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## MIKHAIL ROSTOVTZEFF AND THE MODERNIZATION OF ANTIQUITY

When political economy emerged as an independent field of study in the second half of the nineteenth century, it considered economic development in the then dominant notions of stadial progress. Thus Karl Bücher argued in *The Rise of the National Economy*<sup>1</sup> that antiquity had not progressed beyond the primitive economic order of an isolated household (οἶκος) as described by Karl Rodbertus. This did not imply market relations, competition, the turnover of commodities in any substantial volume, commercial capital, product specialization in different regions, and other attributes of a national economy which, according to Bücher, arose only in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

German ancient historians began to master socio-economic problems at precisely the time when there emerged a desire among them – as a reaction against the former idealization of Greece and Rome – “to dismount the ancients from the fantastic cothurns” (Theodor Mommsen in 1854) and give them a footing in reality through the liberal introduction of modern concepts into the historical narrative.<sup>2</sup> It was Mommsen who had capitalists densely populating his *Roman History* (1854–1856), a work of formative importance for several generations of ancient historians. The opposite reaction to classicism can be observed in *La Cité antique* by Fustel de Coulanges, who lamented that we habitually see ourselves in the Greeks and Romans, thus breeding many a misconception:

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<sup>1</sup> Bücher 1893.

<sup>2</sup> “Es gilt doch vor allem, die Alten herabsteigen zu machen von dem phantastischen Kothurn, auf dem sie der Masse des Publikums erscheinen, sie in die reale Welt, wo gehasst und geliebt, gesägt und gezimmert, phantasiert und geschwindelt wird, den Lesern zu versetzen – und darum musste der Consul ein Bürgermeister werden” (Mommsen’s letter to W. Henzen, quoted after Christ 1983, 45). In his day, Mommsen’s approach in *The Roman History* seemed rather provocative not to mention radical. See Meier 2006, 447.

To understand the truth about the Greeks and Romans it is wise to study them without thinking of ourselves, as if they were entirely foreign to us.... Thus observed, Greece and Rome appear to us in a character absolutely inimitable; nothing in modern times resembles them; nothing in the future can resemble them.<sup>3</sup>

The end of the nineteenth century saw a further consolidation of Mommsen's stand at a time when *Altertumswissenschaft* was ceding its previous dominance in education under the onslaught of modernity. Seeing this, the best German historians of antiquity – Mommsen, Julius Beloch, Eduard Meyer, Robert Pöhlmann, Ulrich Wilcken – strove to demonstrate the enduring relevance of ancient history, among other reasons because of the similarity it bears to modernity.<sup>4</sup> Meyer went the furthest afield. In his well-known talk “Economic Development of the Ancient World”, delivered two years after the publication of Bücher's book, he opposed the notion of stadial economic development, from the primitive beginnings all the way to industrial capitalism, with his theory of two parallel cycles of world history, thus inaugurating a lengthy discussion.<sup>5</sup> The first cycle ran from the time of Homer (of which European feudalism was the closest counterpart) through to the development of trade and marine transport, through technological advances to the monetary economy, factories operated by slave labor and the commercial capital of Hellenism and the Early Empire, then taking a downward curve toward the end of the ancient civilization. The second cycle, from the Migration Period to modern times, largely retraced the steps of the first cycle.

Other scholars, without going this far, followed Mommsen to discern in antiquity a multitude of capitalistic elements – even though the very notion of “capitalism” had not yet been clearly defined, nor in fact has it been defined to this day.<sup>6</sup> By 1918 Richard Passow had already counted 111 meanings of the notion “capitalism” and stated that “dem Begriff genau bestimmte Vorstellungen überhaupt nicht zugrunde liegen”.<sup>7</sup> To my

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<sup>3</sup> Fustel de Coulanges 1864, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Schneider 1990, 425–428. See especially Pöhlmann 1893–1901. In his editor's preface to the Russian translation of Pöhlmann, Rostovtzeff noted: “Exploring the social life and social ideas of the ancient world from a modern viewpoint and on thorough acquaintance with contemporary social literature, the author could not help modernizing antiquity in a way, doing violence to its bearings, stereotyping the processes by which it developed” (III).

<sup>5</sup> Meyer 1895. See Schneider 1990.

<sup>6</sup> The author of a paradigmatic article on this term summarizes thus: “Als wissenschaftlicher Terminus hat sich ‘Kapitalismus’ trotz der definitorischen Bemühungen von zahlreichen Autoren bis heute nicht durchgesetzt” (Hilger 1982, 448).

