Introduction

> If any object can be found to which this term [the spirit of capitalism] can be applied with any understandable meaning, it can only be an historical individual, i.e., a complex of elements associated in historical reality which we unite into a conceptual whole from the standpoint of their cultural significance. Such an historical concept, however, since it refers in its content to a phenomenon significant for its unique individuality, cannot be defined according to the formula *gens proximum, differentia specifica*, but it must be gradually put together out of the individual parts which are taken from historical reality to make it up. Thus the final and definitive concept cannot stand at the beginning, but must come at the end.
>
> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

The work which follows is basically concerned to explore a single historical question: we wish to enquire whether capitalism existed in ancient society, and, if so, in what form(s) and to what extent. In a nutshell, we want to know whether the economy of the most advanced regions of antiquity, those of the Roman world in particular, was affected to significant degrees by the presence of capitalistic or quasi-capitalistic economic pursuits and what bearing this may have had on the course of social development generally. Of course, it goes without saying that such questions mean we must also address the question of the nature of capitalism as such; we shall necessarily have to touch on the whole problem of the relation of antiquity to the modern era where clearly a certain kind of capitalism has been, and still is, of overwhelming importance.

The present work is thus a somewhat ambitious study which, by surveying the course of Roman history from the early Republican

origins to the era of Rome's demise, seeks to contribute to the general understanding of the socio-economic structure of ancient civilization. To achieve this we have set as our main task the construction of a complex sociological model – or what we term, following Max Weber, an ideal type – and our efforts will be directed to describing the intricate workings of this model and showing how the constructs produced are adequate to the purpose at hand. Our approach is therefore unashamedly sociological in orientation, though, in the best traditions of the discipline, we have made every effort to be thoroughly cognizant of the relevant historical materials. The questions we shall ask are not those typical of conventional historiography, which usually seeks to uncover novel historical facts or analyses specific causal conjunctions, but rather those of the historical sociologist who, in asking questions of an analytical nature, recognizes the necessity of more theoretically oriented deliberations, even if the concepts and models thereby constructed ultimately depend on materials provided in the first instance by ordinary historical scholarship. The historian of antiquity will thus find no new facts disclosed below, but should recognize familiar materials selected, arranged and related in different, and hopefully illuminating, ways. Above all, an effort has been made to produce a clear and consistently formed set of concepts in order to improve the overall coherence of specialist studies dealing with the various facets of ancient society, so avoiding some of the ambiguity and confusion that all too often is a feature of the general literature in the field.

From what has already been said, it will not come as much of a surprise, at least to sociologists, to learn that our study engages to a considerable extent with the work of Max Weber. But despite the fact that sociologists and ancient historians will know something of Weber the sociologist of modern society, they are probably alike in their lack of familiarity with his direct contribution to ancient studies. Curiously, it is not at all well known that Weber wrote two major books dealing exclusively with antiquity, and many of his other writings are profoundly concerned with it as well.[1] Thus, it will be a first intention of the present study to revive the scholarly interest in Weber's historical writings dealing expressly with antiquity. But, important though this may be for the history of ideas and as a contribution to the interpretation of Weber's work as a whole, in the context of the work to follow these concerns are largely preliminary to the stated task of producing a more adequate account of the socio-economic structure of the ancient world.[2]

In our view Weber's work on antiquity is seminal for two main reasons: First, Weber wrote at a time when a number of the great achievements of modern German historiography were already in place, was well situated to take advantage of these, and did so. Here we shall refer in passing to the contributions of ancient historians like Barthold Niebuhr, Jacob Burckhardt, Theodor Mommsen, Eduard Meyer, August Meitzen, Robert Pöhlmann and Georg von Below and to those of historical economists such as Gustav von Schmoller, Karl Bücher, Wilhelm Roscher and Karl Rodbertus – of course, there are many others that could be listed. But, secondly, Weber's work is crucial because he is one of the very few historians of high calibre to have written and researched on an almost global range of human cultures – he studied and wrote in detail about the economic, political, religious and cultural life of both eastern and western societies, and did so covering the full panoply of ancient, mediaeval and modern phenomena. In other words, he developed his theories from what is often termed the perspective of universal history, and, with the benefit of the most advanced epistemology of the day, was able to do so in a methodologically sophisticated fashion.

