for them admission to the order of *equites* (originally those rich enough to be liable for service in the 'cavalry').

Under Augustus, fairly early on, *publicani* began to be excluded from the collection of direct taxes. Procurators, the title of the former agents, or bailiffs, of wealthy proprietors, were appointed to look after the collection of all direct taxes in the provinces, and they were fairly widespread by the middle of the first century A.D. Although the new system may have been less oppressive than the old (if the fact that the formal machinery for obtaining redress was less well-used means anything), there were still many complaints, not least because most procurators, in the early days, were freedmen, and at least one revolt - that of Boudicca - was sparked off by their activities. So far as the provincials themselves were concerned, the procurators loomed as large in their lives as did the governors. What is more, far from their working hand in glove, there is some evidence of rivalry or ill-feeling between the two.

There were sizeable staffs for both governor and procurator in each province. They included a number of magistrates, and some of their responsibilities would have been of a ceremonial or deliberative kind. But their main concerns involved making decisions - about, for example, which legal formula was appropriate to a case (much depended on the type of citizenship and the status of litigants) - appointing judges, and hearing appeals. Work arising from these activities, and routine business, would be dealt with by paid

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<sup>9</sup> A.H.M.Jones, "Ancient Empires and the Economy: Rome", p.118.

assistants: scribes, messengers, heralds, and *lictors*, who attended magistrates on ceremonial occasions but also acted as executioners and gaolers.

Service in government administration was lucrative, even if official salaries were small or indeed non-existent. This becomes very apparent when one gets down to the level of the freedmen and slaves who, as members of the household (*familia*) of magistrates, from the emperor downwards, would be engaged in any administrative task their masters passed to them. One of Tiberius' slaves, Musicus, was a dispensator (cashier) in the provincial treasury at Lyons, the capital of central Gaul. His own household staff "numbered sixteen, and included a negotiator to manage his business affairs, a *sumptuarius* to control his household expenditure, two cooks, two footmen (*pedisequi*), a valet (a *veste*), two chamberlains (*a cubiculo*), two butlers (*ab argento*), three secretaries (*a manu*), a doctor and a lady whose functions are discreetly veiled. The emperor certainly secured this little group of slaves, as well as the silver plate and the wardrobe they looked after, for Musicus died still a slave," and his property would thereafter have reverted to the emperor.<sup>10</sup>

Provincial administration was very largely a monitoring system instituted to look after the interests of the Roman Senate and the Emperor. Local administration proper, and its financing, was left to the multiplicity of city-districts which were the basic constitutional components of the empire. Varied as they were in origin and size, all had their magistrates (normally six of them), elected each year by a popular assembly, a council (in which membership was for life), composed of ex-magistrates (supplemented, if need be, by persons nominated by senior magistrates) and numbering a hundred in the west (again on the model of the Senate in Rome) and more in the east, where Greek traditions prevailed.

The hand of Rome appears in the imposition of a property qualification for magistrates and council members. This was universal throughout the empire; it was also essential, because election to office, while an honour, was far from being lucrative in itself. Election to magistracies and membership of the council had to be paid for - but this was only the beginning, as we shall see later.

All of which goes to show that the administration of the Empire was inexpensive for the emperor and the imperial treasury to run - at least to begin with. (It also goes to show how intimately slaves intermingled with people of other condition in the institutional order.) Most revealing of all is the fact that Musicus, so comfortably set up in Lyons, hundreds of miles away from Rome and Capri, was the Emperor's slave - a member of the Emperor's household establishment. This was a huge affair, dispersed all over the empire (but especially numerous in the 'imperial' provinces), was deeply intertwined with administration at all levels, and - as the account of Musicus' own household shows very clearly - extracted enormous profits from the administrative offices occupied by its members. For the access to the pickings which went to make up Musicus' not inconsiderable fortune was a licence, ultimately, to be exercised on his master's behalf.

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<sup>10</sup> A.H.M.Jones, "The Roman Civil Service (Clerical and Sub-clerical Grades)", *Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol.39, 1949, p.45.

Quite apart from the proportion of his licit (and often illicit) gains which were routinely forwarded to the emperor's private treasury, the emperor had the reversion of all the profits he made. As did all Roman citizens who owned slaves, the emperor could also supplement the substantial amounts he derived from repossessing the property of slaves who had died by the fees some of them paid for manumission beforehand. Since slaves did not usually gain manumission until after they reached the prime of life, most of their children would already have been born, thus remaining in slavery; any property which might have been left to them would by law revert to their masters. So the many slaves who became comparatively rich, far from being the self-made men they seem to resemble, had in the end to disgorge the wealth they had accumulated and surrender it to their masters' families. In reality, they were being used by their masters much as cormorants, with rings around their gullets and held on long leads, were said to be employed by fishermen in the Far East.

Later under the Principate - some time in the second century - imperial commissioners (curators) - were appointed to supervise the financial operations of some cities, most of them *civitates liberae* which had been granted a higher level of independence, where there was a tendency to make a little too free with their independence and run into difficulties with their Roman masters. To begin with, curators were persons of high rank, even senators, but by Diocletian's time, when they were to be found in most cities, they were local citizens, their appointment as curator representing an honorific climax to their municipal career.