<sup>7</sup> Passow 1918.

surprise, Marx never used it in his published works, opting each time for the “capitalist mode of production”. Fundamental historico-sociological studies by Werner Sombart (*Modern Capitalism*) and Max Weber (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*) only came about in the early twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> For our purposes it is worth stressing that not only ancient historians but many economists and sociologists of that time, among them Max Weber and Lujo Brentano, admitted to the existence in ancient times of certain types of capitalism.<sup>9</sup> Even Sombart, a very independent thinker in this regard, gave his book such a title so as to imply that it dealt with just one variety of capitalism.

Rostovtzeff’s formative years as a scholar were in the last decade of the nineteenth century and it is no wonder that he sided, though not unreservedly, with advanced German scholarship, i.e. with those who in their own lifetime had been called “modernists” or “modernizers”. His article of 1900, “Capitalism and National Economy in Antiquity”,<sup>10</sup> already mentions the theory of two cycles. Many of the ideas voiced in this article were later developed to become part of his fundamental work on the social and economic history of the Hellenistic world and the Roman Empire. “I must protest, following most historians”, wrote Rostovtzeff, “against the application of these schemes [i.e. Bücher’s periodization] to the whole history of mankind and mainly against enlisting all antiquity in the category of self-sufficient household”.<sup>11</sup> Many facts of life in antiquity can only be explained through analogy with modernity, since the development of ancient civilization took place largely along the same lines. Having published this article in a popular liberal journal *Russkaja Mysl’*, the young historian explained to a progressive public the latest results of modern scholarship, with which he was in step, later joining its vanguard.

At that time most Russian historians of antiquity shared similar views to those of Rostovtzev. While ten years his senior, I. M. Grevs was still guided by Bücher and Fustel de Coulanges,<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See Sombart 1902 and Weber 1904–1905.

<sup>9</sup> Brentano 1916. On Weber, see below p. 123. See also a book criticizing Ed. Meyer: Salvioli 1906.

<sup>10</sup> Rostovtzev 1900 [М. И. Ростовцев, “Капитализм и народное хозяйство в древнем мире”, *Русская мысль*].

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>12</sup> Grevs 1899 [И. М. Греве, *Очерки из истории римского землевладения*]. For Rostovtzev’s critique of Grevs’ theoretical positions, see Alipov 2010 [Р. А. Алипов, *М. И. Ростовцев – историк древнего Рима: доэмигрантский этап научного творчества*], 168–173.

F. G. Mischenko,<sup>13</sup> who was older than Grevs, as well as Grevs' peers – namely Th. Zielinski, V. P. Buzeskul and R. Ju. Vipper – supported the views of Meyer albeit to varying degrees.<sup>14</sup> M. M. Khvostov,<sup>15</sup> a peer of Rostovtzeff, and those historians of the next generation who took an interest in economic history – namely V. S. Sergeev and S. I. Kovalev – were their active proponents, these last two in the aftermath of the revolution.<sup>16</sup> The First World War delivered a devastating blow to the doctrine of progress and the historical theories based on it;<sup>17</sup> cyclic conceptions became attractive to many, including Marxists and those who wished to pass for Marxists. In Kovalev's *General History Course* there is much more modernization of antiquity than in Rostovtzev; he even explained the Doric and Ionian orders through the predominance of feudal and capitalist elements. Until the late 1920s in the Russian historiography of antiquity, only A. I. Tiumenev, a Marxist of old pre-revolutionary stock, vigorously opposed the notion of capitalism in antiquity, distancing himself from both Bücher and Meyer.<sup>18</sup> Yet he acknowledged the importance of commercial and usury capital as well as slave industry for the market, and he estimated that the economic development of ancient Greece was on a par with that of Renaissance Europe. The familiar doctrine of socio-economic formations – slaveholding, feudal, capitalist etc. – was only developed in 1933–1934 in the State Academy for the History of Material Culture. Its

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<sup>13</sup> Mischenko 1899 [Ф. Мищенко, “Эд. Мейер. Рабство в древнем мире”]. “It is however desirable to find in such overviews, for the sake of avoiding the ‘update’ (*ponovleniye*) of antiquity, a more balanced approach making manifest not only the similarities, but also the differences between the analogous phenomena of different historical periods” (102). Mischenko, much like Rostovtzeff (see above n. 4), saw a certain bias in the “update” – modernization.

<sup>14</sup> Zielinski 1896 [Ф. Ф. Зелинский, *Филологическое обозрение*]. See also Zielinski 1900 [Ф. Ф. Зелинский, “Из экономической жизни древнего Рима”, *Вестник Европы*]; Buzeskul 1915 [В. П. Бузескул, *Лекции по истории Греции. I. Введение в историю Греции*], 574; and Vipper 1916 [Р. Ю. Виппер, *История Греции в классическую эпоху IX–IV вв. до Р. Х.*].