Of course, it might be said much of this is true also of a figure like Karl Marx, with whom we shall have occasion to make comparisons on a number of points. But whereas Weber's scholarship has to a remarkable extent weathered the test of time and, in our view, even now stands with the best historical work since produced,[3] the same cannot be said of Marx's work, much of which is now dated and obsolete. I say this advisedly knowing full well that numerous followers of Marx have made, and are still continuing to make, efforts to update the master's contribution in the light of recent advances in the field. But these efforts are, with a few notable exceptions, of limited value. Hence, in the body of the present work we shall not attempt a full-scale comparison of Marx and Weber on antiquity; the sketchy nature of Marx's empirical knowledge of antiquity and the unsystematic character of his writings on it would make such a project unbalanced and somewhat artificial. Nonetheless, as the topic is not without interest and has some worthwhile dimensions, we have often included allusions to Marx's views in passing.

Thus, we readily concede that what we shall present on the question of capitalism in antiquity relies heavily, though not exclusively, on the work of Weber. From a conceptual and

methodological point of view this dependence is especially significant as regards Weber's key concepts of 'rational capitalism' and 'political capitalism'. Of course, as with all Weberian concepts, these are much more than categoric definitions, for, properly understood, such terms refer to complex ideal types which theoretically encompass large sets of empirical materials organized for analytic purposes. Our *modus operandi* in what follows will be to explore the heuristic value of these and certain other key ideal types for the interpretation of the socio-economic life of antiquity. But whereas Weber developed the ideal type of rational capitalism to a high degree (this was a major part of the achievement of his great work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*) unfortunately the same cannot be said of his concept of political capitalism. Weber himself provided only a rough outline of the latter concept, though in our view his conceptual elaboration is basically sound and includes many of the essential elements. Thus, it would be fair to say we are seeking to complement Weber's work on rational capitalism with a corresponding effort focusing on political capitalism. Just as Weber saw his task in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* as being in significant measure a theoretical one – to develop the concept of rational, or bourgeois, capitalism in itself – correspondingly we shall attempt to explicate the concept of political capitalism.

Our discussion below is organized into three parts which can loosely be termed 'analytic', 'descriptive' and 'synthetic'. The first, analytic section is made up of a single chapter on the work of Weber. In this we review his contributions to the study of antiquity and expound his main theoretical constructs, showing as far as is possible at this stage their relevance to the questions we wish to address.

For Weber the most central question is undoubtedly that of the uniqueness of the modern West, but his solution to this issue differs significantly from Marx's in that his schematization of comparative socio-economic structures did not preclude the possibility of forms of capitalism preceding the bourgeois form that emerged after the Renaissance. This is where Weber's distinction between rational or market capitalism and politically oriented capitalism becomes crucial. Whereas politically oriented capitalism is defined as the exploitation of the opportunities for profit arising from the exercise of political power (ultimately, violence), market capitalism is more economically rational and focuses on the formally peaceful opportunities of the market. Hence, at the very least we may be able to

designate the socio-economic structure of antiquity 'capitalist' in the sense of political capitalism – though, as we shall see, aspects of market capitalism may also be relevant.

At this point we must sound a warning in anticipation of some possible misunderstandings our conceptual approach may invite. Throughout our deliberations we shall be especially vigilant concerning the precise referents of key terms like capitalism, in order to avoid the the twin dangers of anachronistically projecting modern forms back onto the past or, alternatively, of overstating the uniqueness of the present. Both mistakes abound in the literature on antiquity, and we shall be especially preoccupied with them in the discussions to follow.

The second section, the 'descriptive part', comprises four chapters which cover four general areas of economic life: agriculture, industry, trade and state contracting. In these chapters we shall survey the literature on our topic that has been produced since Weber's day, and make whatever additions and corrections seem necessary. But more importantly, we shall also attempt the reverse, namely, to interrogate the materials that have been produced by modern historiography in the light of Weber's sociology. We shall try in particular to determine to what extent various quasi- and proto-capitalist formations appeared in the ancient world. For example, in agriculture we shall focus on the large estates and ask whether these ever became genuine capitalist enterprises; or, did they remain in essence autarkic and traditional owing to the predominance of the *oikos*? In so-called 'industry' the main issue concerns the scale and economic sophistication of the slave-based workshop. Was this at any stage a proto-typical factory with a rational division of labour and was it oriented to profit making? As regards the realm of trade our key concern will be the question of whether certain forms of capitalistic trade, especially those associated with the sea loan, played an important part in the economic life of ancient cities. Finally, we shall consider the significance of state contracting for the fate of capitalism in ancient Rome. Here the role of the state contractors or *publicani* is the decisive question because of their extraordinary wealth and the nature of the business methods they employed.