Towards the end of the Roman Empire, taxation did grow to crippling levels: "Church lands were exempt from a number of supplementary charges, but the tax nevertheless comes to 57 per cent of the rental value, and presumably therefore, if the rents were calculated on the same basis in Italy as in Egypt, to over a quarter of the gross yield of the land. These are the rates which taxation had reached by the 6th century. They are startling figures when compared with the *decumae* which the Roman Republic had levied in many of the provinces. Even the privileged categories of landowners paid more than twice as much in the 6th century as the provincials had paid in the first century B.C., and the ordinary landowner well over three times as much."<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, after the centuries of imperial expansion, during which the growing burden of expenditure was placed uncompromisingly on the subject peoples of the provinces, "the tax on land was passed in large measure to the poor, and in time to the middle classes, while the upper stratum carried less and less of the public financial burden."<sup>12</sup>

As a consequence, Jones has argued, land became progressively abandoned from the third century on. Altogether, "the evidence does suggest that over-taxation played a significant part in the decline of the empire. It can be established that the taxes rose from Diocletian's time until they absorbed a very high proportion of the yield of the land. It can plausibly be argued that the high rate of tax was the main reason for the abandonment of marginal land and the consequent impoverishment of the empire. It is at any rate

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<sup>11</sup> A.H.M.Jones, "Over-Taxation and the Decline of the Roman Empire", *Antiquity*, Vol. 33, 1959, p.41.

<sup>12</sup> M.I.Finley, *The Ancient Economy*, p.96.

probable that it was a major factor in reducing the manpower of the empire, and thereby contributed directly to its military collapse."<sup>13</sup>

### III

What had obtained under the Republic was changed fairly drastically when it comes to the imperial finances. The principal formal change lay in the complete control exercised by the Emperor over public finances; other major - 'informal' - changes could be read as turning most of what had been exploitative practices normal to army generals and wealthy patricians into a preserve of the Emperor's.

While there was a formal distinction between the imperial treasury (the *fiscus*) and the public treasury (the *aerarium Saturni*, the name it had gone by under the Republic and which was still nominally under the Senate's control), emperors seem to have treated both as at their disposal for whatever purpose. The same went for the special military treasury established by Augustus, the *aerarium militare*, into which the revenue from the five per cent tax on inheritance and legacies which he imposed on Roman citizens (close relatives and the very poor were exempt), unpopular to the point of outrage though it was.

Quite apart from these 'public' financial resources which were at the emperor's disposal, there were two other accumulations of property: the *patrimonium*, and the *res privata*. Again, the distinction between the two kinds of funds - or, for that matter, between them and the emperor's *fiscus* - is obscure and, apparently, of little practical consequence. Along with the *fiscus*, they were receptacles for the wealth inherited from predecessors and bequests from wealthy citizens from all over the Empire.

All mines and quarries were the emperor's property, worked by slaves (condemned criminals for the most part) but usually contracted out by his procurator to lessors.

The confiscated property of condemned persons and properties of which the ownership had lapsed or were the subject of invalid bequests all reverted by law to the emperor. Again, such financial provisions were much in line with practice under the late Republic. From being consecrated to the gods, the belongings of condemned men, criminals or 'public enemies', were, in the middle years of the Republic, surrendered to the public treasury, just as booty and land conquered from Rome's enemies were. Such properties had been added on to the *ager publicus* - the domains acquired under the Republic by conquest or by bequest from 'allies' (i.e. client kingdoms and tribal lands on the periphery of the empire).

It was all too tempting to extend the practice of confiscation. By Sulla's time, it had become a matter of course for the property of defeated rivals to be confiscated and either sold or handed over at a nominal price to people on the winning side. By the time of the Civil Wars, "the prospect of a large-scale transfer of property was a significant element in any conflict. Cicero describes in horrific terms the expectations of Antonius' followers early in 43BC, marking out for themselves *horti* in Rome and *villas* at Alba and

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<sup>13</sup> A.H.M.Jones, op. cit., p.43.

Tusculum. These expectations were more than amply fulfilled in the triumviral proscriptions, where again men were listed specifically for their wealth, and large amounts of property were sold."<sup>14</sup>

The *ager publicus* located in the imperial provinces naturally reverted to the imperial *fiscus*, and any bequests made after Augustus' reconstruction, equally naturally, were made to the emperor in person. Again, under the empire, all the property of all major criminals was confiscated and instead of being sold, reverted to the emperor.

So simple a means of increasing their own wealth proved impossible for most emperors to resist. A certain discreet resort to legal forms may have been observed to begin with. Tiberius forbade anyone exiled or under interdiction to make a will, thus ensuring that his possessions would revert to the emperor. But it was also Tiberius who confiscated the property of the leading men of Gaul, Spain, Syria and Greece on the grounds of their having too much of their wealth in the form of coins. "The theme naturally returns in exaggerated form under Gaius [Germanicus]; according to Dio, when he was in Gaul in 39 he would have charges of rebellion or conspiracy brought against the richest inhabitants, and made a fortune from selling up their properties. According to Suetonius, he once left a game of dice, went outside, saw two *equites* walking past, ordered them to be arrested and *confiscati*, and returned to the game to boast of his winnings."<sup>15</sup>

#### IV

Imperial caprice aside, such depredations were not occasioned entirely by cupidity; social and political requirements were also involved. Part - a central part - of the character which a Roman emperor was expected to maintain was munificence. "All the way from the Cyropaedia of Xenophon, which was read by both Scipio Africanus and Julius Caesar," says Millar, "we can trace the integral part played by 'liberality' in the conception of what a monarch was, and what 'kingly' conduct should be."<sup>16</sup> There were innumerable occasions on which the emperor might, did and was expected to distribute gifts to those present. Gifts, sometimes of very considerable value, were dispersed to his closest friends, his *amici*, his servants, followers, and, especially, his soldiers, not only for services rendered, or as reward for outstanding enterprise or acknowledgment of timely action, but to show his continuing regard for them and, simply, to display the generosity that befitted an emperor. As *princeps*, or first among citizens, imperator, or supreme military leader and executive authority, *pontifex maximus*, or chief among priests, it was proper that the emperor should also be the greatest of all patrons.

In this, the emperor was following established tradition; imperial munificence was part of the contribution made by liberal benefactions to social, religious, and economic life. Temples, public buildings, monuments, fortifications, roads and aqueducts were all sizeable items of what we think of as public expenditure - along with the 'administrative costs' arising from the need to support the work of magistrates and officials and to supply

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<sup>14</sup> F.Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World*, p. 165.