<sup>15</sup> See Khvostov 1900 [М. М. Хвостов, “Изучение экономического быта древности (две полемики)”]; Khvostov 1917 [М. М. Хвостов, *История Греции*], 41–43.

<sup>16</sup> See Kovalev 1923–1925 [С. И. Ковалев, *Курс всеобщей истории*]; Sergeev 1925 [В. С. Сергеев, *История древнего Рима*]; Sergeev 1926 [В. С. Сергеев, *Феодализм и торговый капитализм в античном мире*].

<sup>17</sup> See for example Vipper 1921 [Р. Ю. Виппер, *Кризис исторической науки*], 34–37.

<sup>18</sup> See Tiumenev 1920–1922 [А. И. Тюменев, *Очерки экономической и социальной истории древней Греции*] and Tiumenev 1923 [А. И. Тюменев, *Существовали ли капитализм в древней Греции?*]. On Tiumenev, see Krikh 2013 [С. Б. Крих, *Образ древности в советской историографии*], 74 f.

forced implementation made many Soviet historians of antiquity, Sergeyeu and Kovalev included, abandon their previous views of the historical process.<sup>19</sup> Although S. Ia. Luria – who was in Rostovtzeff’s seminar and held Ed. Meyer in high esteem – continued throughout the 1930s to write about the struggle in Greek mathematics between the progressive Ionian bourgeoisie and the reactionary Pythagorean feudal lords,<sup>20</sup> in his *History of Greece* (1940) he could no longer indulge in such things. Modernism in Russian scholarship was stifled by Stalinism, from which Rostovtzeff was lucky to escape.

Arnaldo Momigliano, in a famous essay on Rostovtzeff, wrote that “it would be wrong to assume that he had reached intellectual maturity before leaving Russia [at the age of 48! – *L. Zh.*]... It is safe to assume that the exile made Rostovtzeff the great man he was”.<sup>21</sup> One can hardly agree with this. The students of Rostovtzeff’s legacy from different countries have in the last decades provided more than sufficient evidence to the contrary.<sup>22</sup> The published materials reveal that Ed. Meyer and U. von Wilamowitz were personally acquainted with Rostovtzeff long before the spring of 1914 when they recommended him as a corresponding member of the Prussian Academy of Sciences.<sup>23</sup> They held in high esteem his numerous books and articles on the economic history of Hellenism and the Roman Empire published in German.<sup>24</sup> Considering his Russian colleague’s desire for an “all-encompassing take on antiquity”, Ed. Meyer invited him in 1913 to write an overview of the economic history of Hellenism and the Roman Empire for *A Universal History of Economy*.<sup>25</sup> The war thwarted this enterprise, but Rostovtzeff’s lecture courses from 1912 to 1915, preserved in the archives, allow us to conclude that the backbone

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<sup>19</sup> See Krikh–Metel’ 2014 [С. Б. Крих, О. В. Метель, *Советская историография древности в контексте мировой историографической мысли*], 91–92, where Sergeyeu and Kovalev are characterized as “principled opportunists”.

<sup>20</sup> Luria 2016 [С. Я. Лурье, *Избранные работы по истории науки*], 185.

<sup>21</sup> Momigliano 1966, 92; 98. To be sure, Momigliano admitted to knowing very little about Rostovtzeff’s pre-revolutionary life, which those who quote him forget to mention; see for example Bowersock 1974, 16.

<sup>22</sup> Among the numerous works in Russian, see especially Bongard-Levin 1997 [Г. М. Бонгард-Левин (ed.), *Скифский роман*]; Alipov 2010; Tunkina 2015 [И. В. Тункина, “М. И. Ростовцев на перекрестке между русской и немецкой классической археологией до Первой мировой войны”].

<sup>23</sup> See Funk 1992 and Gavrilov 2011 [А. К. Гаврилов, “Три письма У. фон Виламовица М. И. Ростовцеву”, in: id., *О филологах и филологах*]. Wilamowitz discerned Rostovtzeff’s talent quite early on, in 1901; see Marcone 1992, 10 and Kreucher 2003, 96–97.

<sup>24</sup> See Rostowzew 1902; Rostowzew 1905; Rostowzew 1910.

<sup>25</sup> See Funk 1992, 464 and Marcone 1992, 13.

of his theory was already in place at that time and in any case before the revolution,<sup>26</sup> which prompted his flight from Russia in June 1918.

