

Approaching the Ancient World: Theories, Models
and Concepts in Ancient History
(2004)
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Routledge

Chapter I

Approaches

The problem of theory

Within the discipline of ancient history, grown to a stunted maturity under the paternalistic aegis of classical philology, approaches to history that stress the techniques and methodologies of the social sciences (e.g., primacy of theory, model building, conceptual sophistication, quantification) rather than those of the mainstream tradition (e.g., linguistic categorization, literary source criticism, citation of authority) must expect to meet with more than a slight suspicion of illegitimacy.¹

The place of 'theory' in ancient history remains controversial. Its advocates (normally advocates of one particular theoretical approach rather than of theory in general) insist that un- or undertheorised historical accounts are inadequate, because they depend on a set of implicit and problematic assumptions masquerading as 'common sense'. Its opponents maintain that any account of antiquity using modern concepts and theories is illegitimate and misleading, as the evidence has been corrupted and distorted with anachronism (and, more often than not, a political agenda). Most present-day historians find themselves somewhere in the middle, at risk of attack from both sides: recognising that they should include at least some discussion of the key terms and ideas used in their work, and often making use of material from outside ancient history to illuminate their studies, but regarding 'theory' as something ancillary to the real business of ancient history, something alien and even threatening.

The emotions that this debate continues to arouse – anger and anxiety on one side, fervent enthusiasm on the other – make it clear that this is not a purely technical, methodological issue. The question of whether and how ancient historians should make use of modern theories and concepts in interpreting ancient material in

fact raises fundamental questions about ancient history as a discipline and about the status and authority of its accounts of the past. 'Theory' – economics, for example, or Marxism – seems to promise a great deal, claiming to provide a true understanding of how the world *really* works and to reveal the underlying logic and pattern behind the apparent chaos of past and present events. It seems to offer, in some cases, the possibility that history might aspire to the status of a kind of science, the most prestigious and authoritative form of knowledge in the modern West. However, the promise is also a threat: history is to acquire this new status and authority by effectively ceasing to be itself and becoming a branch of some other discipline, whether economics, sociology, anthropology or literary theory. Traditional practices are to be abandoned as inadequate; existing accounts of the past must be repudiated as at best lacking in intellectual rigour and explanatory power and at worst compromised and tainted by dubious philosophical, political and ethical assumptions. For the professional ancient historian with a certain amount invested in existing disciplinary structures and traditions, or for the student who is investing time, effort and money in acquiring the historian's traditional knowledge and skills, some anxiety in the face of such claims and assertions seems quite understandable.

For polemical purposes, one might contrast 'theory' both with 'practice' and with 'reality'. Historians, it may be argued, learn their craft through practice and imitation, through the study of how other historians work and through developing historical arguments and interpretations of their own, not through studying abstract philosophical ideas about the construction of historical knowledge. Their knowledge of the past is based on direct contact with the actual evidence in all its variety, rather than on trying to force a past reality to conform to abstract models and questionable prior assumptions. Theory, on this reading, is too simplistic and abstract, since it attempts to reduce the complexity of the real world, of human motivation and of history itself, to a single principle or a few alleged laws. Indeed, traditional historical accounts might claim to be *more* scientific than theoretical ones, because they are firmly grounded in the evidence. At the same time, theory appears unnecessarily complicated, as it demands that historians should adopt a highly specialised technical vocabulary in place of plain English and should learn a whole new subject on top of – or, worse, instead of – basic historical skills and knowledge of the evidence. For most historians, scepticism about theory's claims – surely reality is always

more complicated? – leaves them with little motivation to acquire more than a superficial familiarity with some key terms and ideas. It is left to just a few individuals of questionable intellectual tendencies to undergo an almost religious conversion to the cult of theory, abandoning the complexities of real life in favour of belief in a single Truth that purports to explain everything.

I suspect that this account will ring true with a significant number of practising historians and students. It is not, however, the only way of defining 'theory' and characterising its relation to history. Rather than being placed in opposition to historical practice and past reality, theory can be seen as intrinsically bound up with both of them: as the set of ideas and assumptions that inform and govern historians' practices and with and through which we interpret the world. Under this definition, not only do all historians possess some sort of 'theory', but historical knowledge would be impossible without it: 'theory' is what enables us to make sense of evidence and use it to create an account of the past. Historical sources do not 'speak' or present us with their intrinsic meaning and significance; rather, we give them meaning and significance by interpreting them, considering them in the context of existing knowledge and understanding, making connections with other pieces of evidence, using them to build up and then modify a wider picture of the past.² In this process of interpretation, our choices and judgements – What is the appropriate context for this piece of evidence? Is this a plausible connection? Is this a valid interpretation? – are influenced by a wide variety of ideas and assumptions: philosophical premises and methodological rules of thumb, the conventions of the discipline and personal intuition, elaborate theoretical concepts and the set of cultural assumptions about human nature and the like that we have learnt to regard as 'common sense', things apparently so obviously true that they are scarcely worth discussing. That is to say, our interpretations are based on – and, essentially, made possible by – some sort of 'theory', however vague and eclectic. The fact that the ideas governing historians' practices and interpretations are frequently unsystematic, largely implicit and often quite unconscious and unquestioned does not lessen their importance. The advocates of 'theory' are not seeking to replace 'non-theoretical' accounts of the past with 'theoretical' ones but to favour histories in which the theoretical assumptions are explicit and coherent over those in which historians are largely oblivious to the ideas that are influencing their interpretations.

In a way, therefore, it all depends on what one means by 'theory'. The debate about theory in ancient history has been complicated by the fact that different participants have had different conceptions of what it was they were discussing. It is the nature of such controversial 'keywords' that they have a wide range of reference, are heavily laden with ideas and values – and are frequently bound up with the problems that they are being used to discuss.³ That is to say, definitions are rarely, if ever, neutral. Defining 'theory' as something opposed to both practice and reality, something external to history, and restricting the term to such elaborate, self-contained systems of thought as Marxism or economics, can be seen as a strategy that defends traditional historical practices against the claims and criticisms of other approaches. Conversely, characterising *any* set of ideas that influence historical interpretation, however incoherent or inconsistent, as 'theory' carries (and is intended to carry) entirely different implications. By erasing most of the differences between, say, Marxism and conventional historiography, it implies that both approaches embody the sorts of philosophical, political and metaphysical assumptions that are explicit and thus easily criticised in Marxism. That being so, much of the criticism of traditional history from a theoretical point of view is seen to be merited, and it becomes clear that historians do indeed need to review both their practices and their existing accounts of the past. More positively, such a definition suggests that, as 'theory' is not in fact so alien to history, it would not after all be so difficult for ancient historians to reap the benefits of adopting more theoretically informed approaches to their subject.