<sup>15</sup> F.Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World*, p. 168.

<sup>16</sup> F.Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World*, p. 133.

them with their attendant freemen and slaves. The costs of all these had of course to be met, and, beyond them, there were religious festivals, theatrical and circus performances, gladiatorial battles and other entertainments to be paid for. From the early Republic until the late Empire, by far the greater burden fell on the wealthy, as it had done in Greece. With the establishment of the empire under Augustus, the burden for Rome itself was reserved for the Emperor alone. In the provinces, it was up to the wealthier citizens to do what they could - indeed, to do as best they could, in competition with others.

Earlier, in democratic Athens and republican Rome, much of this public liberality took the form of 'liturgies'. "Even in fifth century Athens, where public expenses had risen to great heights, there was no budget. Some spheres, in which the modern state is financially concerned, practically did not exist for the polis (education, social services, public transport); others were at least partially left to be provided by individuals. Such were military equipment and the various forms of 'liturgies', to which in oligarchic states we may add service," (by the richer and more powerful citizens) "as official, councillor or judge. The liturgy was a voluntary contribution undertaken by wealthy citizens for the state.... The state thus abstained from financing important public duties, which were left to depend on private willingness to make sacrifices."<sup>17</sup> Each year, the people of Athens allocated hundreds of liturgies to the wealthier citizens - which perhaps qualifies their 'voluntary', 'willing', nature, although how far it is impossible to tell.

What has been said in previous sections of this chapter about economic organisation in Athens and Rome, and in the Roman Empire, has not strayed far beyond the reach of our understanding of economic organisation in modern societies. But to account for 'liturgies' one has to go well outside the conceptual grasp of modern economics, especially when they are linked with the wider category of benefactions - *eugersiai*, the term resurrected - or invented - by French historians and the subject of an impressive, although somewhat controversial, study by Paul Veyne.<sup>18</sup> He linked them with earlier traditional practices, such as those by which leaders of a phyla had celebrated their succession, or appointment, by providing a public feast, and entertainments. This linking of beneficence with the assumption of an informal but very real socio-political position of leadership and authority is further connected by Veyne with the institutionalised practices associated with the 'squirearchy' in pre-industrial England (practices which were actually imitated by Josiah Wedgewood and other eighteenth-century industrialists).

But liturgies and *eugersiai* were of far greater significance in the social and political life of classical Greece and Rome; there they were also for the most part tied indissolubly with social eminence and leading roles in religious ceremonies and politics. This did not mean that merchants, however wealthy, felt called upon to compete for political leadership through benefactions. Significant participation in politics was, like the practice of law, athletics, philosophy, poetry, one of the few occupations feasible for the wealthier and leisured citizens in the classical world. Merchants and such were by definition not contenders either for social prestige or political leadership. As men

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<sup>17</sup> V. Ehrenberg, *The Greek State*, p.83.

<sup>18</sup> P.Veyne, *Bread and Circuses* (Tr. B.Pearce), Allen Lane, 1990.

devoting themselves to profitable enterprise they were not men who could dispose of leisure.

Public donations were an essential part of meaningful participation in politics, not only for the millionaire upper orders of Rome during the later Republic and the Empire, but in the early Republic and the cities of classical Greece and the Middle East of the Hellenistic period. Not that benefactions were themselves treated, or regarded, as a means of gaining political influence; they were simply the dues payable for honorific standing and therefore recognition as a contender for political eminence.

Nor can public benefactions as such be regarded as an aspect of clientism. Patronage, so long as it was without discrimination so far as the citizenry as a whole was concerned, was of course one of the constituent elements of public benefaction. But benefactions of the kind dealt with here were commonly more diffuse, more obviously indiscriminate, than within the context of clientism. Gifts, favours and assistance to the minority of citizens who could be considered clients of a patron and so, on occasion, could be called on for political support was something quite distinct from the open-handed public offerings made to the city, or the citizenry, at large.

In many cases, political considerations might hardly feature at all, or only very marginally. Providing for the building of a road or a bridge, paying for entertainments, gladiatorial battles, were all gifts to the citizenry at large. Contributions to the construction of a temple, or to the expenses of a procession, a theatrical performance, were offerings to the city's gods. Funerary offerings and bequests were made, annual feasts and games endowed, monuments built, to preserve one's name 'in grateful memory'.

On the other hand, the most common liturgies and *eugersiai* were more obviously politically inspired, especially in Rome. The practice of paying allowances to the poorer citizens of Athens for attendance at the Assembly is said to have been initiated by Pericles to offset the liberality of the far wealthier Cimon, his chief political rival, to his clients. This kind of manoeuvre was impossible in Rome. Furthermore, Roman magistrates (and everyone else appointed to public office as against the service of the Emperor) received no emoluments at all - and was expected to pay all his own expenses and those of his attendants. Late in the Hellenistic period, magistrates and public officials generally - and, in some cases, priests - were expected to pay for their appointment. Payment was seen as a bid for honorific status - and, thereby, political eminence, to begin with - and thereafter, under the Empire, some degree of fiscal and legal immunity (perhaps, too, of licence to exploit the unprivileged).

## V

During the whole period of eight or nine hundred years from the end of Athenian democracy until the end of the Roman Empire in the West the distribution of wealth between the orders of society was, by and large, little affected by changes in the distribution of political power. Solon's reforms, reinforced by the prosperity Athens

enjoyed afterwards, may well have had a lasting effect; those of the Gracchi at the end of the second century B.C. were of limited effect and in any case short-lived. Most of the time, the rich got richer and the poor got poorer.