By August 1919, while lecturing at Oxford, he had negotiated with the Clarendon Press for an edition of *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, the first chapters of which, irrespective of the numerous obstacles, he submitted in January 1924.<sup>27</sup> The project was at first entitled *Studies in the Economic History of the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds*, which corresponded to the initial conception of the prewar German edition, but the agreement signed in December 1919 already had “social history” in the first position in the title. Rostovtzeff had thus considerably widened the original scope of his German colleague’s proposal, having exhibited in this study and later in *The Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World* an unsurpassed power in analyzing the evidence of archeology, numismatics, papyrology and epigraphy as well as literary and iconographic sources so as to create a thoroughly grounded yet lifelike pattern of history in its dynamic development. It is in this way that he differs from other modernizers, Russian and European alike. It was not his emigration that made Rostovtzeff the great man – it merely allowed him to be the scholar he would have become in Russia had it not been for the October Revolution.

Thus I am disinclined to overestimate the importance of the dramatic personal experience of revolution and emigration which, according to Momigliano, made Rostovtzeff recognize the bourgeoisie as the main creative force of the ancient economy and devote his two pivotal works to this subject. Even my necessarily brief overview shows that (1) Rostovtzeff’s historical interests and views were formed at the turn of the century under the profound influence of the most prominent representatives of German scholarship, who took for granted the existence of capitalism in antiquity in one form or another,<sup>28</sup> and (2) the theory of Ed. Meyer resonated most widely among Russian scholars holding different political views and retained its influence after the revolution as well. Significantly, the conservative Meyer had no particular sympathy for capitalism, neither ancient nor modern – “fully-blown capitalism” disrupted the traditional life of the rural population, which ultimately resulted in the collapse of ancient culture.<sup>29</sup> From the very beginning, Rostovtzeff’s approach was nothing if not balanced. He distinguished the “healthy” and “fruitful” Hellenistic

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<sup>26</sup> For a detailed analysis, see Alipov 2010, 207–219.

<sup>27</sup> Marcone 2001, 359 n. 9.

<sup>28</sup> In his article, among other instances, Rostovtzeff cites Mommsen and M. Weber: Rostovtsev 1900, 205. See Weber 2006.

<sup>29</sup> See Meyer 1895, 110; 132 f.; 154 f.; 157 f.; Schneider 1990, 443.

capitalism from a “barren and baleful” Roman capitalism that kept diminishing the productivity of Italy and the provinces.<sup>30</sup> His views on the Roman bourgeoisie were liable to change over time, and yet in his history of the Roman Empire he makes Trimalchio a typical representative of this class,<sup>31</sup> so the attempt to link Rostovtzeff’s attitude here to his merchant genealogy is unconvincing.<sup>32</sup> Rostovtzeff was the last to deny the influence of modernity on the historical study of the ancient world; as a matter of fact, social and economic history, his main field of research, was itself a product of modernity. However, a straightforwardly biographical interpretation of his modernism has yet proven unsuccessful.

What was the essence of Rostovtzeff’s modernization? In the firm belief that the political history of antiquity was as much derived from the interests of various social groups as was modern history, he largely borrowed from his German teachers and colleagues the practice of using contemporary concepts – national economy, capitalism and capitalists, industry, stock exchange, factory – to explain those phenomena of ancient economics where he saw similarities to modernity. Let us consider the word “factory”. In *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* the word occurs quite often – sometimes alongside the “workshop” that presupposes differences between them, sometimes independently – and it denotes a small to large-scale market production of certain standardized goods in mass demand such as ceramic lamps. No definition of a factory is offered, its size is not determined, thus it is unclear in which respect it differs from a large workshop or manufactory (a concept also used here) and what is described in one place as a workshop sometimes appears as a factory in another. At the same time, Rostovtzeff distinguished the ancient factory from the modern one based on machine production, and he considered small workshops the main type of production in the Roman Empire. Had he defined the modern notions as clearly as he had the Latin ones in his thesis on Roman tax-farming,<sup>33</sup> it would have forestalled much of the criticism that followed. Like other modernist historians, however, he was reluctant to do it,<sup>34</sup> thus leaving this task to those he called theorists.

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<sup>30</sup> Rostovtsev 1900, 204 f.

<sup>31</sup> Rostovtzeff 1926 (1957), 57 f.

<sup>32</sup> Wes 1988, 212. In the passage that Wes cites, Rostovtzeff is not dealing with the bourgeoisie.

<sup>33</sup> Rostovtsev 1899 [М. И. Ростовцев, *История государственного откупа в Римской империи (от Августа до Диоклетиана)*].

<sup>34</sup> About Ed. Meyer, see Schneider 1990, 435–437. Christ 1972, 344 n. 24: “Rostovtzeff was always far from precise in his sociological and philosophical definitions. He had completely renounced the creation of his own terminology, as practiced by Max Weber”. Yet must a historian devise his own terminology?

