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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Diebolt, C. (2011). The stakes of cliometrics in ancient history. *Historical Social Research*, *36*(3), 350-361. https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.36.2011.3.350-361

The Stakes of Cliometrics in Ancient History

Claude Diebolt *

Abstract: *»Das Infragestellen von Kliometrie in der Alten Geschichte«*. According to Finley, markets and economic motivations played little, if any, role in ancient economies. Status and civic ideology governed the allocation of scarce resources. Hence, the application of economic theory to the ancient economy was at best a futile exercise and at worst a source of grave misunderstandings. Temin's contributions lead to other conclusions and, as in the myth of Sisyphus, the boulder seems again to be at the bottom of the hill! My feeling is that the Gordian knot remains the same now as over the past decades: should cliometrics be used in the social sciences/humanities in general, and ancient history especially?

Keywords: ancient history, cliometrics.

> "No theory – no history! Theory is the pre-requisite to any scientific writing of history." (Werner Sombart, Economic History Review, 2 (1), 1929, p. 3)

1. Introduction

Antiquity and the Mediterranean constitute the two frames – one chronological and the other geographical – within which a major part of civilisation and economic life used to concentrate. However neither Antiquity nor the Mediterranean represent rigidly set realities. Their content is shifting and it is by definition subject to change. Within the antique Mediterranean, there was a succession of civilisations from the 4th millennium BC to the 4th or 5th century AD and the same applies to the economic systems. The history of the antique Mediterranean is the history of a progressive extension of economic life from its edges – Egypt and Mesopotamia – to the Mediterranean Sea as a whole. From these two countries, the centre of economic life moved to the eastern coast, to Phoenicia and from there to Greece, then Carthage to reach the western part with Rome. Egypt and Mesopotamia shared two major characteristics. Both were mainly land economies which functioned under the supervision of massive and centralised states. Phoenician and Greek cities as well as Carthage were economies based on maritime trade for which the land was only some kind of point of departure. In its own way, Rome represented the inter-

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penetration of the economic forces of land and sea. Rome tried to unite the antique economy and although it failed, it provided new bases which were to become the direct origins of our modern economies. This latter point, i.e. the assertion of a market economy, remains paradoxically, together with the issue of the use of the cliometric approach, one, if not the subject of major controversies. To read Annex 1 on Finley's inheritance and Annex 2 on the state of the art presented by Morris and Manning is particularly enlightening in this context.

2. The Market Economy under Discussion

The nature and functioning of the market in Antique societies are at the very heart of recurrent discussions (cf. in particular Bang, 2006, pp. 51-88). Actually the market seems ambivalent enough for historians to qualify it as either primitive or modern according to a tacit or explicit model, the so-called market model which plays a central part in our contemporary societies. To this day, as evidenced by the presentation of Annequin (2008) which is developed below, the problem remains quite topical. What part did exchange and market capital play in pre-capitalist societies? Already in 1893 in *Die Entstehung der Volkswirtschaft*, Bücher explained his vision of a closed ancient economy which Meyer opposed as he claimed that the most recent period in Antiquity was essentially modern. We have here the two opposed points of view to be debated (cf. Finley, 1979).

In 1909 in *Agrarverhältnisse im Altertum*, Weber (cf. 1924 reprint) listed the obstacles which, he thought, prevented the capitalist development of the ancient economy: the limits of commercial production, the intermittent character of the exchanges and of the availability of capital ownership, the instability of this capital in status societies, the role played by slavery to slow down the ability to take into account economic rationality, etc. Antiquity economy can first be characterised in terms of shortcomings in reference to capitalist economy. During Antiquity the citizen was a *homo politicus* and not a *homo oeconomicus*.

If, for Weber, capitalism was the most accomplished, the most rational form of he economy and of institutions, for Polanyi (1944, 2nd Ed. 2001), it was only a transitory, but original system since it allocated a central role to the market. The interpretation raised a problem of which Polanyi was aware, namely the problem of the presence, in the Greek city, of a real market place where all goods could be freely exchanged between equal economic partners, where a currency was used for all purposes. On the other hand, Finley (1973) objected to the market, probably because he thought the market might disrupt a global interpretation.