From this perspective, the subject of 'theory in ancient history' is more than the study of some outré concepts and systems of thought that have been applied to antiquity by one or two eccentrics. The danger of a book such as this, or of a stand-alone unit on 'Approaches to Ancient History', is that it reinforces the idea that 'theory' is something separate from, additional to and even alien to the normal practices of ancient history. On the contrary, the study of 'theory' is the study of historical interpretation in general, the different ways in which historians produce accounts of the past on the basis of the surviving evidence. Complex theoretical systems such as Marxism serve as useful examples for such a study because they highlight the sorts of issues and problems that are common to all historical interpretations but are left implicit, even concealed, in more conventional approaches to ancient history. The 'problem' of theory is not

that it is some alien force trying to take over history, but rather that, by convincing themselves that it is and that they are under attack, historians have blinded themselves to the theories that inform their own practices and interpretations. They have also chosen to shut themselves off to ideas and methods that might help to illuminate ancient evidence and produce more interesting and sophisticated – and no less 'real' – interpretations of the past.

Approaches to ancient history

The aims of this book are threefold. First, I want to introduce some of the key concepts, arguments and assumptions of a range of theories that have informed and influenced different accounts of ancient history. Whether or not a student makes use of 'theory' in his or her own work, the fact that some other historians do make use of it means that a certain amount of knowledge of different theories, of how they are used, how they can be recognised and how they might be evaluated, is a vital part of the historian's basic 'toolbox' of skills. I have chosen to arrange the book around different aspects of ancient history (economy, society, culture, mentality) rather than devoting separate chapters to different theories. This does mean that my discussions of such complex theoretical traditions as sociology and structuralism are decidedly limited and superficial, focusing on one or two key ideas rather than attempting to give a complete account of each system of thought. On the other hand, students are most likely to encounter 'theory' in the context of particular debates in ancient history rather than on its own, and it is easier to compare and contrast different theories and to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses by looking at how they have been applied to historical problems rather than by considering them purely in the abstract. The guide to further reading is intended to point students in the direction both of more detailed introductions to different theories and of further examples of their application to ancient history. The choice of topics does show a certain bias towards social and economic history: partly because this is my main area of interest and expertise, but above all because it is in these areas, which the 'social sciences' claim as their domain, that traditional historiography faces the greatest challenges to the validity and authority of its approach to the past and, more positively, that theoretical approaches seem to have the most to offer to ancient historians.

Second, I want to offer this material as the basis for a more gener-

al discussion of how historians develop interpretations and construct arguments, and how those interpretations and arguments should be evaluated. As I suggested above, explicitly theoretical approaches to ancient history make good examples for the study of historical interpretation because their assumptions and interpretative strategies are normally quite overt; having studied such approaches, the same techniques and criteria of evaluation can be applied to works the guiding assumptions of which are less obvious (in some cases, even the historian may not be wholly aware of them). Both these aims relate to the skill of critical reading, something that needs to be applied to secondary sources as much as to ancient evidence. As with the interpretation of ancient evidence, this involves more than just having a critical attitude, not accepting what the sources say at face value (though that is clearly important): we need to have a sense of what to look for, of the right questions to ask, of the possible contexts within which the work can be interpreted. Just as we look at Livy in the context of the development of Roman historiography and the establishment of the Principate, and consider his work in relation to other contemporary literature which reinterprets Roman myths and traditions, so we need, for example, to consider the work of M.I. Finley in the context of a debate about the nature of the ancient economy that has been running since the late eighteenth century and to think about its relation to parallel debates in economic theory and anthropology. Few historians are *not* influenced by contemporary ideas and discussions, even if they do not draw on them explicitly; we need to know enough about the wider intellectual context of their work to be able to recognise such influences and evaluate the results.

My third aim is slightly more polemical: to demonstrate the possibilities of a 'theoretical' approach to ancient history as a source of new ideas and new ways of reading the ancient evidence and, thus, as a means of developing a richer understanding of the past. As is doubtless obvious from the fact that I have chosen to write such a book in the first place, my own approach to ancient history is heavily influenced by 'theory'. I begin from the basic assumption that the historian's task is to explain past events, rather than simply to record them, and to understand past society in terms of the underlying structures that shaped people's lives rather than simply describing the diversity of their experiences. We cannot, I believe, avoid interpreting the past in terms of present concepts and concerns; it is surely better to do this consciously and explicitly, aware of the possi-

bility of anachronism and distortion, than to convince ourselves that we can gain direct access to the *real* past, untainted and unmediated by any modern influences. If we accept what one might term the inevitability of anachronism, we can feel free to draw upon all the ideas and concepts that the modern world, with greater resources and above all much greater volumes of evidence, has developed to understand society and the world at large. I am not aiming to promote a particular theory – though I have my preferred approaches, as will probably become evident in the course of this book, however scrupulously I try to be fair in presentation and evaluation – but the advantages of a theoretical approach.

Of course, theoretical ideas and concepts need to be evaluated critically and applied sensitively and with regard to historical context – or at least that is one of my basic theoretical assumptions. For the rest of this chapter, I want to discuss a number of general points relating to the use of such theories, highlighting some of the underlying issues that will recur regularly through the rest of the book. I have taken as a focus for this discussion M.I. Finley's characterisation of the ancient city as a 'consumer city', an idea discussed in a number of his books and in particular in an article of 1977.⁴ This is a classic example of an explicitly 'theoretical' approach to a topic in ancient history – 'classic' both in its methodology and in its influence over subsequent studies of ancient urbanism. It is clear evidence of the power of this concept that even twenty-five years later historians find it difficult to study Greek or Roman cities without engaging, however briefly, with Finley's ideas. Indeed, entire academic conferences have been organised with the express aim of getting 'beyond the consumer city' – which suggests that Finley's argument may serve as an example also of some of the potential problems and drawbacks of a theoretically informed approach to ancient history.⁵

Generalisations and comparisons

The outstanding characteristic of 'theoretical' as opposed to 'traditional' approaches to ancient history is their emphasis on the general rather than the particular. Of course, this is a matter of degree and emphasis rather than an absolute distinction: *all* historians aim to draw together individual pieces of evidence to produce a more general account and interpret the evidence on the basis of wider assumptions ('generalisations') about the ancient world and the world in general.⁶ However, any historical account can be located on a

spectrum between those that focus primarily on the individual event or institution and those that examine events or institutions primarily with the aim of drawing more general conclusions that might be applied to other examples, even to other historical periods. For example, one might study the reign of a particular Roman emperor as something that is interesting in itself, or as a way of understanding the nature of the Principate and the role of emperors, or even in search of transhistorical ideas about leadership and power.⁷ In the last accounts, the particular case is interpreted explicitly in terms of a more general theory or concept ('the Principate', 'power') and is of interest primarily in so far as it serves either as evidence to confirm the validity of the general principle or as grounds for modifying and refining it. From this perspective, simply collecting information about a particular case, without any reference to a wider research agenda, does little to advance our understanding of the past.

In the end, I believe that the history of *individual* ancient towns is a cul-de-sac, given the limits of the available (and potential) documentation, the unalterable condition of the study of ancient history. It is not wholly perverse to see an advantage in the weakness. There is mounting criticism of contemporary urban history for allowing the deluge of data to obscure the questions being asked and their purpose, a danger that the ancient urban historian is happily safe from. But what questions do we wish to ask about the ancient city, whether they can be answered satisfactorily or not? That is the first thing to be clear about, before the evidence is collected, let alone interrogated. If my evaluation of the current situation is a bleak one, that is not because I dislike the questions that are being asked but because I usually fail to discover any questions at all, other than antiquarian ones – how big? how many? what monuments? how much trade? which products?⁸

We have insufficient evidence, according to Finley, to write a proper history of any individual ancient city, even Rome or Pompeii – but in any case that should not be the aim of our studies. Instead, we should be seeking 'to *understand* the place of the town as a pivotal institution in the Graeco-Roman world and its development'.⁹ Individual cities are of interest not in themselves but in so far as they tell us something about ancient cities in general, helping us to develop an idea of the place of 'the city' in Greek and Roman society.