In our final, concluding section we shall try to synthesize the great mass of material surveyed in the two previous sections. The intention will be to gain an interpretative grasp of the overall socio-economic situation in antiquity. We shall focus on two main questions. First, what was the extent of the market in ancient

Roman society? And, second, what was the institutional basis of political capitalism? Associated with these problems are a number of subordinate issues, such as why there were limits to the development of a market system and what were the long-term effects of the dominance of political capitalism. To complete our discussion we shall explore in a systematic fashion why rational capitalism failed to develop beyond what was merely an embryonic stage.

Part I

Antiquity and historical sociology

1 Max Weber and the theory of ancient capitalism

> Well this is really a question of terminology. I need hardly point out that no historian of *ancien regime* societies, *a fortiori* of ancient civilizations, would ever, when using the word *capitalism*, have in mind the definition Alexander Gerschenron calmly gives us: 'Capitalism, that is the modern industrial system'. I have . . . indicated that capitalism in the past (as distinct from capitalism today) only occupied a narrow platform of economic life. How could one possibly take it to mean a 'system' extending over the whole of society? It was nevertheless a world apart, different from and indeed foreign to the social and economic context surrounding it. And it is in relation to this context that it is defined as 'capitalism', not merely in relation to capitalist forms which were to emerge later in time. In fact capitalism was what it was in relation to a *non-capitalism* of immense proportions. And to refuse to admit this dichotomy within the economy of the past, on the pretext that the 'time' of capitalism dates only from the nineteenth century, means abandoning the effort to understand the significance – crucial to the analysis of the economy – of what might be termed the former topography of capitalism. If there were certain areas where it elected residence – by no means inadvertently – that is because these were *the only areas which favoured the reproduction of capital.*
>
> Fernand Braudel, *The Wheels of Commerce*

In the now quite voluminous literature dealing with the work of Max Weber, it is surprising how few commentators have addressed his writings on antiquity.[1] We say surprising because, as already noted above, Weber produced two major books concerned with antiquity, and many of his other writings were concerned with it as

well. Thus, it is of more than just passing interest, both for the history of antiquity and also as regards an understanding of Weber's later work, to look once again at the early phase of his career and to trace the lines of development issuing from it.

It is of considerable importance from the point of view we shall advance here that one of the main conceptual concerns of Weber in his early works, indeed the key, unifying theme in them, is the issue of the existence and nature of ancient capitalism.[2] It is not well known that Weber took very seriously the idea that capitalism played an important, even decisive role in the life of earlier societies. As we shall see shortly, Weber's precise view of the role of capitalism in antiquity is rather complex, and involves certain changes of viewpoint on his part over the course of his career. But, it is most instructive to trace the course of Weber's thinking in these early writings on ancient economics, and not only for the student of ancient society; their close scrutiny informs us among other things as to the nature of the problematic underlying his later, more well-recognized contributions to the analysis of the all-important modern capitalism. Thus, without prejudicing the issue of what is precisely implied by the notion, we can say that the idea of ancient capitalism is not merely of antiquarian interest but has wider implications; in particular, it provides a contrasting perspective which is most useful in constructing a theory of modern capitalism as well as of the course of western historical development generally.

In Weber's *oeuvre* there are a number of works devoted solely or in significant part to the study of antiquity. They are the following:

1 *Die römische Agrargeschichte in ihrer Bedeutung für das Staats- und Privatrecht* (1891);
2 The essay 'The social causes of the decay of ancient civilization' (1896);
3 *The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations* (first edition 1897 and second edition 1909);
4 The essay 'The city', written between 1911 and 1913, but first published (posthumously) in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, no. 48 in 1921. This is now included in *Economy and Society* as Chapter XVI;
5 *General Economic History* (1919–29), which is not a text actually written by Weber, but the written version of a series of public lectures given by him under the title 'Outlines of Universal Social and Economic History'. The contents of the lectures were reconstructed from Weber's own brief notes and those of students who attended the lectures and published (posthumously) in 1923;
6 Finally, in addition to these works, we note that Weber's *magnum opus Economy and Society* and Weber's numerous writings on religion contain a wealth of references to various aspects of antiquity.