The basic problem which is raised here is the relationship between institutions and economic systems in ancient societies. Is then a cliometric and more specifically a Northian approach (cf. North, 1990, 1991), which allocates a fundamental role to formal and informal institutions, capable of overcoming the terms of this recurrent debate? It could be said that North offered an interesting alternative as he proposed that the institutional frame and the resulting organisations played an essential part in explaining the economic performance of nations. More formally, institutions are the rules of the game:

> Institutions are the humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interaction. They consist of both informal constraints (sanctions, taboos, customs, tradition and codes of conduct), and formal rules (constitutions, laws, property rights) (North, 1991, p. 97).

Already in the VII and VI centuries BC, the Greeks devised a new type of market that they passed on to the various world economies centered on the Mediterranean. Considered over a long historical period, this market experienced evolutions, transformations which cannot be summarised in a few words.

On the other hand, when focussing on the structural elements, the innovative aspects of this institution – which the Greeks were perfectly aware – but also on the context, the cumbersome procedures which affected its functioning, it is possible to characterise this market and to specify its role in the ancient economy on the basis of recent research results (cf. Manning & Morris, 2005).

In urban Greece, civic society was based on ownership; it provided opportunities to buy, to sell, to freely pass on one's belongings and hence to have total control over them. As soon as archaism was over, the major cities minted their own money and had an all purpose money with a generally recognised value which meant that it could circulate widely. But more importantly, the city with its agora represented an integral whole which was the horizon of the Greek citizen. At the heart of the city, the agora occupied a space delimited by boundary stones where the exchange time was precisely specified. City magistrates supervised the lawfulness of transactions, the value of contracts, the quality and quantity of products exchanged the definition of fair prices. On the agora, the buyer could measure, compare, check and if necessary sue against a fraudulent sale. The same applied to all agorai and all places where things were exchanged, e.g. a harbour which was also a space delimited by boundary stones, supervised by magistrates, a space beyond which trade was illegal. Within these exchange spaces, the city was to guarantee, as best as possible, security, lawfulness, transparency of transactions and information of economically equal partners: no need to stress how essential this last point was.

Hence one could say that this market was not a natural result of the development of exchanges, neither was it inherited, but it was really an original institution which was progressively completed with complex jurisdictions on business law, supervision of maritime loans, etc. It is obvious that this market considered as an institution considerably boosted exchanges by limiting their uncertainty, reducing the impact of asymmetric information between the seller and the buyer, by allowing merchants and ship owners to get organised so as to take into account in their operations economic circumstances and to make the best possible use of their rationality drawn from experience. However this market – more than most others – remained imperfect, subject to climatic hazards, slow transports, political uncertainties, predatory behaviours. Moreover the market, especially the market for slaves, was supplied by war and piracy as well as by purchase, sudden supply variations, local variations which fragmented supply, limitations imposed on the circulation of specific goods, the interventionist policies of some public authorities, in particular to guarantee supply.

Consequently it seems obvious that it is necessary to take into account the economic dimension of political behaviours, the relationship between these behaviours and the free play of the market, to check whether it is possible to approach the economic and the political areas as two distinct categories. Such questions remind us of the content of the old quarrel between primitivists (who considered that before our time no economy had been governed by the market) and modernists.

Today the economic historian can call on new tools: information resulting from archaeology which relies on efficient prospective, analytical and statistical means; advances in areas of historical demography which remained for a long time too unreliable; the development of trans-cultural comparisons as well as the use of new concepts born partly from economic theory. It seems today that it might be possible to overcome the head-on opposition between a liberal and modern approach as personified by Rostovtzeff (1930, 1957) and the approach of the substantivists who are heirs to Polanyi (1944, 2nd ed., 2001), which might have led partly to some kind of epistemological dead-end.