Finley's aim is to identify attributes that are common to all, or at least most, ancient cities, and to develop ideas and concepts that can then be applied to any (or at least any 'average' or 'typical') Greek or Roman city. Only if we study individual ancient cities as part of a wider research project like this will we be able to ask the right sorts of questions of the evidence, to yield the right sorts of knowledge and understanding of the past. The failure, in Finley's eyes, of most accounts of ancient cities is that they do not even try to generalise, but simply accrue information related to their subject: this is 'latter-day antiquarianism', in contrast to a properly analytical history.¹⁰

There are, to be sure, a growing number of 'histories' of individual towns, Greek and Roman, from the archaic age to the end of antiquity. With scarcely an exception, however, they lack a conceptual focus or scheme.¹¹

Instead of efforts to establish clear patterns of city behaviour through the employment of simplifying assumptions, there has emerged in recent decades a spate of pseudo-histories of ancient cities and regions in which every statement or calculation to be found in an ancient text, every artefact finds a place, creating a morass of unintelligible, meaningless, unrelated 'facts'.¹²

In a 'theoretical' history, the historian's main aim is to identify patterns, trends, rules and laws, underlying structures, overall frameworks and essential features. Such accounts offer a particular sort of knowledge about the past – a way of thinking about it and imagining it, rather than simply information about it. Having dismissed other approaches, Finley does not then attempt to offer a complete account of all aspects of the ancient city but focuses on what he regards as its defining feature, the relationship between the city and its territory. In contrast to the medieval city, the city of producers, that paid for its food supply with goods and services, the ancient city was supported by taxes and rents collected from the producers in the countryside. Moreover, whereas the medieval city was politically as well as economically independent, and hence became a privileged space in which new ideas developed and a new class rose to power, in antiquity town and country were politically united, dominated by the same landowning elite and its values. Hence, it is argued, ancient and medieval cities played very different roles in the economic histories of their times – the one a locus, even a catalyst,

for development and growth, the other at best neutral and perhaps even an impediment to change. Of course, the ancient world contained an enormous variety of cities, including some in which trade and manufacture played a more prominent role, but underlying even the thriving business activities and wealth of a place such as Pompeii is its dependence on the produce of its immediate hinterland, gathered in by the elite as taxes and rents: the exploitative relationship that characterises and defines the 'consumer city'.¹³

Whether this sort of approach to history is appealing and stimulating may in the end be a matter of personal preference and temperament: is this the sort of knowledge about the past that we desire? Crudely, do we focus on the innumerable representations of penises at Pompeii because they are exotic and interesting in themselves or because they can tell us something about the economics of Roman prostitution?¹⁴ Do we study Pompeii in and for itself or simply as an example of 'ancient urbanism'? Ian Morris has characterised the crucial difference between the approaches of 'the humanities' and 'the social sciences' as lying in their different aims of 'understanding' and 'explanation': the one emphasises the complexity, detail, richness and variety of human behaviour, the other seeks to identify underlying general principles behind what appears to be undifferentiated randomness.¹⁵ As a result of both inclination and training, many historians tend to follow the path of the humanities, favouring the striking detail and the revealing anecdote; they are suspicious of grand theory precisely because it devalues such details and obscures the differences between individual cases and even between historical periods. For those inclined to theoretical approaches, of course, this is precisely why they should be preferred.

At the risk of caricaturing complex issues, we might say that in the humanist's eyes, reducing the world to a handful of principles tells us little, because it ignores precisely those things that we most need to understand. In the social scientists' eyes, humanists systematically select on dependent variables, superficially wallowing in particulars rather than seeking explanation.¹⁶

No historian rejects generalisation altogether, however much he or she focuses on the particular; history – indeed, life in general – would be impossible if we believed that there was never any connection between events or that distinct but similar objects could never be compared. Rather, historians have an individual sense of what

sorts of generalisations they are willing to accept and employ and what sort of knowledge of the past they are attempting to produce. When reading a historical work, we need to pay attention to the generalisations that underlie the historian's interpretations – not all of which may be explicit, or even conscious – to evaluate them and to assess their significance. This may provide grounds for rejecting the book's conclusions altogether, if we decide that its assumptions are excessively dubious, or we may modify them in line with our own perspective. For example, Finley's idea of the 'consumer city' is closely bound up with his overall view of the ancient economy as essentially undeveloped (a theory discussed in the next chapter); but it is quite possible to accept that his model does apply to ancient cities while rejecting, or at least qualifying, his pessimistic view of the development of antiquity.¹⁷

When evaluating general theories and concepts, we can, for the sake of argument, distinguish between two key aspects. The first may be termed the 'breadth' of the generalisation: how large a geographical region, how great an extent of time, how many different facets of human activity does it claim to encompass? Put another way, how vulnerable is any given generalisation to being dismissed as 'sweeping'? The main aim of theory is to show that apparently different situations and societies are in fact comparable. Commonly, this involves metaphors of depth and surface, or foundation and superstructure: the obvious differences between societies are assumed to obscure their underlying similarity. A key point in any such argument is therefore the basis on which this continuity is established. This may be relatively easy in the case of theories that cover a limited aspect of life in a single society; it is more problematic if we wish to extend a theory developed through study of the modern world to other, pre-modern societies. For example, a common criticism of attempts to apply modern economic theory to the ancient world is that they simply assume that a form of behaviour associated with the modern West (namely, a propensity to maximise utility) is actually a universal trait of 'human nature'. It is possible to make a case to justify this assumption and hence to justify the use of the theory, but it cannot be taken for granted that our own beliefs, customs and ideas are universally valid rather than historically and culturally specific. An obvious focus for the evaluation of any given theory is therefore to consider what assumptions of historical continuity are being made in order for it to be used, especially when it is being deployed outside its original context.

Some theories offer explicit claims for their universal applicability on the basis that they have identified the fundamental organising principles of human society. Thus Marxism builds its theory of the development of all human societies across time on the universality of human needs, the simple fact that everyone needs food and shelter, whereas sociobiology seeks to explain all human behaviour in terms of biological imperatives, given that human biology has scarcely changed in thousands of years. The more ambitious a theory, the more aspects of human life it attempts to explain – and especially if it claims to be valid for all human societies at all periods – then the more likely it is that it will be accused of being simplistic, of ignoring the complexities of human behaviour and historical development, of reducing everything to a single determining factor. Those who reject such theories do not deny that, for example, material needs and inherited instincts do affect some areas of human behaviour; it is a question of how much weight is placed on such ‘universal factors’, and how much they are expected to explain. On the other hand, the more that a theory is reduced in scope, the less explanatory power it has, and the less possibility it offers of making comparisons between periods.