His review of *A Social and Economic History of Greece* by J. Hasebroek, who was generally in favor of primitivism, is interesting in this respect. Admitting that “much is correct in the revolt against the modernization of ancient history”, that “on the whole it is a healthy reaction to excesses of an otherwise sound view”,<sup>35</sup> Rostovtzeff devotes a lengthy footnote to defense of this view: theorists endlessly argue about definitions of capital and capitalism, so it has become impossible to talk about capitalism in the ancient world. However, we are dealing not with words or notions but with facts. We are faced with a dilemma. Did the ancient world set a template for the development that the modern world is now undergoing, or did it remain at a primitive level of the economy which was then surpassed by the Middle Ages? The development is evident, continues Rostovtzeff, with the ancient economy reaching its highest point in Hellenism and the Early Empire. The economy of that time differs from the present day only in a quantitative fashion, not qualitatively, and he calls it capitalistic because the manufacturers and traders were working only for the market, not for any targeted consumer group, and were exclusively profit-oriented. The concentration of labor, credit, technology, developments in transport and new legal regulations – all these are also features of a capitalist economy.<sup>36</sup>

We are thus dealing with two separate phenomena. On the one hand in Rostovtzeff’s eyes there was a scientifically attested and unequivocal growth in production and living standards from the time of Homer all the way through to the early centuries of the Empire, this followed by stagnation and decline, which is incompatible with a primitivist approach to the ancient world economy. On the other hand it presents the theoretical possibility of a capitalism based on neither machine production nor free labor; for people born in the nineteenth century it seemed more feasible than for those born in the twentieth century when these things were inextricably linked. Rostovtzeff deals with a profit-oriented market economy – so why should this economy not also use slave labor, like capitalist agriculture in the American antebellum south, and be called ancient capitalism? To corroborate Rostovtzeff’s thinking, let me adduce one fact that impressed me. When metal smelting as the indicator of industrial activity as a whole came to be measured by lead emissions deposited in Greenland’s ice cap, it appeared that its peak coincided with the Roman Empire’s heyday in the first century CE, to be superseded only after 1800 with the beginning of the industrial

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<sup>35</sup> Rostovtzeff 1932, 334.

<sup>36</sup> Rostovtzeff 1932, 334 n. 1.



revolution.<sup>37</sup> If one takes “capitalism” off the table and judges by the level of social development, it turns out that the remarkable achievements of the ancient world from the first century BCE to the first century CE were only reiterated in Western Europe in the eighteenth century.<sup>38</sup> It is evident that the theory of cycles, as much as the theory of stadial development, has its *raison d’être*. The resurgence of concentration-camp slavery and the serfdom of the *kolkhozes* and communes in the twentieth century is just another reminder of this.

What is surprising about the review under discussion is the treatment of Max Weber. Ever since the 1910s, Weber had had an interest in and a productive influence on Rostovtzeff’s studies of ancient economy – and vice versa.<sup>39</sup> Presenting him as “predominantly a theorist and philosopher”, Rostovtzeff notes that “a man of genius, Weber modified Bücher’s position, making it more acceptable for historians”.<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile in *The Agrarian History of the Ancient World*<sup>41</sup> and other works, Weber, having repeatedly stressed the importance of Rostovtzeff’s conclusions, not only did not deny the most diverse types of ancient capitalism but with great methodological clarity formulated which of the ideal forms of capitalism were attested to in antiquity and the obstacles they faced.<sup>42</sup> Weber, a sociologist, did not recognize the dilemma imposed by Rostovtzeff, an historian, which allowed for either Bücher’s progress or Meyer’s cycles, but instead went his own way, which often ran parallel to Rostovtzeff’s chosen path. Interestingly, another outstanding sociologist, Pitirim Sorokin, who became a close friend of Rostovtzeff in America, was pushing a cyclical model of development in his *Social and Cultural Dynamics*.<sup>43</sup> The historical process is presented here as a fluctuation of the three main types of culture. It was about this same time that O. M. Freidenberg, a proponent of the archaization of antiquity, wrote: “Modernization is a bane. But modernization is first and foremost a method. It explores antiquity in the same way as modernity”<sup>44</sup> – which brings us back to the position of Fustel de Coulanges.

In *The Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World*, a major study published in 1941, modernistic traits are pared down considerably.

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<sup>37</sup> Persson 2010, 36 f.

<sup>38</sup> Morris 2013, 240–241. See also some compelling graphs in de Callatay 2012.

<sup>39</sup> See Deininger 2004; Bruhns 2005.

<sup>40</sup> Rostovtzeff 1932, 334–335.

<sup>41</sup> See Weber 2006 (1908) 320–747; Lo Cascio 1988.

<sup>42</sup> See Meier 1988.

<sup>43</sup> Sorokin 1937.