New approaches to ancient economies and the place allocated to the market have been proposed. I will mention two examples which seem to me on the one hand to be good illustrations of the trends of present day research and which on the other hand deserve further detailed work.

The first example can be seen from a perspective which focuses on pre-industrial economies and the role played by the market as well as from a comparative approach which offers some kind of model to interpret the market.

For instance Bang (2006) studied the system of the bazaar which, according to him functioned in various pre-industrial societies which had enlarged markets, such as the Roman and Greek worlds, the Islamic world, India or Imperial China. He considers the bazaar as some kind of model, as an ideal type in Weber's sense of the term and he considers that this system is best suited to an instable, uncertain and fragmented market. Actually it favours associations of merchants and financiers which curb risks; it provides the necessary flexibility to face local variations; it ensures a good information on the spot and hence makes it possible to develop opportunistic behaviours. In a given context, the bazaar provides efficient answers which remain however limited but at the same time it contributes also to perpetuating some structural problems of the market. It is interesting to note that although this approach is one which strongly singles out the market in pre-industrial societies, it stresses at the same time the influence of current studies as it favours the analysis of exchange strategies, of profitability calculations, of the search for information to reduce uncertainty, of the functioning of networks which may decrease risks.

Along the same line, Temin showed in 2001 that the economy of the early Roman Empire was primarily a market economy. Market exchange was ubiquitous, and market prices moved together in ways typical of markets, albeit imperfectly coordinated ones. Moreover, in 2004, he advocated the idea that the supply and demand of labour were equilibrated by wages and other payments to workers, albeit in a rough way. Before that, in 2002, his analysis of the longest continuous price data from the ancient world, which came from ancient Babylon, showed that they were market prices.

The second example aims at going beyond the issue raised by the supporters of a socio-economics derived from Polanyi's analyses. Some specialists of ancient economies, who find the work of the new economy or institutional history attractive (North, 1990; 1991), qualify, criticise, or even reject globally the analyses which follow Polanyi's work. The followers of the neo-institutional theory, who oppose this largely accepted interpretation, note that in all societies, the task of institutions is to reduce the uncertainty of exchange, that in all societies economic constraints and institutions determine the production and transaction costs and hence the feasibility and profitability of economic action (cf. Coase, 1960). Far from being split into independent structures, economic logic and institutional logic have been closely linked throughout history. And we should concentrate on this double logic:

> If the proper choice of a model depends on the institutional context – and it should – then economic history performs the nice function of widening the range of observation available to the theorist. Economic theory can only gain from being taught something about the range of possibilities in human societies. Few things should be more interesting to a civilized economic theorist than the opportunity to observe the interplay between social institutions and economic behaviour over time and place (Solow, 1985, p. 329).

Hence Greek and Roman societies, which had developed an enlarged but non capitalistic market capable of developing widely the scope of exchange, would – with their specific characteristics – fall within the same analytical approach as contemporary societies.

Even if we try not to cast a suspicious (critical) look at the above-mentioned examples and the corresponding various attempts at modelling and conceptualising, we still have to check the validity of the new interpretations, to question the relevance of the use of some tools, some categories of economic analysis in our contemporary societies to understand ancient societies, and finally to assess the operational value of some more or less recent concepts imported from economic theory. We still have to measure the weight of behaviours and ideologies, to question the very notion of institution and the range of its social coverage. Would that help overcome some old issues which still seem actual, go beyond this widely felt epistemological lock-in on methodological progress and theoretical blockage? It is of course difficult to speak the final word on that point, but it seems worth trying.

3. Conclusion

Finley (1973) unveiled a view of the economic underpinnings of ancient economies in which markets and economic motivations played little if any role. Status and civic ideology governed the allocation of scarce resources.

Hence, the application of economic theory to the ancient economy was at best a futile exercise and at worst a source of grave misunderstandings. Temin's seminal and continued contributions to the field lead to the opposite conclusion and, as in the myth of Sisyphus, the boulder seems again to be at the bottom of the hill!