These issues can be illustrated from the history of theories of urbanism and its effects. In the mid-twentieth century, cities were often positively identified with economic development, both in early modern European history and in the contemporary Third World: they were indicators of the level of economic progress, ‘electric transformers’, ‘accelerators of all historical time’.¹⁸ At the same period, the Chicago School of urban sociology argued that their observations of aspects of contemporary American urban life – including alienation, individualism and fragmented, even ‘schizophrenic’, social relationships – were universal features of ‘urbanism’, the consequences of living in large cities.¹⁹ In neither case was the concept of ‘city’ clearly defined; it was taken to be self-evident, a matter of common sense, something that could be found in all historical societies. The obvious objection to these theories was to put forward examples of cities, both historical and contemporary, that did not seem to have a positive influence on the economies of their hinterlands and with societies that exhibited striking differences from modern Chicago. Historians and sociologists therefore reduced the breadth of their generalisations by turning to approaches that emphasised historical and regional variation, reviving the tradition of developing typologies of cities: industrial and pre-industrial, generative and parasitic,

European and Oriental. Only some cities – those of early modern Europe and the modern West, above all – were now characterised as progressive. Third World cities that lacked dynamic relationships with their hinterlands no longer contradicted the theory but could be explained in its terms: they were not progressive because they did not conform to the Western model of cities.

This is the tradition within which Finley’s work is located: following German sociologists of the turn of the century such as Sombart and Weber, he distinguishes the ancient city from the medieval, as consumer rather than producer, and thus characterises it as an impediment to economic development rather than as a stimulus.²⁰ It is notable that he chooses to generalise about the ‘ancient’ city rather than the ‘Greek’ or ‘Roman’ city; he justifies this on the basis of the shared cultural attitudes to urbanism that he detects in Greek and Roman sources (which is, however, clearly distinguished from modern ‘urbanism’), and on the grounds that they share the same basic relationship between city and hinterland. Most subsequent studies of ancient urbanism have focused on either Greek or Roman cities; partly this reflects the fact that most historians specialise in one period or the other, but it is also the case that many historians detect significant differences between Greek and Roman cities, and even between cities in different regions (under the Roman Empire, for example, the long-established cities of Italy or Asia Minor compared with the foundations in Gaul or Britain).²¹ It is a question of judgement: do the similarities between ancient cities of different periods and regions (especially when contrasted with other, quite distinct, city types such as the medieval and the modern) outweigh the equally obvious differences, or should Finley’s broad model be abandoned in favour of something more historically specific (but hence less powerful)?

Either approach has to assume that there is indeed such a thing as a ‘city’, of which Greek, Roman, medieval, Oriental and modern cities are variants – even if it has proved impossible to produce a definition that actually works for all historical periods. Greek and Roman writers themselves struggled over the question of whether a ‘city’ should be defined by its size, by its political institutions or by its facilities; modern urban sociologists have faced the same problem.²² The majority of places identified as cities in antiquity would not be counted as such according to the criteria used to distinguish ‘towns’ from ‘cities’ in the early modern period, let alone the modern.

It will not have escaped notice that I have so far avoided defining what I mean by a city. Neither geographers nor sociologists nor historians have succeeded in agreeing on a definition. Yet we all know sufficiently what we mean by the label, in general terms . . . The block in definition arises from the difficulties, apparently insuperable, of incorporating all the essential variables without excluding whole periods of history in which we all know cities existed, and on the other hand, of settling for a least common denominator without lodging on a level of generality that serves no useful purpose.²³

It is difficult to see how such vagueness can be accepted, if 'the city' is then going to be assigned a key role as either stimulus or impediment to economic development. 'We all know sufficiently what we mean by the label, in general terms': this seems to invite the projection into the past of our own assumptions about cities, built up from a mixture of experience and cultural baggage – including the long-standing association of cities with modernity.²⁴ Some sociologists have argued that theories of urbanism are examples of the 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness', in which symptoms of changes in society as a whole – increased division of labour, say, or the more impersonal, segmented social relationships associated with modernity – are ascribed to the city as an agent, rather than the city as the place where they tend to be most visible.²⁵ Certainly, if we cannot agree on a general, transhistorical definition of what constitutes a city, it is difficult to see how we can make use of broad generalisations about the effects of urbanism in studying cities in the ancient world.²⁶

Laws, models and types

The second aspect of any generalisation that needs to be considered and evaluated might be termed its 'strength' or its 'status'. What sort of knowledge does it claim to provide – a definitive statement about how the world works, an idea of how the world might work in ideal circumstances, or an observation of how the world often tends to work? This affects the usefulness of the theory – a 'strong' generalisation, if accepted, tells you how things *must* have been, rather than simply how they might have been – but also its plausibility. The stronger the claim, the more likely it is that the theory will have to account for evidence and examples that appear to be incompatible with its assertions.

The strongest form of generalisation may be termed a law: a statement of how particular phenomena will always behave. A number of writers in the nineteenth century sought the historical equivalent of Newtonian physics, a set of laws governing the behaviour of human beings that would have the same explanatory and predictive power for society as physics and chemistry had apparently provided for the natural world. Marxism, which developed within this tradition, retains something of this perspective in its search for the 'laws of motion' of capitalism: society is imagined as a complex machine, the inner workings of which may be exposed, revealing the inherent tendency of the modern social order to bring about its own downfall. It should be noted that, while Marx frequently refers to his search for the 'laws' that shaped human behaviour whether or not individuals were aware of them, he was equally interested in the ways that humans were able to alter the world around them, including the 'laws' that affected their behaviour. 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please'; this is not quite a contradiction, but certainly an inconsistency.²⁷ Few contemporary Marxists believe that the replacement of capitalism by communism is an inevitable historical process, or that these 'laws of motion' are really analogous to scientific laws.²⁸ Nevertheless, most attacks on Marxism focus on the idea that it claims to have identified the hidden determinants of human behaviour and the underlying principles of historical development: not only are these generalisations felt to be excessively broad and simplistic, they are deterministic (denying, or at least limiting, human choice and free will), teleological (ignoring the role of contingency and chance in history) and, of course, politically dubious.²⁹ Other attempts at formulating explicit historical and social laws may be criticised on the same grounds: for example, the theory of Oswald Spengler that civilisations are, like biological organisms, subject to predictable cycles of growth, maturity, decay and death, and hence, on the basis of the test case of the Roman Empire, our own civilisation has embarked on an inevitable decline.³⁰

The nineteenth-century positivistic conception of a 'law' as a definitive statement of how the real world actually works is in fact out of step with current thinking on the nature of scientific knowledge.³¹ Scientific theories are now seen not as absolute truths but as working hypotheses, which for the moment fit the evidence better than alternative theories but are always liable to being replaced (just as Newtonian physics was superseded by relativity; note that Newton's laws still work in most situations). Epistemologically, they have a

similar status to historical interpretations, although the evidence underpinning them is generally of higher quality, as scientists are able to gather experimental data under controlled conditions. However, this does not mean that historians no longer need concern themselves with the idea of absolute scientific or pseudo-scientific laws. In the first place, many scientists retain a positivistic outlook in their work, regardless of what the philosophers of science might say, and hence, for example, the hypothesis that the behaviour of individuals and groups is determined not by conscious thought but by the drive of the gene to reproduce itself may be presented as scientific fact rather than theory.³² The same is true of some social scientists, notably economists, despite their dismal record in actually predicting the future behaviour of the world economy. Second, historians are not always clear about the status of their generalisations, so that they may present a hypothesis as a universal law ('city air makes men free'; 'cities are electric transformers'), or simply assume the universal validity of their assumptions about 'human nature'.