M.I. Finley began his *Politics in the Ancient World* by citing Aristotle's pronouncement on the advantage of tyranny to the ruler, of oligarchy to the rich, and of democracy to the poor: 'the real difference between democracy and oligarchy is poverty and wealth'. Given the perpetual discord (stasis) and the frequent uprisings that marked the history of Athens and other Greek cities, this raises the obvious question of why Roman citizens - or, for that matter, the peoples of the Roman empire - did not follow suit. Finley himself supplies four answers (in the first and last chapters of his book), without claiming that they all add up to a satisfactory one.

The first is that the Senate, with the blatant arrogance so often assumed by the rich and powerful, declared their own interests as identical with those of the citizenry as a whole (the Republic) - and got away with it. Faced with insurrection, as in the case of the popular demands led by Tiberius Gracchus and, ten years later, by his brother Caius, for the redistribution of publicly owned land, the Senate leaders had recourse to a resolution (*senatus consultum ultimum*) which declared the republic to be in danger and called upon the magistrates to take all necessary measures to quell disorder.

The second answer relates to the perpetual bias of the law in favour of the rich and powerful - usages which 'clearly reflected the harsh realities of Roman society, and failed to mitigate the difference between rich and poor' - unearthed by J.M. Kelly (see chapter II, pp. -- --). Such procedures provided an ongoing rationale for recourse to emergency measures such as the *senatus consultum ultimum* and also kept the ground prepared for them by inducing acceptance of bias and injustice as a fact of life.

Thirdly, there is the clear separation of the political world of the Rome of the late Republic from that of Athens or other Greek cities hundreds of years earlier. True, political rivalry in classical Greece led often enough to disturbances and sometimes to armed conflict. But in the last two centuries of the Roman Republic they led repeatedly to large-scale civil war, involving the armies of the Republic. For the poorer citizens as well as the richer, to be active politically meant enlistment in one or other of the partisan groups formed in Rome in their support or, later on, in one or other of the armies of patrician contestants for power.

Which leads on to Finley's fourth partial answer, which is that the army, to cite A.H.M. Jones again, provided one of the principal escape hatches for the dispossessed poor. More, conquest brought wealth to the city of Rome itself from which even the poorest benefitted - indirectly, of course.

One can go on to adduce other part-answers. Although there is no suggestion by any historian that munificence blunted the edge of the resentments of the poor, it may be that the munificence displayed by the rich and the resentment of the poor at the constant deprivations to which they were subjected by the rich tended to by-pass each other, so far

as any political consequences are concerned. The worst effects of economic inequality were experienced in the countryside, where the land-hunger of the notables and their exploitation of the deprived was felt by the peasantry of Italy, or the provinces of the Roman Empire. The benefactions of the wealthy which offset the poverty of their fellow-citizens were for the most part experienced by people of Athens, Rome and other cities - which was where politics was played out.

But city and town dwellers formed a small minority of the fifty or sixty million inhabitants of the Roman Empire at its height - perhaps no more than five or six per cent. Many small towns were themselves in fact agricultural centres, where the richer landowners lived; some others were simply villages in which the peasants themselves lived, walking out to their holdings every day. The vast majority lived in the country. So, as with all other pre-industrial societies, the population of the Roman Empire was made up very largely of peasants, in which each household provided itself with food and from its own holding of land and stock. This would be supplemented by occasional purchases or, more likely, since coin was something of a rarity, through some barter arrangement: vessels for storage and cooking, necessary tools, perhaps some articles of clothing and furniture. There were local markets, and occasional fairs, but nothing comparable to the established network that came to exist in the Middle Ages.

In times of dearth, one borrowed food or money (which led almost inevitably to debt-bondage), or starved, or moved into Rome, where there were regular distributions of bread, or some other city, where free food might also be available from some *euergetes* or other. Overall, the limits of possibility in what Braudel called 'the structures of everyday life' for the peasantry of the classical world were far tighter than they were for their medieval successors who figure in his *Civilization and Capitalism*. And while the *pax romana*, although never really complete, did at least preserve them from the attentions of armies and armed bands that menaced them perpetually throughout the thousand years of the Middle Ages, great numbers of them fell victim to the more lasting calamity of eviction.

For, bedrock though it was, the subsistence economy of the early Roman Republic was disrupted by the conquests of its last two hundred years. Slaves came to be in abundant supply. Most of them were prisoners of war (the Third Macedonian War yielded 150,000 slaves), and so were the property of the Republic. "The accepted rule was that the victor had absolute rights over the persons and property of his captives, without distinction between soldiers and civilians."<sup>19</sup>

They were bought in large numbers by the upper orders of Roman society with the new riches they were acquiring, and were put to work the large estates that the same people were able to build up through purchase. So in Italy and Sicily, to begin with, then in North Africa and other places a second system of large estates worked by slave labour grew up to displace the native peasantry. Eviction added to the destitution that had come often enough from natural causes.

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<sup>19</sup> M.I.Finley, *Aspects of Antiquity*, p.167.

It was next to impossible for the peasantry thus displaced to find alternative means of subsistence - other kinds of employment were virtually non-existent - and most of them must have migrated to Rome; few went abroad. So, while the citizens of Rome may have "paid little or nothing for the initial conquest and the continued garrisoning of their expanding empire,"<sup>20</sup> all in all, the peasantry and the lower classes in Italy "lost rather than gained by the Empire," Jones concludes. "Many of them lost their land and were recompensed only by cheap corn if they migrated to Rome, or meagre pay in the army."<sup>21</sup>

Protest was virtually impossible to organise in the countryside - and pointless anyway. Organised protest came from the dispossessed poor who had moved into the cities. And in the cities there was no labour market of the kind familiar in the modern world, hence no line of confrontation between employers and employees. What the urban poor demanded was not a radical change in the economic structure but cancellation of debts and the redistribution of land. "The free poor preferred not to act as hired labourers for private individuals but as independent peasants and craftsmen. Their aim was not to improve the conditions for selling their labour but to avoid that kind of labour altogether. Their pressure on the wealthy was most profitably exercised through politics in order to secure for themselves advantages embodied in law."<sup>22</sup> It was in Rome itself that the misappropriation by the wealthy of land acquired by conquest - the *ager publicus* - became a major source of political unrest, and equally significant that the Gracchi, who, as 'tribunes of the people', led the most successful uprising in support of fair shares in land, were themselves notables - and defeated by a combination of other notables.