My feeling is that the Gordian knot remains the same now as over the past decades: should cliometrics be used in the social sciences/humanities in general, and ancient history especially? Is it a discipline which could harmoniously marry theory and empirical analysis? Is it in the first place a branch of history or of economics? How much credibility should be lent to this research approach? Which kind of cliometric methods should be used? Will social sciences/humanities and ancient history thus become more scientific? Which role should and can cliometrics play in the training of young students and doctoral students engaged in academic research in these disciplines? And finally what should be done to overcome the – real even if often latent – communication barrier generated by the introduction of systematically quantitative methods in the literature in social sciences/humanities and ancient history, at a time when these disciplines are becoming technically more elaborate, an evolution which is most probably not reversible?

My teaching aims at contributing some partial answers, even if I find it surprising that there should still be lively discussions about the questions I raised above: actually quantification has almost always been part of historical work in the social sciences, the humanities and ancient history. In fact the question is whether we really have the choice between using quantitative methods or not? I consider that we do not and for one essential reason, namely that the quantitative element is to be found in all approaches but probably implicitly rather than explicitly. Quantitative methods have always been the intrinsic characteristic of research in the social sciences and the humanities, but except in economics, their use has been mostly secret and subliminal. As many issues which rely on quantitative dimensions are covered up by words, quantification is not apparent. I usually illustrate this proposition by challenging my students to choose one page at random in one of their favourite books in economics, history, law, sociology or others and I ask them to decide whether quantification is implicitly to be found in what they have just read. It is actually often the case. My answer to the first question would therefore be that it is a waste of time to argue about whether it is necessary to promote quantification in the social sciences/humanities and ancient history, also because it is obviously neither possible nor necessary to exorcise this so-called devil!

In the end the real question is another one, namely how to make a better use of quantification (cf. Costa, Demeulemeester & Diebolt, 2007)? From my point of view, unless it goes along with a statistical and/or econometric treatment and a systematic quantitative analysis, measurement is nothing but another form of narrative history. It uses figures instead of words, but it does not rely on any other factor. On the other hand cliometrics innovates in the way it phrases its explanations of past economic development in terms of valid hypothetical-deductive (economic) models which call on the finest econometric techniques. The aim is to identify the interaction between variables in a given situation using a mathematical expression. If the question is asked in this way it becomes obvious that positions which are too rigid are not possible but that the corresponding research is also much rarer!

Following this argument, it is also essential, before attempting any modelling exercise, that each cliometric research should turn first to an explicit economic historical analysis. This kind of analysis enables to pinpoint recurrent stylized facts and to identify the main actors. The objective is to identify the endogenous (behaviour of actors operating within the institutional framework) and exogenous (policy change, even if it can also be the product of endogenous move by specific actors) sources of institutional change (cf. Acemoglu, Johnson & Robinson, 2001; 2005). It would also provide some hint as to how far specific institutional arrangements might help promote the adaptiveness of the system as a whole: "*Institutions are subtle forms whose real functioning cannot be discerned without a deep knowledge of their context and history.*" (Clark, 2007, p. 726). In fact,

> beyond the study of long run quantitative data sets, a branch of cliometrics is more and more focused on the role and evolution of institutions by aiming at combining both the desire for generality of the economists and the concern for the precise context in which economic players act that characterise both the historians and other social scientists. The middle road between pure empiricism and disincarnate theory might perhaps open the door to a better economic theory, enabling economists to understand more deeply the working of economies and societies and by the way offer better policy advice (Demeulemeester & Diebolt, 2007, p. 16.).

As Kindleberger (1990) once pointed out, economic history is certainly not sufficient to ensure good economic analysis, but it is however a necessary condition. It can help identify which assumptions and which models are likely to best represent the reality at hand. Greif (1993, 1998, 2006) indeed showed that very often, game theoretical models are too general and provide multiple equilibria. Only a precise economic and institutional historical analysis can help disentangle all these elements.

In the new institutional history a point is common with the traditional practise of the (positivist) historian: the historical analysis had to be as "*precise*" as possible (accounting as precisely and truthfully as possible for the precise sequence of events, i.e. *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*). However here the historical work is just a preliminary step before trying to locate some recurrent phenomena or stylized facts (or evolutions).