In theory, such 'laws', explicit or implicit, should be easy to evaluate: they cannot ever be proved correct, however much supporting evidence is accumulated (though obviously that adds to their plausibility), but they can be proved wrong ('falsified') by a single contrary example.³³ This provides grounds for reducing their scope ('not valid for all societies') or qualifying their claims ('not valid in all circumstances') or rejecting them altogether. In practice, this is not so straightforward. The alleged law may be so vaguely formulated that it is impossible to falsify – in which case it is hardly likely to be very useful, or to have inspired a particularly productive analysis. It is often sufficient simply to highlight the assumptions underpinning an interpretation to force a re-evaluation (for example, pointing out, as discussed above, that Finley and other urban theorists simply assume that there is a universal social object called a 'city' that always acts in some way on the society around it).

Not all theories are so vulnerable to criticism: given certain basic assumptions, they are internally consistent and impossible to falsify. Historical evidence is not made up of pre-existing, objective facts; it is produced through a process of interpretation, and so it can always be reinterpreted in line with a particular theory – or simply explained away. More than one internally coherent theory may therefore fit the known 'facts' (a situation known as underdetermination). This is even more of a problem when direct evidence does

not exist. When examining questions of cause and effect, we cannot run controlled experiments to isolate determining factors from incidentals; historical causation always remains a matter of debate. We can study patterns of human behaviour, but we cannot directly study what motivates that behaviour, or determine whether it is due to inherited instincts, repressed desires or conscious rationality. In practice, most historians instinctively reject monocausal and reductive laws of history because they find them simplistic and unconvincing, rather than because they have been proved definitively wrong. A good interpretation should be able to account for as much of the existing evidence as possible without having to explain away too much, and it should be compatible with the rest of our knowledge of the world – or produce convincing arguments to persuade us to abandon the assumptions about free will and determinism that lead us to reject the idea of grand historical and social laws.

Most of the theories that have been adopted by historians make less grandiose claims and take a more sophisticated approach to understanding human behaviour. Rather than offering absolute laws, they generate claims to the effect that X is true in particular circumstances and therefore may be true, or at least may be a significant factor, in similar situations. At a basic level, this may simply involve the use of comparative evidence from other historical periods; thus one might draw on a study of the impact of London on the economy of sixteenth-century England as a source of ideas for considering the impact of ancient Rome on the rest of Italy, on the basis that they were both large 'metropolitan' cities in pre-industrial economies, which needed to draw supplies from a large area.³⁴ The most useful theories, however, are less closely tied to specific historical situations and hence, potentially, more widely applicable. They acknowledge that reality is complex, and that historical and social processes have multiple inter-related causes, but they argue that it is possible to identify underlying regularities, and to distinguish between more and less important causative factors, by making use of simplified, abstract approximations of reality: models.

In social scientific terms, a model is 'an intellectual construct which simplifies reality in order to emphasise the recurrent, the constant and the typical.'³⁵ An alternative characterisation is as:

a simplified structuring of reality which presents supposedly significant relationships in a generalized form. Models are highly subjective approximations in that they do not include all

associated observations or measurements, but as such they are valuable in obscuring incidental detail and in allowing fundamental aspects of reality to appear. This selectivity means that models have varying degrees of probability and a limited range of conditions over which they apply.³⁶

In other words, whereas historians tend to criticise theories and laws for excessive simplification of a complex historical reality, here the simplification is deliberate, an essential step in the intellectual process. This can be illustrated by looking at three different ways in which models may be employed to develop our understanding of human society.

First, an artificially simplified model of reality may be constructed as a means of identifying and exploring causal relationships. This is, in a sense, a kind of thought experiment analogous to a scientific experiment, in so far as it aims to reduce the number of variables involved in a process to highlight how particular factors interact. The most obvious examples of this approach are economic theories. Many of these are derived not from empirical data about the functioning of markets but from abstract models of markets, often mathematical, in which it is assumed that all participants are economically rational (that is, they will always seek to maximise utility) and have perfect, costless information about costs, prices, and so forth. These are assumptions that never hold true in reality; but, by excluding motivation and knowledge as variables, economists are able to study the interaction of the other variables (supply and demand, interest rates, returns on investment, and so forth). This produces general statements about economic processes that hold true in particular circumstances, namely the artificially simplified world of the model.

A classic example of this intellectual technique is the 'Isolated State' model developed by J.H. von Thünen in the early nineteenth century as a means of investigating the effects of changing production costs on agricultural practices:

Imagine a very large town, at the centre of a fertile plain which is crossed by no navigable river or canal. Throughout the plain the soil is capable of cultivation and of the same fertility. Far from the town, the plain turns into an uncultivated wilderness which cuts off all communication between this state and the outside world . . . The problem we want to solve is this: What

pattern of cultivation will take shape in these conditions?; and how will the farming system of the different districts be affected by their distance from the town. We assume throughout that farming is conducted absolutely rationally.³⁷

Different crops, von Thünen argues, have different rent-distance functions; that is, the economic rent (net value of returns on production) they yield alters with distance from the central market, as the cost of land decreases and the cost of transport increases. At a given distance from the city, therefore, it is economically rational to grow one crop rather than another. The result is a pattern, now familiar from elementary geography, of concentric zones of production around the urban centre, each one featuring a different crop type and a different degree of intensity of cultivation.

In devising this model, von Thünen drew on experience and empirical evidence, but its assumptions about uniform fertility, uniform transport costs, complete isolation and perfect economic rationality are clearly unrealistic. The point is that, having identified the way that rent-distance functions operate in idealised conditions, we can then compare this with the empirical evidence for production strategies in a given region. For example, it offers a plausible explanation for the fact that Kent in the sixteenth century became a centre of market gardening supplying the London market. We can then investigate land-use patterns in the *suburbium* around ancient Rome, not just with the idea that they might resemble the situation around early modern London but with a proper understanding of the economic principles that chiefly determined what happened around London. If the predictions of the theory are completely at odds with the empirical evidence, we need to rethink the model; either it is logically flawed, or its assumptions are simply too unrealistic. We do not expect that reality *ought* to conform to the model (although admittedly some economists do seem to proceed on this basis in developing policy proposals). Indeed, divergences from the model may be interesting in themselves, revealing something of the range of different factors that might influence decisions about land use – as seen in the Roman *suburbium*, which is revealed as the site of fierce competition for land and water between agricultural producers, the wealthy elite seeking to construct luxury villas and parks, and the demands of the city for somewhere to bury its dead.