<sup>44</sup> Freidenberg 1978 [O. M. Фрейденберг, *Миф и литература древности*], 11.

The “bourgeoisie” remains, but “capitalism” is used only now and then, and this with reservations;<sup>45</sup> “capitalistic” occurs more often, but usually in quotation marks; “factory” tends to become “something like a factory”. The historian seeks not to exaggerate the importance of new trends in ancient economy, describing his position as a middle ground between Bücher and Meyer.<sup>46</sup> This book placed Rostovtzeff at the summit of scholarly achievement in the economic history of antiquity. His authority was such that in 1946 the only publisher that Meir Reinhold could find for his extensive critique of Rostovtzeff was in the Marxist journal *Science and Society*.<sup>47</sup> Moses Finley, a friend of Reinhold, proved to be a far more influential critic, approaching ancient economy via the theorization of history, toward which Rostovtzeff, by his own account, felt “an innate dislike”.<sup>48</sup> Finley was shaped by Marx and the economist Karl Polányi,<sup>49</sup> who claimed that economic activity in antiquity was never an independent sphere but subject to the laws of social relations. Later Finley would gravitate toward Weber, from whom he took up not the analysis of capitalistic elements in ancient economy but the opposition between *homo politicus* of antiquity and *homo oeconomicus* of the Middle Ages and modern times.<sup>50</sup> For Weber, meanwhile, the final decision on the correspondence of models with historical reality, meanwhile, lay with scholars experienced in philology and archeology<sup>51</sup> such as Rostovtzeff.

Reviving the old argument between the primitivists and modernists by taking it to a new level, Finley mainly targeted Rostovtzeff. In an article of 1965, minimizing the technological progress and economic development throughout antiquity, he labels Rostovtzeff’s theory “an anachronistic burlesque”.<sup>52</sup> In Finley’s *The Ancient Economy*, a book which won him wide renown, all the references to Rostovtzeff except for one are intended to demonstrate that he is hopelessly outdated and of no good use.<sup>53</sup> All this relates to *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, while Rostovtzeff’s profound study of the Hellenistic world’s economy is disposed of in a single paragraph challenging the very existence

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<sup>45</sup> Rostovtzeff 1941, 1303: “I hesitate to use a term whose meaning is so much disputed”.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 1327 n. 25.

<sup>47</sup> Reinhold 1946.

<sup>48</sup> Rostovtzeff 1930, 197.

<sup>49</sup> For instance see O’Halloran 2019, 15–32.

<sup>50</sup> On Finley’s facile view of Weber’s theories, see Chazel 2016.

<sup>51</sup> Weber 2006 (1908), 373.

<sup>52</sup> Finley 1965, 42. For criticism of Finley’s views, see for example Greene 2000.

<sup>53</sup> Finley 1985.

of a Hellenistic economy.<sup>54</sup> Dripping with sarcasm, Finley cunningly caricatures the modernists, which was also a practice of Rostovtzeff when dealing with Bücher. Yet Rostovtzeff contrasted Bücher's brief theoretical essay not just with two papers, as Meyer did, but with two monumental histories, synthesizing a range of diverse sources greater than what anyone else would later do. A book of modest size based on selected examples from literary sources of specific periods, Finley's study could not become a time-proof alternative. While rightly exposing the excesses of the modernists, Finley substituted the economic model with a sociological one, according to which the rich aristocracy of Greece and Rome were mainly concerned with maintaining their social status because ideology prevented them from any direct involvement in market transactions where only people of lowly station were involved. He was thus touching on the whole ancient mindset and the degree to which it was capable of rational economic behavior such as risk assessment and potential investment gain. Finley claiming we cannot apply a modern yardstick to ancient man was at this point almost closer to Fustel de Coulanges than to Weber.

I believe that whether it be an archaization or modernization of ancient economy, literature or science, these are not the theoretical pursuits of individual scholars or isolated episodes in historiography but forces permanently at work and competing ways of interpreting history. We tend to see antiquity as having greater similarities to our own time or greater differences from it, depending on the influence of contemporary trends. Finley, who grew up in the leftist intellectual milieu of 1930s New York,<sup>55</sup> saw antiquity through a lens which differed from that of Rostovtzeff, and he felt no need to bring it closer to modern times. In the 1970s and 1980s his theory was very influential, and he still remains one of the those ancient historians most often cited.<sup>56</sup> However, experts even then pointed out that he had neglected not only archeology – upon which Rostovtzeff had based many of his own conclusions<sup>57</sup> – but also the quantitative methods of research which were gaining momentum to reveal real economic growth that in no wise followed from his theory.<sup>58</sup> In the argument between the proponents of modernism and primitivism that followed, Finley's theory was and still often is met with more severe criticism than Rostovtzeff's

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>55</sup> Tompkins 2013.