North (1990) stressed that there are forms of persistency in human institutions: their future evolution is partly conditioned by their history (i.e. path dependence, David, 2007). In a Northian perspective, institutions are the rules of the game established in order to reduce transaction costs in human interaction by reducing uncertainty and establishing some common knowledge ways of interacting. The problem is that, once they are established, these rules are used by the various groups in society to promote their own interests. Thus they are reinforced, and they cannot be changed abruptly. The rules of the game have often been designed in a very static perspective, i.e. reducing uncertainty and consequently transaction costs in the short-run. They often reflect the bargaining power of the various groups in society at a precise moment in time. They do not include any concern for dynamic efficiency. It might be, however, that certain institutional structures appear to favour entrepreneurship and wealth-creating activities. But it might also be true that they promote rent-seeking activities. Countries could be trapped in a high-growth or a low-growth equilibrium due to their institutional framework (and the set of incentives they imply). This is the reason why institutional design is so important. Historical analyses can be a good tool in order to understand the way real-world institutions since the ancient economies have evolved in a specific context.

Appendix 1: Finley's Heritage

The core thesis of Finley's *Ancient Economy* is clearly non-cliometric.

> […] The model had to be qualitative not quantitative, because the ancients kept not usable statistics; but that fact in itself is significant. Their failure to collect systematic numerical data is not just an empirical problem for us, or evidence of their intellectual shortcomings, but a sign that the ancients did not see economic activity as a distinct element of life. In short, the ancient economy was embedded. The analytical heart of Finley's model is status (Morris, Foreword, in: Finley, 1999, pp. XIX-XX).

> Ancient social and economic history is abode all rural history, the history of peasants, although in two vital cases – beginning in Greece around 600 B.C. and Italy around 200 B.C. and ending in both after A.D. 200 – the creation of "true" slave economies made free citizenries possible. This was a world in which family came first and nearly everyone aimed for economic self-

sufficiency. Trade generally took place on a small scale and was conducted over short distances. Most fortunes were made from rents and control of the machinery of taxation. Only rarely did traders of industrialists make good, and when they did, they were eager to invest their gains in land. There were economic changes – in particular, the steady concentration of land in fewer and fewer hands in the Roman empire, and with in the blurring of the boundary between free and slave – but there was little economic growth to speak of. There were, of course, exceptions, such as the super-cities like Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch, or, in a smaller way, classical Athens. These cities needed permanent grain imports to feed their citizens and housed substantial nonagricultural groups. But they remained exceptions: even in the high Roman empire, the truly urban population was never more than one-twentieth of the rural. It would be a mistake to call Graeco-Roman civilization urban, although its ruling classes certainly were. They showed little interest in the countryside so long as they could get enough food from it, and there was rarely (if ever) anything we could call state economy policy. […] As Weber had foreseen, the ancient economy, unlike the medieval, did not contain the seeds from which homo oeconomicus could grow […]: there were no forces acting to disembed the economy, to allow class and the market to override status. Finley's ancient economy was a functioning coherent system, which came to an end not because of its internal contradictions but because of the interaction between Roman social structures and the exogenous factors of increasing pressure on the frontiers: "There, if one wishes, is an economic explanation of the end of the ancient world" (Finley, p. 176) (Morris, Foreword, in: Finley, 1999, pp. XXI-XXII).

[…] I am suggesting not that the ancients were like Molière's M. Jourdain, who spoke prose without knowing it, but that they in fact lacked the conceptual elements which together constitute what we call "the economy". Of course they farmed, traded, manufactured, mined, taxed, coined, deposited and loaned money, made profits or failed in their enterprises. […] What they did not do, however, was to combine these particular activities conceptually into a unit. […] It then becomes essential to ask whether this is merely accidental, and intellectual failing, a problem in the history of ideas in the narrow sense, or whether it is the consequence of the structure of ancient society (Finley, 1999, p. 21).