"Cancel debts and redistribute the land' - that was the standard 'revolutionary' slogan in antiquity," - and even that was 'utopian.'<sup>23</sup>

However, in Rome and in other cities the influx of slaves may well have introduced a further circumstance to offset the resentments felt by the dispossessed poor, and so add a further mitigating effect beyond such benefits of conquest as filtered down to them. For slaves made up an even lower social category than the dispossessed; slaves were themselves possessions, and so visibly much worse off than the free poor.

Some domestic slaves may have been treated humanely. They could also be encouraged to hope for freedom in return for loyal service. Augustus, indeed, "tried to put a brake on deathbed manumissions.... [No] one man was allowed to free more than one hundred slaves in his will."<sup>24</sup> But Keith Hopkins has argued at length, and I think convincingly, against the general tendency to cite instances which stress the humanitarian regard for slaves, a modern perversity which almost parallels the preposterous views expressed by

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<sup>20</sup> A.H.M.Jones, "Ancient Empires and the Economy: Rome", p. 115.

<sup>21</sup> A.H.M.Jones, "Ancient Empires and the Economy: Rome", p.124.

<sup>22</sup> A. Lintott, *Violence, Civil Strife and Revolution in the Classical City*, Johns Hopkins Univ. Pr.,1982, pp. 257-8.

<sup>23</sup> M.I.Finley, "Revolution in Antiquity," in R.Porter and M. Teich, *Revolution in History*, C.U.P., 1986, p. 53 and p. 54.

<sup>24</sup> M.I.Finley, "Aulus Kaprelinus Timotheus", in *Aspects of Antiquity*, Chatto & Windus, 1968, p.167.

Aristotle about the 'natural' inferiority of slaves. Roman slavery was characteristically vicious, exploitative, and cruel.<sup>25</sup>

Slaves were completely subject to their masters; and this was only the beginning. The same Augustus who tried to reduce the number of deathbed manumissions cited as one of his achievements that he had during the civil wars returned 30,000 runaway slaves to their masters; what he omitted to say is that those for whom no master could be found were impaled. And in any case, Hopkins remarks, emancipation, generally speaking, "reinforced slavery as a system because Roman slaves frequently, even customarily in my view, paid substantial sums for their freedom." Evidence from slaves was inadmissible at law unless it had been elicited under torture. And there is the horrendous account of the Senate, in Nero's time, voting to approve a judgment according to the law by which the murder of a master by a slave was to be requited by the execution of all his slaves; in this case there were four hundred of them.

At the other end of the scale from domestic slaves were those who worked the *latifundia*, large estates located principally in southern Italy, Sicily and Africa. "The slaves who worked on these estates were not counted in tens, but in hundreds and thousands. Most of them came from the East, prisoners of war or human cattle bought in the Aegean markets, especially at Delos, where, according to Strabo, as many as 10,000 slaves could be turned over in a day." They were also to be feared, because they were so many. "Each estate was bound to have its *ergastulum*, the prison where offenders were locked up. Chains and branding irons were commonplace, as were the most deplorable corporal punishments - torture and crucifixion. The harshness with which they were treated accounts for the great slave revolts which broke out in Sicily and in the south of Italy in the second century B.C.."<sup>26</sup> Thousands of them were crucified along the road from Capua to Rome after the defeat in 71 B.C. of Spartacus - by Crassus ('the richest man in Rome'), and Pompey.

By the time of the principate, as the empire attained its limits, the flood was slackening. The market was kept supplied for a time by the pirates who swarmed in the eastern Mediterranean, by border warfare, and by the established practice in many poorer areas of the empire of selling children to pay debts or taxes. But the slave revolts had underlined the dangers of herding large numbers in slave-barracks, with other compounds not so far away; and the distribution of large areas of land, broken up into small farms, to veterans throughout the last century B.C., especially towards its close, reversed the trend towards large-scale farming and promoted the development of tenant farming and share-cropping.

The only instance of large-scale production apart from the *latifundia* was mining, and in this case it persisted throughout the history of Rome, as it did with Athens. Mines were always publicly (or imperially) owned, although often operated by concessionaires. For most of the thousand years of classical antiquity, mines too were worked by slaves, often in large numbers, and in conditions which were every bit as bad as those which prevailed in the shorter-lived *latifundia*. Again, towards the end of the Roman Empire in the West, hired workers replaced slaves in the mines, too.

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<sup>25</sup> K.Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves*, pp. 118-122.

<sup>26</sup> C. Mosse, *The Ancient World at Work*, p.69

## VI

So far, it has been just possible to relate distinct functions observably present in a modern economy with elements in the classical economy which hardly match or correspond but somehow fulfilled the same purposes: investment in military rather than commercial enterprise; clientism and *eugersiai* rather than expenditure from public revenues on public buildings, roads, bridges, poor relief, and other responsibilities assumed by modern states; slavery, and various forms of bondage rather than wage-labour. We now come to aspects of modern economies which seem totally absent from the world of classical antiquity.