In a way, this sort of model offers another form of comparative evidence, a comparison not between different historical periods but

between reality and a simplified intellectual construct of reality. As with historical comparisons, we need to consider whether the comparison is appropriate; whether the differences between the two situations (in this case, the wholly unrealistic assumptions of the model) are likely to be less significant than the logical consistency and (arguably) universal validity of the economic principle. There is then a further move involved in extending a model developed to understand modern economic practices to an earlier historical period; for example, von Thünen assumes that agriculture is market oriented, so we would not expect his theory to apply to a society based on subsistence-oriented peasant smallholdings. Of course, if we then find the same patterns of land use around an urban centre in such a society, this raises questions about the assumption that peasant agriculture is not influenced by the demands of the market. The basic question is whether the economic principles identified in the controlled circumstances of the model offer a plausible explanation of behaviour observed in the real world.

As has already been discussed, it is a common criticism of the application of modern economic theory to ancient history that it simply assumes the existence of a form of behaviour ('economic rationality') found only occasionally in the modern West – and, apparently, found mainly among economists rather than the population as a whole. In fact this is a problem not of the economic theory, which could scarcely have been developed without making use of simplifying assumptions of this kind, but of the way in which the theory is then applied to actual situations. It is problematic to assume that economic rationality is a universal human trait and thus that economic theory *must* always apply; economics does not produce laws of human behaviour but theories of how factors interact in an idealised situation which resembles (arguably) but does not conform to reality. It is equally problematic to assume that, because an economic principle was developed on the basis of an idealised model, it can never have any validity for the ancient world. Of course, we may reject the theory because the model's assumptions are, according to our own assumptions, completely untenable; thus Marxism criticises conventional economics on the grounds that it describes human behaviour under capitalism rather than human behaviour in general. We may criticise the internal logic and consistency of the model or reject it because it offers a less persuasive or less useful interpretation of the evidence than another approach. However, to reject it for making simplifying assumptions as a means of identifying underlying principles misses the point.

The second approach to model building is to use empirical evidence to produce an idealised construct of an institution or a process, identifying essential attributes, regularities and recurrent features. Such general concepts as 'pre-industrial', 'family', 'state' and 'city' are models of this type, derived from a range of actual cases that clearly differ from one another but are felt to have enough in common to support the notion that they are examples of a more general type. Such models may be 'monothetic', identifying the essential feature(s) which all examples of the type must possess (as, for example, most definitions would agree that a 'city' has to have a large population – relative to its historical context – concentrated in a relatively small area), or 'polythetic', identifying a range of features of which examples of the type will possess most but not necessarily all (thus a 'city' may be a religious centre, a political, economic or cultural centre, but not necessarily all of them together, while a religious centre such as a monastery or a shrine is not necessarily a city).

Historians make use of such general concepts all the time, without necessarily being clear about their logical status. They debate regularly about whether a particular case should be classified as an example of a particular concept: was republican Rome 'democratic'; was the Delian League an 'empire'? This is because such concepts are not simply a convenient means of classification, of simplifying reality, though of course they serve that purpose well. Rather, membership of the group is taken to carry implications about the nature of the particular case, how it relates to wider society and how it should be studied. Thus, as we have seen, it has often been assumed that something identified as a 'city' will have a positive effect on economic development. Studying the Delian League as an 'empire', comparable with other empires, raises all sorts of interesting research questions and opens up the possibility of drawing on ideas from other periods and disciplines. However, it is important to be conscious of the status of the argument; the Delian League is not intrinsically an empire, and therefore it is not bound by any supposed 'laws' of empire. Rather, it may be *thought of* as an empire; it resembles an abstract model of 'empire' in some respects, and therefore it may resemble it in others. On the other hand, there may be grounds for arguing that its differences from other empires are more significant than its resemblances, in which case we would not expect to learn anything from the comparison. What matters is whether or not the model offers a more persuasive interpretation of

the evidence than alternative approaches. Certainly we need to be conscious of the fact that we are dealing with intellectual constructs, ways of thinking, not real objects, and we need to be wary of the baggage of unconscious assumptions that such general concepts as 'empire' and 'city' tend to bring with them.

Finley's 'consumer city' is a particular sort of model, an 'ideal type', following the approach developed by the German sociologist Max Weber:

An ideal type is achieved by the one-sided *accentuation* of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent *individual* phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified mental construct. In its conceptual purity, this mental construct can never be found empirically in reality. It is a *utopia*. *Historical* research faces the task of determining in each *individual* case, the extent to which this ideal-construct approximates to or diverges from reality.³⁸

The important point about Weberian ideal types is that they do not usually occur singly; rather, one type is defined in contrast to other types, as the 'consumer city' is distinguished from the 'producer city'. The model is intended to highlight what ancient cities have in common that distinguishes them from medieval cities, and hence it gives them a different role in relation to economic development.

In theory, the relationship between model and evidence is always two way. 'It is in the nature of models that they are subject to constant adjustment, correction, modification or outright replacement.'³⁹ The ideal type is based on historical evidence; it then offers a way of interpreting the evidence; in turn, the evidence should be used to produce a more refined model that better matches reality. In practice, because the evidence is always open to interpretation, the model tends to become fixed, the point around which the arguments revolve. Certainly this became the case with the 'consumer city' hypothesis. It is fair to say that, on the whole, ancient cities resemble the 'consumer' ideal type more than they do the 'producer'; that is not to say that this is the only or even the best way of characterising Greek or Roman cities, let alone that we have to accept the assumption of Finley and Weber that 'consumer' cities always have a negative influence on economic development. However, the argument among ancient historians tended to get stuck at the earlier stage of whether or not the ancient city really was a consumer.

This was really the wrong argument to pursue, and this wrong turn explains why so many historians now feel that the debate about the nature of the ancient city has reached a dead end.⁴⁰ The 'consumer city' model proved more or less impossible to pin down and refute, for a number of reasons. We have no direct evidence about the economic relationship between town and countryside, and the evidence we do have for town-country exchange, urban manufacturing, and so forth can be interpreted in such a way as to fit either the consumer or the non-consumer model. The ideal type is polythetic, based on several different attributes rather than a single defining feature, so that it cannot be disproved by demonstrating that one of these attributes does not hold true in a particular case; showing that the city could be a centre of trade and industry, as many historians attempted to do, does nothing to lessen the contrast with the medieval city in political and social terms and so does not disprove the model. Finally, the notion of the 'typical' ancient city becomes problematic if this means that too much contrary evidence can be explained away as coming from 'non-typical' cities – which at times seems to include any city about which we actually know anything.

The model of a 'consumer city' and indeed the whole analysis I have attempted of the ancient economy would not be in the least affected or impaired by the discovery of a few more textile workshops in Pompeii or a few more members of the senatorial aristocracy who actively engaged in commerce and manufacture. There can be no dispute over the existence of exceptional men, even of exceptional cities. No historical or sociological model pretends to incorporate all known or possible instances. In the absence of meaningful quantitative data, the best that one can do is judge whether or not a model, a set of concepts, explains the available data more satisfactorily than a competing model.⁴¹

Ideal types can seem frustratingly elusive if one forgets – as Finley did not – that they are simply models; they cannot be proved or disproved but simply judged more or less persuasive and productive. The proper question is not whether the typical ancient city was a consumer but whether thinking about ancient cities in terms of the consumer city model and its implications tells us anything useful. Models are tools, not ends in themselves; if they fail to account for the evidence persuasively, if they seem to rest on dubious

assumptions, or, most importantly, if they fail to suggest interesting new ways of thinking about the past, then they need to be replaced.