In the chapter which follows, we shall discuss the first three works listed above in some detail, as antiquity is their central focus; the remaining writings will be utilized where appropriate. We shall argue that Weber begins his work on the economic history of antiquity with an essentially unclarified conception of capitalism, a usage more or less taken over from Theodor Mommsen whose great *History of Rome* was very clearly an important influence on Weber. The impact of Mommsen is most obvious in Weber's *Die römische Agrargeschichte,* a work composed at a time when Weber was closely associated with Mommsen both via social connections and through a series of intellectual exchanges. But a close reading of Mommsen shows that, under the influence of contemporary liberal ideas, he had simply taken over the conventional wisdom concerning the nature of modern capitalism and anachronistically projected its forms back onto the conditions of ancient society – and Weber all too uncritically followed him in this.

By the time of his next published contribution, the essay 'The social causes of the decay of ancient civilization', Weber has evidently reflected upon and revised his previous view, and seeks to modify his original assessment of the significance of capitalism. Indeed, he now wants to restrict the scope and relevance of capitalism to a somewhat marginal role, and, under the influence of Rodbertus, he develops a contrasting perspective in which special significance is placed on the economic function of the *oikos*. At this stage, however, Weber lacks a full appreciation of the nature and use of the ideal type, and does not have the advantage of a developed sociological typology.

But all this begins to change in the next few years (1897 onwards) with the publication of *The Agrarian Sociology*. In the opening introductory section of that work Weber embarks on a detailed study of the problems of concept formation in relation to ancient studies: he recognizes the dangers of anachronization, begins to distinguish different types of capitalistic activity, and becomes conscious of the need to fashion ideal-type concepts for heuristic purposes. It is worth bearing in mind that it was between the first

and the second versions of *The Agrarian Sociology* (1897–1909) that Weber also produced *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and wrote a number of key methodological essays (most notably '"Objectivity" in social science and social policy', in which the epistemology of the ideal type is developed at some length). In the light of this, we shall argue, Weber had begun to recognize that the problem of understanding the nature of capitalism, both ancient and modern, was much more complex and difficult than he had initially thought, and, furthermore, that the issues were incapable of resolution without engaging with another issue altogether, namely, the problem of rationality. In consequence, he proceeds to develop a new and more sophisticated ideal type of modern capitalism around a set of conceptually clarified notions which included those of rational economic action, rational calculation, rational division of labour, and rational technology. Then, against this more refined formulation of 'rational capitalism' he contrasts the idea of 'irrational capitalism' which he argues appeared in various guises – the capitalism of military adventurers, pirates, booty hunters, slave traders, tax farmers, speculators, money dealers and others.

But Weber is by no means so naive as to argue along Hegelian or teleological lines that rational progress, however defined, is an inevitable consequence of the movement of history. Rather, he argues that certain types of rationalization, and only these, have been the peculiar fate of western societies as a result of unique causal conditions. This means, contrary to an all too common misunderstanding of Weber, that rationalization is not to be understood as the all-embracing characteristic of western historical development such that irrational forms of social life cease to be of any contemporary significance. For it needs to be recognized that, despite the increasing dominance of rational capitalism, irrational forms also persist, even in the most advanced societies – we need only consider the large-scale cocaine enterprises of the Colombian drug barons, the world-wide traffic arms and munitions, or the political manipulation of domestic weapons manufacturers to see examples of what Weber calls irrational capitalism prospering today. It would therefore be the greatest misinterpretation of Weber's view to see the process of rationalization through the filter of an Hegelian Reason, so that the course of historical evolution from, say, primitive to modern is regarded as coinciding in some simple fashion with a general movement from irrational to rational social forms. For, in Weber's view, premodern societies have also undergone rationalizations, but in different directions and in different spheres

to those of the modern west. So we must emphasize here at the outset that in our attempt to work up a Weberian perspective on the economic character of antiquity it is not at all a question of explaining the nature of a developmental transition from, say, the irrational capitalism of premodern societies to the rational capitalism of modern society. Rather, it is a question of understanding the peculiar character of different societies – which includes understanding the peculiar directions of their individual rationalization processes, though this does not preclude the possibility of acknowledging lines of development between past and present forms provided these can be properly demonstrated. We must insist, however, that the issue of whether progress has taken place along paths that can be interpreted in rational terms is ultimately an empirical question, and does not depend on a philosophical anthropology or historical *Weltanschauung* of some kind.