Adam Smith began his explanation of economic growth as the outcome of market exchange founded on the division of labour with a description of how much the manufacture of pins could be expedited and improved by dividing the making of a pin into five or more different processes, each of which could be improved in efficiency and speed by engaging a worker exclusively on each single fractional task. Two thousand years earlier, Xenophon explained how it was that, whereas in small places, "the same man makes couches, doors, ploughs and tables, and often he even builds houses," in larger cities, "because many make demands on each trade, one alone is enough to support a man, and often less than one: for instance, one man makes shoes for men, another for women; there are places even where one man earns a living just by mending shoes, another by cutting them out, another just by sewing the uppers together, while there is another who performs none of these operations but assembles the parts. Of necessity he who pursues a very specialised task will do it best."

But there it stopped. David Hume's remark that he knew of no city in classical Greece and Rome which was founded on industry has been corroborated often enough since his time. It has led on to rather grand theorising on the lines of the distinction Weber drew between the modern city as primarily a centre of production (i.e., of manufactured goods) and the ancient city as - again primarily - a centre of consumption, with the medieval city shifting over time from the ancient to the modern mode. The contrast is not of course absolute, as the use of 'primarily' indicates, but Finley provides what seems meant to be a clinching argument for a fundamental difference between town and country which makes the town dependent for its essential needs on the country, and so 'parasitic'. In the ancient world "there is scarcely a city which is self-sufficient in timber, metals, salt, spices, not to mention slaves, hides, semi-precious stones and other commodities that have become necessary amenities for civilized society"<sup>27</sup> - as well as food, of course.

But the contrast is overdrawn. All the items Finley lists are still things that modern cities have to look for outside their limits. And ancient as well as modern cities had things or activities in them which were essential, requisite, useful or desirable for country people as well as city-dwellers, and which were simply not available elsewhere. They were the obligatory, traditional or convenient locations for governmental, administrative, financial and legal business; for political activities, special religious and ceremonial occasions and

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<sup>27</sup> M.I.Finley, *The Ancient Economy*, p.125.

festivals, entertainments, celebrations, and the like. At times of crisis, they were refuges - which was often the reason they were created in the first place.

Cities and towns happened also to be places where it was possible to buy things made either in the city itself or imported from some inconveniently distant place. Manufacture there was in plenty, but it was for the most part domestic manufacture in the strictest sense - done by an individual craftsman with his own tools on material he had either bought or produced. Other members of his household, including any slaves he might have, might work with him. He might even specialise. The benefits of specialisation were as obvious to him as to Xenophon, but they were the visible benefits which came from improved craftsmanship, even when it was applied to making up the parts of shoes, or mending them.

Domestic manufacture of this kind has always featured in industrial production; it persisted as the principal mode of organisation for industrial production until a few hundred years ago and has survived, in modified form and over a narrowing band of products, until the present day. There was large-scale manufacture, in the later Roman Empire, but of a special kind. "For about a century from the time of Diocletian, soldiers and all other employees of the state were supplied in kind with food and clothing.... Some of these were manufactured in state factories, arms in imperial *fabricae*, a proportion of clothing in imperial woollen and linen mills and dyeworks. The workers in these factories were state employees, supported by rations, and the raw materials were supplied by levies in kind",<sup>28</sup> as were horses, transport animals, and the bulk of the clothing.

The vast majority of people living in the country were very poor, especially later on, when rent had to be paid and taxes were heavy. The bulk of the urban population was just as badly off, and even with free bread in Rome or subsidised food supplies in many other cities, getting enough to eat was a perpetual problem. In the end, one has to envisage the 'limits of possibility' for the peasant population (and for townsmen, too) enforcing a distribution of population throughout the empire more or less in accordance with the distribution of food and other resources. For there were physical constraints which prevented any significant redistribution of supplies to accommodate any other kind of population distribution. The biggest limitation on trade was transport, which Jones cites as one of the more important reasons for the insignificance of trade and industry. A load of wheat would be doubled in price by the cost of transporting it over three hundred miles. Sea transport was much cheaper, which is why all but one of the large towns in the empire were also ports. The exception was Rome, and Ostia was built to take in supplies of wheat and other goods for Rome. The costs of transport for these imports were met by the imperial treasury; exports from Ostia were negligible. Elsewhere, too, any large-scale trade in food and other commodities was for the most part contained within what we would now call 'the public sector', carried on either directly by officials of the Roman Republic or Empire or by the contractors they engaged.

The organisation of industry under the Romans differed little from what had obtained in Greece. There is little evidence to support the idea, popular among historians at one time,

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<sup>28</sup> A.H.M.Jones, "Ancient Empires and the Economy: Rome", p.131

that there were large-scale 'factories' making pottery and textiles. "The free small-scale producer remained the most usual kind of industrial worker, and the great wealth acquired in the wars of plunder or of conquest was directed towards the purchase of land, to luxury expenditure, to public contracts, or even occasionally to foreign trade."<sup>29</sup>

The marked lack of development in the organisation of production noted in the first chapter is matched by the absence of anything beyond marginal improvement in production methods and techniques. In so far as the economic prosperity, comparatively speaking, of the eastern part of the empire spread to the west, and as more land was settled, cleared and brought under cultivation, there was of course economic growth. Agricultural productivity reached a level not matched in Europe for almost a thousand years. But there was little or no growth achieved by means of the more effective exploitation of existing natural resources, labour and capital.

On the other hand, while material civilisation in the ancient world did not advance, in the technical sense, it did spread. By the end, the classical world enclosed within the Roman empire had achieved something like homogeneity in law, and in language too, although in this case there were two, Greek in the eastern and Latin in the western half. This is hardly true to the same extent of culture and material standards of living of people of comparable social standing in all the provinces, but so far as the area contained within the Roman Empire is concerned, it approximated rather more closely to homogeneity than has ever been the case since.

## VII

To us it all seems odd and inexplicable. After all, the period of 'high civilisation' of the classical world has to be reckoned as lasting at least five hundred years, and in terms of the cultural, economic and political continuities we have been considering, it could be put at eight or nine hundred years. Even during the four centuries or so of the high Middle Ages, which, so far as economic development and technical progress are concerned, is a period still popularly regarded as unprogressive, even stagnant, there were notable advances in material comforts, equipment, and tools.