The same can be said of the third form of model building, that of constructing abstract models of structures and processes within a given society. The aim here is not to generalise for the purposes of comparison with other societies, but to provide a template for understanding complex social and economic processes. Much as a map of the London Underground does not attempt to provide an accurate representation of what is actually on the ground but aims to show, as clearly as possible, the relationships between different stations, so the model offers a deliberately abstract and schematic representation of the relationships between different factors. 'It is meant, rather like a passport photo or a menu, only as a guide to a complex reality, not as a replacement for it.'⁴² Two of the most striking examples of such model building in the field of ancient history can be found in the work of Keith Hopkins: the 'taxes and trade' model, covering the economic impact of Roman imperialism, and the model in his book *Conquerors and Slaves* of the impact of Roman conquests on the economy and society of Italy.⁴³

Both models aim at highlighting processes that had far-reaching effects on the economy and society of the Roman Empire but of which the Romans were almost completely unaware; hindsight, and more sophisticated analytical tools, give us an enormous advantage in understanding. The models are constructed in the same manner, incorporating three different layers of argument. At the bottom is the ancient evidence. Hopkins emphasises deduction rather than induction as his intellectual approach; he begins with general concepts and uses these to interpret the evidence, rather than expecting the evidence to 'speak' to him. Moreover, he is candid about its limitations, and the limitations of conventional historiography:

It is not possible to prove this assertion by the traditional method of selective quotation from classical sources . . . My assertion is compatible with such passages in the sources, but cannot be validated by them. Instead, I have tried to consider both the probability and the consequences of the assertion being wrong, and then to ask: What alternative assertion is more likely to be true?⁴⁴

However, the evidence remains important in two respects: it can illustrate, if not prove, his more general hypotheses (for example,

taking a graph of shipwrecks in the Mediterranean as an indication of an increase in the volume of trade under the Roman Empire) and it serves to test them, as his theory's claim to truth is based on its being able to account for the evidence better than any alternative theory.

The second level of each model is a series of propositions, most of which are admitted to be unprovable: 'It is difficult to prove that each proposition is right . . . the generalisations advanced are disproportionately large in relation to the surrounding evidence.'⁴⁵ Some are presented on the basis of their logical consistency and economy, others on the basis that they reflect known economic principles (for example, the relation between money supply and prices). Most strikingly, they are presented as backing one another up in what he characterises as the wigwam argument: 'each pole would fall down by itself, but together the poles stand up, by leaning on each other; they point roughly in the same direction, and circumscribe truth.'⁴⁶ That is to say, a series of plausible but unprovable hypotheses, when taken together, amount to a more persuasive argument. This is the third level of the model, the overall conception or schema, which shows how the various factors are inter-related, revealing how the levying of taxes in conquered provinces led to an increase in economic activity through the Empire, and how the rewards and costs of Rome's military adventures brought about the dispossession of the Italian peasantry and the growth of the city of Rome. The models seek to do justice to the complexity of historical change: it is not presented as a simple process of cause and effect but as a series of mutually influencing factors and feedback loops, which in the case of *Conquerors and Slaves* are presented in the unusual (for ancient history, at least) form of a flow diagram.

Like other models, Hopkins's theories offer templates for thinking about the ancient world, overarching frameworks that suggest new ways of interpreting the evidence and new lines of enquiry. They differ from other such interpretative constructs in the explicitness with which he develops his arguments and signposts his guiding assumptions and intellectual strategies; in evaluating other models, we are made to do more of the work ourselves. Hopkins argues that, given the limitations of the ancient evidence, all historians can ever do is produce competing fictions about the past and try to judge their plausibility; he is simply more open about the logical status of his arguments and the basis on which he judges the plausibility of interpretations (namely, compatibility with what economics and

sociology tell us about the workings of human society). Most of the criticism of his models has focused at level of evidence, arguing, for example, that Roman taxes were often collected in kind rather than cash as the model assumes, thus implicitly rejecting both his methodology and his overall aims, since no attempt is made at offering an alternative model of the internal mechanisms of the Empire. It remains in part a matter of taste: what sort of knowledge do we want of the past, a grand explanatory framework or isolated pieces of information? If we wish to understand the complex ways in which different parts of ancient society interacted, Hopkins's work suggests that carefully formulated abstract models are indispensable.

Vocabulary

Hopkins's substantive theories about the workings of the Roman Empire have been extensively debated, but his model-building approach has not been widely imitated. In part this must reflect the usual suspicion of generalisations that try to explain too much, especially when presented with such a cavalier attitude towards the ancient evidence; this is not the sort of knowledge of antiquity that most historians desire. But it is also the case that Hopkins's articles *appear* off-putting and alien: he not only makes a case for abandoning many of the traditional practices of historiography but enacts it through the form in which he presents his arguments, deploying explicit propositional statements, technical social-scientific terminology, economic formulae and flow diagrams. This is not how ancient history is traditionally written.

The use of technical vocabulary – commonly disparaged as 'jargon' – is an important feature of many theoretical approaches to history; it is certainly the most immediately obvious, and indeed one might suspect that many works are identified as 'theoretical' on the basis not so much of their methodology or aims as of their rhetoric, in contrast to conventional history's reliance on 'everyday' language. Technical language – it is only 'jargon' when someone else uses it – has a number of functions. It aims at achieving a greater degree of precision in describing complex and unfamiliar objects and processes – particularly if, as is often the case, a term has no equivalent in 'everyday' language. It emphasises the possibility of making cross-cultural comparisons, highlighting the resemblance of a particular instance to a more general model, whereas describing

objects in terms specific to a particular historical society implies that they are not comparable to anything else. Third, it operates as a form of shorthand, an aid to communication; the term 'consumer city' can be deployed in a historical argument without necessarily requiring further elaboration, on the basis that other historians will be familiar with the term and arguments and assumptions that lie behind it.

However, the use of technical language does raise two issues of concern for the majority of ancient historians. First, there is the question of anachronism, of whether describing antiquity in terms developed to understand the modern world is inevitably misleading because it distorts the evidence, ignoring the particularity of the past and suppressing key differences between past and present. As one proponent of this argument put it, 'I have not contaminated the presentation of the evidence from the Roman empire with conceptions drawn from wider sociological studies.'⁴⁷ Taken to its logical conclusion, this implies that the only appropriate way of describing antiquity is in ancient terms, since all of our modern words have anachronistic connotations. In practice, of course, historians are happy to use a word such as 'city', although it has rather different overtones and associations from such ancient terms as *polis*, *astu*, *municipium* and *urbs*; indeed, it is only by 'translating' ancient concepts into our anachronistic vocabulary that we can develop any sort of understanding of the past. Of course modern terms may be misleading, but there is no logical reason why social-scientific terminology should be *more* misleading than everyday language; indeed, it can be argued that it is less likely to mislead, because it is more obvious that it carries modern overtones (whereas one might pass over a phrase such as 'the Roman middle class' without registering the possible anachronism) and because those who deploy such terminology are generally more explicit and self-conscious about their choice of language.