Notes

Introduction

1 It is worth remembering that Weber began his scholarly career basically as an ancient historian, and it was really only after his nervous breakdown – mid-career as it were – that he turned his attention to the study of contemporary matters out of which his more celebrated sociological works emerged.

2 On the relation of history to sociology in Weber's work, there is no better statement in our view than that of F.H. Tenbruck in his recent essay on 'Max Weber and Eduard Meyer'. There we read:

> It is regrettable that the meaning of Weber's sociology has been defined by an immanent interpretation of his latter work. . . . However, quiet reflection would have indicated that Max Weber's work could have originated only on the basis of highly developed scholarship. An empirically-based sociology with universal historical perspectives obviously presupposes that historical research has reached out beyond the collection and description of particular historical processes and has been able to order the mass of material according to comprehensive viewpoints. . . . The basic level of *Economy and Society* consists of themes that had already been posed by History. Max Weber did not need – and indeed could not collect – one by one the facts with which *Economy and Society* overwhelms us; he found them already available, admittedly subject to debate, structured by concepts and theories. (F.H. Tenbruck, 'Max Weber and Eduard Meyer', in W. Mommsen and J. Osterhammel (eds), *Max Weber and his Contemporaries*, London, Unwin Hyman, 1987, 235–6.)

3 According to a 1965 review by the leading historian Alfred Heuss, Weber's contribution, though neglected at the time, was and remains a brilliant achievement. For he

> was the first to take the Roman agrarian writers (Cato, Varro, Columella) seriously, examining them in a matter-of-fact way . . . and uncovering the crass principles of Roman agrarian capitalism in its technical details. In this respect, the book, though generally neglected by the historians, became path-breaking, and subsequent

> research had to continue along its line of inquiry. . . . Who else among the historians of the time was capable of handling the legal sources and the technical language of land surveyors, both of which Weber combined in virtuoso fashion? The book, hard to understand because of its dry and remote subject matter, is an ingenious work (quoted by G. Roth in *Economy and Society*, New York, Bedminster, 1968, vol. 1, xl).

1 Max Weber and the theory of ancient capitalism

1 The only significant exceptions to this are: M.I. Finley, 'The ancient city: From Fustel de Coulanges to Max Weber and beyond', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 19, 1977; and A. Momigliano, 'New paths of classicism in the nineteenth century', *History and Theory*, 21, 1982. Excellent as these are, however, they are only partially concerned with Weber whose work is treated from points of view different to that adopted here. Three of the most recent book-length studies on the economy of antiquity, Finley's *The Ancient Economy*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1973, G.E.M. de Ste Croix's *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, London, Duckworth, 1981, and P. Garnsey and R. Saller's *The Roman Empire: Economy, Society and Culture*, Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1987, while touching on Weber, do not discuss his work at any length. A useful introductory essay to the whole area we shall presently discuss is Paul Cartledge's '"Trade and politics" revisited: Archaic Greece' in P. Garnsey, K. Hopkins and C.R. Whittaker, *Trade in the Ancient Economy*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1983.

2 It is worth noting that today's leading non-marxist historians of the ancient economy – A.H.M. Jones, P. Brunt, M. Frederiksen, M. Crawford, K. Hopkins – are generally reluctant to use the term capitalism. This is in marked contrast to the older tradition of ancient historiography in which capitalism was a key notion; these scholars readily accepted the term and its applicability to ancient society. I am thinking in particular of Theodor Mommsen and the whole tradition of ancient historiography that follows from his work, and includes great figures such as M. Rostovtzeff, E. Meyer, T. Frank, F. Oertel, A.J. Toynbee and F. Heichelheim. For a critique of the older generation's approach with its anachronistic use of categories like 'bourgeoisie', 'capitalist', 'industrial production' etc., see the devastating critique of Rostovtzeff by M. Reinhold, 'Historian of the classical world: a critique of Rostovtzeff', in *Science and Society*, 10(4), 1946.

3 A good introductory account of the history of Roman land-tenure is H. Last's discussion in the *Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 7, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1928. There Last tells us that

> according to the theory that seems to have prevailed in classical times, Romulus divided the territory at his disposal into three parts, of which one was reserved for public purposes, such as the maintenance of the king and the public cults, one became common land, and the third was divided among the *curiae*. Without pressing