The combination of an eventful history and a stable, almost static, economy and material culture is almost impossible for us to grasp. It is as if, during the much shorter period from the eighteenth century to the present day, the kind of housing, furniture, clothing and fabrics, the clean water supplies, the theatres and the bookshops available to the well-to-do in a few major cities had spread to larger sections of the population, to more and more towns, to more countries, and even to quite distant and small settlements, but there were today no factories, no mechanical transport, no gas or electricity, no cinema, telephones, radio or television - none of the massive technical equipment or abundance of commodities which we take for granted.

A complete or even a plausible answer to the problem is out of the question. Any answer must lie in the interpretative understanding of the material resources, the institutional life

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<sup>29</sup> H. Last, "Rome and the Empire", Cambridge Ancient History, Vol.11, chap. 11, C.U.P., 1936, p.470.

and the values and beliefs according to which the Romans and their subjects ordered their lives. But evidence and information about these things, extensive as they are, fall so far short, and are so fragmentary, that full understanding of the total set (which is really what is needed) is beyond us. One may, however, guess.

The first distinctive element of what one can call the 'circumstantial postulate' of the economic life of people who inhabited the world of classical antiquity is that wealth - 'capital' - meant land and property (cash, treasure, slaves). In his account of imperial finances, Millar remarks on the importance of the steady flow of legacies and inheritances to the emperor, a flow maintained by the almost unbreakable custom by which leading citizens left a specific fraction of their property, up to a half, in some cases, to the emperor. The custom, needless to say, was reinforced at times by imperial pressure and, by some emperors, extended "far beyond the circle of leading senators, so that Gaius could declare invalid the wills of top-ranking centurions (*primipilares*) who had made neither Tiberius nor himself heirs."<sup>30</sup>

In this, as Millar indicates later, the emperor was following one of the more familiar money-making paths, and especially meaningful in that it owes the significance of the contribution to imperial wealth made by legacies "to an aspect of the ancient world which was of much wider importance, namely the relatively static nature of wealth. It is not an accident that so large a proportion of Roman legal writing concerns wills and inheritances; for wealth could be exchanged or divided, but not easily increased or multiplied."<sup>31</sup>

One did not, in fact, 'make' money, in any of the entrepreneurial senses in which the term is used nowadays. One acquired it, by conquest and confiscation, which is how Rome itself became rich, by exacting tribute from one's subjects or dependents, by inheritance - or by theft. (Piracy is mentioned by Aristotle as one of the four occupations by which the citizens of a *polis* might gain a livelihood). Moreover, the idea of wealth seems to have been conceived in much the same way as that of power: *imperium* was an entity which could be divided and subdivided, distributed in parcels, or vested in one person, but which could not be increased or diminished. In much the same way (however much, or little, economic growth there in fact was) it was assumed that wealth, like land (the basis of true wealth), did not, could not, grow.

If capital was conceived of, and in actuality, was static, and if the primary, virtually only, paths to wealthiness - 'making money' - were in essence predatory, then the conceptual limitation of 'economic' to household management discussed at the beginning of this chapter loses much of the oddity modern writers have dwelt on. The management of the imperial finances amounted to nothing more, or less, than the management of the imperial household, if 'household' is taken to mean all those possessions and transactions which were either contributions to the emperor's income or gifts and payments to others. There does seem to have been surprisingly little concern for the transactions which involved the

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<sup>30</sup> F. Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World*, p. 153.

<sup>31</sup> F. Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World*, p. 155.

emperor's subjects, except in so far as they added to, subtracted from, or encroached upon, his. The rich and not so rich conducted their own affairs in much the same manner.

There is nowadays much, often somewhat glib, talk of 'the world economy'. In so far as there is an actuality corresponding to a 'world' or 'global' economy, it is a world not only of competing undertakings and governments but of national economies which are themselves composed of individuals and organised collectivities in competition with each other. The Roman Empire was also a 'world economy', but one from which entrepreneurial as against military competition was so limited, or restricted by governmental authority, as to be virtually absent.

Against this kind of background, hierarchy assumed a much more deterministic character. As a consequence, the patronage system, which stretched from the Emperor downwards, became virtually the one available means of advancement through the hierarchic order of society. In an economy which was static, rather than stable, gains in wealth usually meant losses suffered by others. By whatever means, licit or illicit, gains in wealth were obtained, social and political advancement had to be validated by social recognition accorded by sponsors - patrons - in the higher order to which one aspired.

Some years ago, A. Blok suggested (tentatively enough, it should be said) that a typology of political systems might be feasible in which patronage and centralised authority exercised through a bureaucracy were polar opposites (with 'brokerage' and 'friendship' as intervening categories).<sup>32</sup> The scheme has its attractions, but breaks down under all the qualifications which need to be added. But there may be something to be said for a typology of economic systems which offers hierarchic relationships of social status and power (relationships which included clientism) on the one hand, and market competition on the other, as polar opposites in terms of their affinity with economic growth.

All of which still leaves one with a conundrum. If 'the ancient economy' is visible as a striking affirmation of hierarchic order, then it presents a stark contrast with the affirmation of equality of standing with others as citizens. It is almost as if the opposition between libertarianism and communitarianism which animates political theorists today were in those times simply two sides, economic, political, of the same coin.

#### POSTSCRIPT TO CHAP.4

#### NOTES & QUERIES

Ref. to government as protection - ? article by ?Tilly in a collection on the modern state ed. by Skocpol?

Ref. to beggars in one of the texts on the Roman economy.

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<sup>32</sup> A. Blok, "Variations in Patronage", *Sociologische Gids*, Vol. 16, 1969, pp.365-378.

Roman Empire as 'global economy'?