We do not have the option of a neutral, transparent, 'normal' language; we simply have to choose from a range of possible vocabularies, some more precise and technical than others but all equally time-bound and laden with anachronistic baggage. The past can always be redescribed in different ways; it is a question of what vocabulary is felt to be appropriate for describing a particular aspect of the past, and that may be determined by our assumptions about what the past was like.

The materials and means of labour, a proportion of which consists of the products of previous work, play their part in every labour process in every age and in all circumstances. If, therefore, I label them 'capital' in the confident knowledge that 'semper aliquid haeret' ['something always sticks'], then I have proved that the existence of capital is an eternal law of nature of human production and that the Xinghiz who cuts down rushes with a knife he has stolen from a Russian so as to weave them together to make a canoe is just as true a capitalist as Herr von Rothschild. I could prove with equal facility that the Greeks and Romans celebrated communion because they drank wine and ate bread.⁴⁸

Marx would concede that this behaviour *could* be described as capitalist; his point is that this is not a neutral description but a concealed argument, positing the universality of values and motives associated with the modern West. According to his view of pre-modern economies, there is a more appropriate vocabulary for analysing such situations; for someone of opposing views, of course, it is the Marxist vocabulary of 'modes of production' and the like that will seem anachronistic and misleading. This is rightly a matter of debate (albeit a debate that is never likely to be resolved); what is not acceptable is the idea that there is a problem with only certain sorts of language, that if one simply avoids terminology derived from the social sciences there is no need to consider the effects or implications of one's choice of words.

The second area of concern about social-scientific terminology is that, at the same time as it eases communication among those who share the same assumptions and theoretical background, it renders the account less accessible to anyone else. There is some truth in this suggestion, just as the use of words such as *polis* or *equites* in ancient history exclude non-specialists. In either case, these are felt to be the most useful and appropriate words for describing the past; the reader is expected to make a certain amount of effort to get to grips with the technical vocabulary, rather than the historian having to spell everything out. There is always a need to balance precision and accessibility in any area of ancient history. It is not generally true, whatever traditionalists might feel, that technical language is used deliberately to exclude everyone who is not part of the group of theoretical initiates; but social-scientific vocabulary certainly can be

deployed rhetorically to establish the historian as a particular kind of authority, offering a particular sort of account of the past.⁴⁹

A more serious problem in communication may arise when a term is not immediately identifiable as a technical one, because it also has a meaning in 'ordinary' language. Some common theoretical concepts were originally adopted from everyday speech and acquired a more specialised meaning from their use in theoretical discussions: class, capitalism, labour, society.⁵⁰ Others were originally devised in the context of a particular theory, with very specific technical meanings, but have been absorbed into the wider vernacular in a watered-down and occasionally garbled form: this is the case, for example, with much of the vocabulary of Freudian psychoanalysis, such as 'repression'. Words constantly change their meanings over time, especially 'key' words, which play a central place in particular debates, and they constantly acquire wider connotations and associations.

Present-day overtones of the word 'consumer' should not be allowed to intrude and mislead. No one is suggesting that the urban lower classes were a host of beggars and pensioners, though it has become a favourite scholarly pastime to 'disprove' that contention for the city of Rome ... The issue implicit in the notion of the 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.⁵¹

On the one hand, the label 'consumer city' gives a neat indication of the essence of the model, whereas an original term with no particular associations – the 'Type A city', perhaps, or the *esthiopolis* – might be rather less effective or memorable. On the other hand, some of the other associations of the word 'consumer' create the possibility of confusion, making the model appear to claim things that are in fact not part of its argument, such as the notion (familiar from Juvenal's line about bread and circuses) that all ancient city dwellers were idle parasites.

Often, the major contribution of a theory, and the reason why it is felt to be a productive way of studying some aspect of society, is the creation of a new vocabulary and hence a new way of thinking about the world. Naming something that has not previously been named does in a sense bring it into existence. For example, in retrospect 'patriarchy' (male subordination of women) is seen to have been the dominant form of social organisation in Europe and the rest of the world for millennia; but only when it was named as such, rather than simply assumed to be the natural order of society, could it be properly analysed and criticised. Sometimes this intellectual development involves strange and unfamiliar words; sometimes it involves the reinterpretation and appropriation of existing words, which can be equally disconcerting. In any case, historians need to be fully conscious and critical of their own and others' use of language. Words can mislead readers, if not writers, through unintended associations and overtones. They can also reveal a historian's theoretical assumptions (thus 'class', 'alienation' and 'mode of production' tend to indicate Marxism, whereas 'marginal utility' and 'diminishing returns' point to neoclassical economics), while an essential strategy in evaluating any historical interpretation is to identify the key terms, the concepts that are being made to do a lot of work in the argument.

Conclusion

The first step in evaluating a theoretical approach to history is to realise that it is there; some historians make their assumptions and methodology explicit, but in many cases key generalisations are left hidden, perhaps even from the historians themselves. Most historical accounts focus on the interpretation of individual pieces of evidence, rather than on the wider framework of ideas that govern their interpretations; when evaluating them, we need to consider both. A good theory needs to be internally coherent and economical to fit with the evidence – and to fit with what else we know about the world, including principles and models derived from the social sciences.

For example, Finley's consumer city model has been attacked on the grounds that cities such as Pompeii show evidence of significant trade and industry and hence should not be characterised as mere 'consumers'; that the model takes the value-laden statements of members of the elite about proper economic behaviour at face value,

and assumes that they apply to the whole of ancient society rather than just to the elite; that it ignores significant differences between Greek and Roman cities, and works less well for the Roman period; that it offers a reasonable description of the ancient city but that the implications of this for ancient economic development are quite different from what Finley assumes; and finally, that Finley's overall view of the ancient economy is discredited by its association with the anti-Western ideas of the Khmer Rouge and the Sendero Luminoso. With the exception of the last, these are all valid arguments, operating at different levels – and there are responses to each of them. Neither the ancient evidence nor modern social-scientific principles are ultimately decisive. In the end, it is a matter of choosing between plausible interpretations on the basis of our own assumptions.

The final test of any theory is not just whether it is persuasive but whether it is productive, offering new ways of thinking about the ancient world. Most historical theories end up being abandoned not because they have been proved wrong but simply because they have ceased to raise interesting questions or suggest new lines of research – a fate that now seems likely to overtake the 'consumer city' model. Of course, it can also be productive to return to an old theory with a new perspective – which is precisely what Finley did, rereading the works of Weber and others on the ancient city – while some venerable theories continue to stimulate at least some historians. The aim of the rest of this book is to introduce a range of theories that have led ancient historians to view the past in a different light. Part of the argument of this chapter has been that some sort of theory, however vague and unsystematic, is indispensable; as Finley put it, 'without one . . . there can be no explanation; there can only be reportage and crude taxonomy, antiquarianism in its narrowest sense'.⁵² The positive argument is that, while 'theory' can be disconcerting, frustrating and even aggravating, it can also be inspiring.