The economic language and concepts we are all familiar with, even the laymen among us, the "principles", whether they are Alfred Marshall's or Paul Samuelson's, the models we employ, tend to draw us into a false account. For example, wage rates and interest rates in the Greek and Roman worlds were both fairly stable locally over long periods (allowing sudden fluctuations in moments of intense political conflict or military conquest), so that to speak of a "labour market" or a "money market" is immediately to falsify the situation. For the same reason, no modern investment model is applicable to the preferences of the men who dominated ancient society (Finley, 1999, p. 23).

Appendix 2: Morris and Manning's State of the Art

A century of important work has created a large (but problematic) database, honed powerful (but somewhat narrow) methods, and identified fundamental (but unresolved) problems. Ancient historians should be proud of these achievements. But the field remains radically undertheorized and methodologically impoverished. Theory, method, and data are inseparable. Archaeologists and historians have made great advances in classifying and analyzing the primary sources but have not made thought enough about how to build models or how to relate models to the empirical facts. […] The result is economic history without economics. […] We see six ways to resolve these problems: 1. Conduct more discussion of the metanarratives that structure arguments. […] 2. A deliberate turn toward social science history. […] 3. A broader approach to economic history. […] More thoughtful integration of archaeology into ancient history. […] More emphasis on ancient demography and technology. […] Mode detailed comparisons of economic institutions through time and space (Morris & Manning, 2005, pp. 2-4).

Ancient historians have largely ignored economic theory. There are two obvious reasons for this. First, ancient historians seem to feel that they lack the data to test formal economic models. But this is only a partial explanation, given economists' propensity for "proofs" based on stylized facts or internal logic. Second, ancient historians seem to feel that economic models are no help for understanding a world of thin and discontinuous markets. This, in essence, was Finley's argument: The economic language and concepts we are all familiar with, even the laymen among us, the 'Principles', whether they are Alfred Marshall's or Paul Samuelson's, the models we employ, tend to draw us into a false account… to speak of a 'labour market', or a 'money market' is immediately to falsify the situation. For the same reason, no modern investment model is applicable to the preferences of the men who dominated ancient society. (Finley 1985a: 23). Finley probably exaggerated the weakness of factor markets in the Roman Empire (Temin, 2001). He was clearly right to insist that markets were less integrated than those in the twentieth-century West, and those historians who write as if ancient economies worked just like modern ones can go seriously astray (for example, French 1964). But that is far from being the end of the story. Development economists have shown that formal models can make sense of economies in which markets are shallow and fragmented (see Ray 1998). Further, ancient historians who combine simple formal models with awareness of the peculiarities of antiquity have raised and answered important questions […]. their work is widely praised, but not widely emulated. We might say that they are models *to* the field, but not models *for* the field. There are two reasons for this distinction. First is an ideological/institutional problem. Most ancient historians are educated in humanistic university departments, studying under liberal humanists. Second, the opportunity costs are high for ancient historians to become economists and economists to become ancient historians (Morris & Manning, 2005, pp. 30-31).

Neoclassical economics has never had much influence on ancient Mediterranean studies. Marxism dominated the field in East European communist countries until 1989 and had some impact in Western Europe from the 1920s onwards (though hardly any in the United States). A larger minority of Western ancient historians embraced Weberian sociology from the 1950s onward, and some turned toward new historicism in the 1990s. But both the classical and biblical fields have always been overwhelmingly branches of liberal humanism. We want to increase the diversity of approaches in ancient history by drawing more inspiration from the social sciences, and in particular from Weber's foundations (Granovetter 1990; Swedberg 1991), and the "new institutional economics" that has wedded key neoclassical principles to a concern for institutions, ideology, and demography (North 1981; 1990) (Morris & Manning, 2005, pp. 33-34).

As Manning emphasizes, ancient historians usually build models inductively, generalizing from a mass of texts or artefacts. Some of the major advances have come when historians reverse this process, beginning from general propositions and using them to establish the parameters of the possible […]. (Morris & Manning, 2005, p. 38).

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