<sup>56</sup> Scheidel 2016. We should keep in mind that Finley's *The Ancient Economy* (250 pages) is easy reading compared to Rostovtzeff's history of Hellenism (1700 pages).

<sup>57</sup> D'Arms 1977.

<sup>58</sup> See Silver 2007; Erdkamp 2020.

histories.<sup>59</sup> Thus the author of a recent book on the economy of classical Athens attributes the generation-long stagnation in ancient economic history to Finley's influence.<sup>60</sup> Even those who acknowledge the validity of those problems raised by Finley, are themselves seeking different solutions.<sup>61</sup>

Henry Pleket, who in 1975 wrote the article "A Farewell to Rostovtzeff", in 1984 suggested that "we may well have made pre-modern Western Europe too modern and ancient society too primitive". In 1990 he convincingly showed that there were no essential structural differences between the economy of pre-industrial Europe (1500–1800) and that of the Roman Empire.<sup>62</sup> Economic growth per capita in the Roman Empire was only half as high as that of Holland in its golden age of the seventeenth century, but their social structures differed markedly. These are significant and far from the only adjustments to Rostovtzeff's standpoint, thus delimiting his at times too bold rapprochement with modernity.

How has Rostovtzeff's modernism fared in recent decades? I do not pretend to have the big picture, but might still offer some separate observations. The dispute between modernists and primitivists was often believed to have been settled and superseded, but modernism as a means of interpreting the ancient economy by way of an economic theory elaborating on the facts of modern life is hardly dead and gone but rather undergoing vigorous development. Douglas North's new institutional economy has meantime replaced Finley's theory, and economic historians who use it look hard for and succeed in finding markets and transaction costs in antiquity.<sup>63</sup> That said, Rostovtzeff's vocabulary has generally been discarded: capitalism turns into market economy, capitalist into an entrepreneur, the bourgeoisie into the merchant middle class. This allows one to avoid any outdated parallels when analyzing the same or similar phenomena and processes while resorting to contemporary analogies which would seem to be more appropriate. Will they still seem so in twenty or thirty years' time?

The break however has not been final. John Bintliff, a leading ancient archeologist, recently published an article on the Hellenistic and Roman Mediterranean subtitled "A Proto-Capitalistic Revolution?" –

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<sup>59</sup> See for instance Sarri 2011; Temin 2012.

<sup>60</sup> O'Halloran 2019, 316–317. Finley's student, on the contrary, argues that Rostovtzeff's position and that of his teacher had more commonalities than his critics care to admit; see Saller 2005.

<sup>61</sup> See for example Morris–Saller–Scheidel 2007; Manning 2018.

<sup>62</sup> See Pleket 1975; Pleket 1984, 6; Pleket 1990.

<sup>63</sup> See Manning 2018, 30–31.

but without mentioning Rostovtzeff.<sup>64</sup> Yet still of importance here is the way mapped-out by Rostovtzeff, not the mention of his name or the use of terminology which he himself was already discarding. It is a way of reconstructing the social and economic history of the ancient world through the use of massive amounts of data from papyrology, epigraphy, fine art and especially archeology. Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the possibility of quantifying these data was very limited, Rostovtzeff pressed hard to recover from those material remains of the past the information which contemporary methods of scientific analysis extract with unparalleled ease and efficiency. Without these methods one cannot imagine either economic archeology or any social and economic history of antiquity.<sup>65</sup>

Although there has presently been a hundredfold increase in the number of students of ancient economy as compared to a century ago, a general economic history of the Roman Empire which would replace Rostovtzeff's outdated history has not yet appeared – unlike the new theory. William Harris, an eminent economic historian, says in the introduction to his recent book: “All that I offer here in any case are some fragments for some future Rostovtzeff to throw into the furnace as raw material for a new synthesis”.<sup>66</sup> A large group of students of Hellenistic economy have regularly organized conferences and published proceedings on the topic, building on Rostovtzeff and paving the way for a modern alternative at an altogether new theoretical level. Beginning in 2001, they have so far published three volumes of stimulating studies, the latest in 2011.<sup>67</sup> As far as I know, no collective monograph has yet appeared. It has emerged that it is easier to oppose Weber and Rostovtzeff, theory and history, than it is to incorporate them in a single approach. Meanwhile, as voices that refuse to consider economic growth as an indicator of success are growing louder, it becomes difficult to predict the way in which the next generation will come to estimate the ancient economy.

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<sup>64</sup> See Bintliff 2013; Bintliff 2014.

<sup>65</sup> See for instance Bowman–Wilson 2009.

<sup>66</sup> Harris 2011, 11.