The title of this chapter is precise. It is not an attempt at a sketch of 'the economy' of ancient Greece and Rome, but a series of sketches about some of the ways in which the people of the world of classical antiquity went about supplying the goods and services they needed to supply their needs and wants. It begins with the part played by war and conquest.

However, *latifundia* belong more to the last two centuries of the Republic, when sizeable and well-populated areas, especially in the eastern Mediterranean, were added to the empire. Both war and conquest brought a flood of slaves to the Republic in the last two centuries B.C.. Unceasing warfare was no more characteristic of the classical ages than it has been of any other, but then..

The economic consequences of constitutional changes of that sort resembled more what happened after the English revolution of the seventeenth century, or the American War of Independence, rather than after the French, Russian or Chinese revolutions.

The fiscal structure which prevailed in the later Roman Empire was the end-product of a very long period of erosion of the moral and political fabric in which citizenship had been embedded. For taxation is an indicator, rather than a cause. The tax-nexus - that all-important structural feature of the modern state - was completely missing from Athens during its lifetime as a democracy and from the city of Rome during the greater part of its history as a republic. Its absence, Finley has suggested, "is a correlate of the distinction commonly formulated in political terms, between the liberty of the classical citizen in the city-state and the lack of freedom, relative or total, under the empires.....I suggest that

Inequality, in turn, promoted demand for commodities and goods far beyond the range of subsistence needs. Trade, and the wealth it brought to those able to profit from it, served as an effective economic multiplier of inequality.

None of this reached the extremes it did in Rome, but it entailed a degree of division of labour and a volume of trade well in excess of that needed for an economy of single households.

Granted that the view of their society held by Greeks and Romans was on the lines of Dumont's '*homo hierarchicus*' was built into Greek (and Roman) society as...

It is perhaps proper to mention here that there is a somewhat similar problem that relates to social and political organisation, although it is not etymological but rather a matter of social or cultural perception. On the face of it, there seems to be just as big a discrepancy between the conception of society in political terms and the realities of economic inequality as there is in modern society. It has been argued, notably by Paul Veyne<sup>33</sup>, that the order of society which was thought to prevail in ancient Greece and Rome by the people who lived then was fundamentally hierarchical. The point he makes is that during

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<sup>33</sup> P.Veyne, *Bread and Circuses* (Tr. B.Pearce), Allen Lane, 1990.

the last few hundred years we have deserted the notion of hierarchical order as natural to humanity and to the natural world, universally accepted as it was two thousand years ago, and have opted for an image of society - if only society as it should be which is just as fundamentally egalitarian. Nowadays, it seems, we can only rediscover the reality of a hierarchically ordered society and its implications for political organisation by looking at Indian society.<sup>34</sup>

The trouble is that his argument rests on two very questionable assumptions. The first is to take the 'liberty, equality, fraternity' slogan of the French Revolution the article of faith for modern society that Paul Veyne sees in it instead of the utopian dream it turned out to be. In the second place, it is simply not true that Greeks and Romans accepted inequality without question. Deprivation and economic inequality in general was a frequent cause of civil disorder and uprisings, and citizenship for Athenians and Roman citizens during the Republic was interpreted straightforwardly at critical times as meaning equal political rights. the fundamental sense was that of belonging, of membership of the city-community.

So the two sets of problems, one relating to economic, the other to political, organisation in the world of classical antiquity, are not only categorically different but antithetical.

Ownership of the means of production (land) was widely, if unevenly, distributed.

impossible in Rome. Furthermore, Roman magistrates (and everyone else appointed to public office as against the service of the Emperor) received no emoluments at all - and was expected to pay all his own expenses and those of his attendants. Late in the Hellenistic period, magistrates and public officials generally - and, in some cases, priests - were expected to pay for their appointment. Payment was seen as a bid for honorific status - and, thereby, political eminence, to begin with - and thereafter, under the Empire, some degree of fiscal and legal immunity (perhaps, too, of licence to exploit the unprivileged).

It is perhaps proper to mention here that there is a somewhat similar problem that relates to social and political organisation, although it is not etymological but rather a matter of social or cultural perception. On the face of it, there seems to be just as big a discrepancy between the conception of society in political terms and the realities of economic inequality as there is in modern society. It has been argued, notably by Paul Veyne,<sup>35</sup> that the order of society which was thought to prevail in ancient Greece and Rome by the people who lived then was fundamentally hierarchical. The point he makes is that during the last few hundred years we have deserted the notion of hierarchical order as natural to humanity and to the natural world, universally accepted as it was two thousand years ago, and have opted for an image of society - if only society as it should be which is just as fundamentally egalitarian. Nowadays, it seems, we can only rediscover the reality of a

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<sup>34</sup> L.Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus* (English translation), Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1972.

<sup>35</sup> P.Veyne, *Bread and Circuses* (Tr. B.Pearce), Allen Lane, 1990.

hierarchically ordered society and its implications for political organisation by looking at Indian society.<sup>36</sup>

#### Postscript to chap. 6

The civilisation of Greece and Rome, it is true, had been an urban civilisation, and their world a world of cities, but they were 'consumer-cities'. Their inhabitants were landowners and their dependents and the craftsmen, shopkeepers and traders who supplied their needs: "The issue implicit in the notion of a consumer-city is whether and how far the economy and the power relations within the town rested on wealth generated by rents and taxes flowing to, and circulating among, town-dwellers. Even the quintessential consumer city, Rome, required innumerable craftsmen and shopkeepers for intra-urban production and circulation. In so far as they were engaged in 'petty commodity production,' the production by independent craftsmen of goods retailed for local consumption, they do not invalidate the notion of a consumer-city."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> L.Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus* (English translation), Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1972.

<sup>37</sup> M.I.Finley, "The Ancient City: From Fustel de Coulanges to Max Weber and Beyond", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 19, 1977, p. 326.