<sup>67</sup> See Archibald–Davies–Gabrielsen 2001; Archibald–Davies–Gabrielsen 2005; Archibald–Davies–Gabrielsen 2011.

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The introduction of modern notions into the history of the ancient world is not an individual feature of Mikhail Rostovtzeff as an historian but was characteristic of many scholars from the generation of his teachers, and then of his students, and therefore should be viewed against this broader backdrop. With the emergence of economic history, political economists K. Rodbertus and K. Bücher interpreted the economic development of antiquity in terms of the then prevailing notions of progress, and corresponding to this historical period was a very primitive economic order and closed-household economy. Such an archaization of the ancient economy was opposed by Eduard Meyer, an outstanding historian of the ancient world, who not only saw many capitalist elements in antiquity (they were previously discerned by T. Mommsen and later by his students M. Weber, J. Beloch, U. Wilken, R. Pöhlmann etc.) but who in principle rejected the theory of progress in favor of the theory of cycles, or two parallel periods in world history. M. Rostovtzeff shared this theory in his early article "Capitalism and the National Economy in the Ancient World" (1900) which contains many ideas that he later developed in his major works on the social and economic history of Hellenism and the Roman Empire.

Evaluating the discussions about Hellenistic and Roman capitalism, we should consider the struggle between primitivists and modernizers to be an integral part of and a powerful stimulus to the scholarly understanding of antiquity, which uses explanatory models. In the second half of the nineteenth century the concept of capitalism had not yet been fully developed (Marx, for example, never used it in his writings) and therefore its scope and content in the works of Rostovtzeff, his associates and critics did in fact vary significantly. The doctrine of socio-economic formations (slaveholding, feudal, capitalist etc.), habitual to Soviet scholars, was developed only in the 1930s, thus forcing many Soviet historians to abandon their previous views of the historical process, whereas others such as S. Luria continued to write about the struggle of the Greek urban bourgeoisie with the feudal lords.

The leading historian of ancient economy after Rostovtzeff, M. Finley, though used Weberian concepts, tended rather to side with the primitivists. In general he insisted on the self-sufficiency of cells of the ancient economy and denied any

tangible technological progress or economic growth throughout ancient history. By the end of the twentieth century it became clear that the model proposed by Finley needed at very least the same modification as Rostovtzeff's theory. Unlike Rostovtzeff's theories, his histories remain unsurpassed.

Привнесение современных понятий в экономическую жизнь античности и шире – в историю древнего мира – не является индивидуальной особенностью М. И. Ростовцева как историка, оно было свойственно многим ученым того времени и потому должно быть рассмотрено на широком фоне. Во второй половине XIX в. политэкономы К. Родбертус и К. Бюхер трактовали экономическое развитие древности в господствующих тогда понятиях стадийного развития, в соответствии с которыми на период античности приходился примитивный экономический уклад – замкнутое ойкиное хозяйство. Против архаизации античной экономики выступил Эд. Майер, который не просто усматривал в древности множество капиталистических элементов, – ранее их видел Т. Моммзен, позже его ученики М. Вебер, Ю. Белох, У. Вилькен, Р. Пёльманн, – но и выдвинул теорию циклов, или двух параллельных периодов в мировой истории, сходных своими базовыми чертами. У Ростовцева эта теория представлена в статье “Капитализм и народное хозяйство в древнем мире” (1900), содержащей многие идеи, развитые им впоследствии в капитальных трудах по социально-экономической истории эллинизма и Римской империи. Неверно поэтому связывать эти идеи с воздействием на его мировоззрение революции 1917 г.

В Европе и США между двумя мировыми войнами сложился широкий консенсус, выразителем которого выступал Ростовцев. Альтернативой историчистской теории, рисовавшей развитие человечество как смену этапов или формаций, был метод М. Вебера. Критикуя Эд. Мейера за попытки найти в античности следы промышленного капитализма, он рассматривал “феодализм” и “капитализм” как универсальные типы хозяйствования, совместимые с различными историческими формами производства. Ведущий историк античной экономики послевоенного времени М. Финли, используя идеи Вебера, в главном склонялся скорее к позиции “примитивистов”. Он не только настаивал на самодостаточности ячеек античной экономики, но и отрицал технологический прогресс и экономический рост на всем протяжении античной истории. В последние десятилетия XX в. стало ясно, что модель, предложенная Финли, нуждается в такой же, если не более существенной модификации, что и теории Ростовцева. Почти через сто лет после выхода *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* (1926) Ростовцева избранный им способ модернизации античности остается одним из самых плодотворных в той области, где теоретические модели современной экономической науки накладываются на ограниченный и с трудом поддающийся количественному анализу материал.

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