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New Approaches to Roman Institutional & Political History

I thank Michael Alexander for entrusting me with the impossible task of characterizing in 15 minutes the last generation of scholarship on Roman political and institutional history. This has been fun as well as challenging. I focus on questions and interests, and my minimal bibliography is arranged in the order of my talk. At the end I pose some issues for discussion and thought.

The simplistic, but common, definition of political history connects it with the narrative and analysis of political events, ideas, movements and leaders – "kings and things." Analogously, institutional history has generally been understood as tracing the development of legal, economic, and political ideas and institutions, ideologies and movements. This nexus of interests is fundamental to Roman history and historiography. Everyone in this room knows the focus and limitations of Rome's literary and documentary sources. For example, Tacitus scathingly dismisses the *plebs sordida* as he turns to the imperial court, generals, and movers and shakers. The arrangement and indices of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* and other epigraphic corpora emphasize the importance of political leaders, law, legislation, and institutions in this kind of document. The *Prosopographia Imperii Romani*, which Mommsen proposed in Berlin in 1874, shaped work on the Roman Empire, and T.R.S. Broughton's *Magistrates of the Roman Republic* filled in the prosopography of the earlier period. Likewise impelled by Mommsen, Roman law was long the bedrock of the study of Roman history.

With such foundations, scholars in the 19th and much of the 20th century examined the personalities and vicissitudes of great men, pivotal military and political events, and the development and disintegration of governmental institutions. Polybius, Sallust, and other Roman historians had shown the way: such material provided vivid individuals and episodes to illustrate and epitomize cogent narratives. I stress here this latter element – the creation of a narrative. For although the stuff of history was data on men, events, and institutions, gleaned primarily from the literary and documentary sources, it was the historian's craft to bring it together into a compelling whole. Further, since 19th-century historiography was concerned with the history of the nation state, Roman history seemed an ideal object of study. The familiar literary sources – from Caesar through Vergil to Ammianus Marcellinus – supported the analysis of Rome's rise and fall, the creation and dissolution of a lawful empire. This is what people were interested in, and what was deemed proper to teach students and virtuous citizens as all moved towards the goals of an ethical and successful nation led by selfless leaders.

Things are different now, and the last few decades have radicalized the study and teaching of Roman history.[1] The scholarly and academic world has changed drastically in response to two sets of revolutions in the world at large. One is the series of social changes that began in the 1960s and 1970s. The other is

[1] It is true that broad transformations in history writing in the early 20th century took some time to influence the study of Roman history. I certainly do not want to suggest that M. Rostovtzeff, H.-G. Pflaum, Sir Ronald Syme, T.R.S. Broughton, or others were not enormously influenced by the social and political upheavals of their time – as more and more us recognize and even explicitly research – but classicists tend not to embrace and implement change quickly.

what I will call the 'information revolution,' the challenges and opportunities of the dizzying expansion of information technology. Let me address each in turn.

The 1960s ushered in tremendous social, economic, cultural and political changes that continue and expand even today. Here I point to the rise of identity politics in the US, Europe and elsewhere; the undeniable importance of the women's movement and other interrogations of gender and sexuality; and a growing fascination with spectacle, fueled by increased leisure and access to mass media. Also life changing has been the creation of a world economy, a unifying force that has been counterbalanced by separatist, "sectarian" movements tied to politics, ideologies, and religion. We have witnessed the shocking breakup of nations and even empires; we have seen forceful expressions of religious concepts, dogma, and practice; and we feel daily the profound echoes of post-colonialism.[2] These and other historical transformations have had an enormous impact not only on the ways we think and see the world around us, but also on the kinds of questions with which we approach history, including the history of Rome. Teachers and students now want to know more about Rome's social and cultural history.

I see two important challenges associated with the new desiderata. One is accessing relevant information; the other is making sense of it as Roman history.

[2] One could add the questioning of military tactics and ideals, but this is outside my topic.

Pertinent data can certainly be found in our customary historical sources – Livy, for example, provides much more information about women than we might imagine from Book 21 alone. But the desire to know more about gender, the family, slaves, the urban poor, rural dependents, ethnicity and other subjects has led scholars to turn to more diverse literature, as well as to material culture. Scholars frequently cite documentary sources, not only inscriptions and coins, but also papyri and the Talmud, the Vindolanda tablets, ostraka and the like.

The widened understanding of relevant information for Roman history has led to great successes, especially when combined with methodologies taken from the social sciences. And the search has been successful. *PIR* is now complemented by M.-Th. Raepsaet-Charlier's *Prosopographie des femmes de l'ordre sénatorial* (1987). Many works explore the roles and images of non-elite women as well as elite ones, and of these some of the best include deep appreciation of Roman law. Approaches to elite Roman men have also widened. Werner Eck's publications may be a gauge: in the 1970s he focused on prosography and political organization, but now one of his interests is senatorial self-representation, investigated through portraits, other types of sculpture, ornament and built space as well as through inscriptions and literary sources. As the latter note suggests, we've now moved beyond ascertaining the activities and representations of women, and of men, to exploring larger constructions of male and female, gender and sexuality in the Roman world. Scholars examine Roman slaves, freed persons, bandits, provincials, and the institutions around them, often aided by large databases of inscriptions (more below) and or by large corpora of reliefs, portraits and other representations. Here intriguing and

accessible work has been done with comparative history, as in K. Bradley's examinations of slave revolts. As an example of how traditional scholarly 'tools' have been employed for our newer interests I cite James Franklin's prosopography of the *lupanar* at Pompeii. Even as interest in individuals continues strong – witness the ever-growing number of biographies of Roman men and women –it is most profitably combined with exploration of the society and institutions influencing that person.

Our enthrallment with performance – not to mention the US's apparently insatiable fascination with violence – has led to a slew of research on gladiatorial and other spectacles in the Roman world, and excellent investigations of 'non-law' and 'disorder' in Roman society have appeared. Much less lurid, but just as interesting, has been research on Roman social control through the built environment. Thus studies of Pompeii and other "Roman" towns are burgeoning, aided by new excavations that often explicitly include search for the gender, ethnicity, and class of those inhabiting and using the space and buildings. One hallmark of the most influential and exciting work now appearing is the attempt to discern the institutions – the underlying social and political structures and mechanisms – rather than focus mainly on material remains.

The creation of a world economy has led to greater interest in the economy of the Roman Empire, following and questioning the 1980 taxes-and-trade model of K. Hopkins; many scholars, such as E. Lo Cascio, use economic models developed elsewhere, and very sophisticated argumentation. Interest in

Rome's economy is tied to investigating the relationship of the Roman provinces to each other and to the center of power. Much of this debate has been couched in discussion of "Romanization" and/or in Frontier Studies, topics now specialties of their own. Here again newer scholarship intriguingly looks to the many institutions affecting economic and social transactions and interaction. Post-colonial approaches are also familiar, such as J. Webster's "The Creolization of the Roman Empire" (2001) and obvious in nuanced readings of Favorinus, Fronto, and other authors once dismissed as overly rhetorical representatives of the "Second Sophistic." And, to repeat, a welcome and growing literature focuses on Rome's provinces and their inhabitants.

Attention to Rome's parts may be tied to the swelling insistence that the "decline and fall of Rome," or the later Roman Empire, be taught as part of Roman history proper. This desire is sometimes connected with increasing interest in Roman religion (or religions), an aspect of Roman history investigated not only as it illuminates the cohesiveness of the empire (as when in 1987 Simon Price demonstrated the vital importance of imperial cult), but also as it particularized Rome's provinces and peoples (such as in Martin Goodman's work). Ancient authors now common in current scholarship include Josephus, Tertullian and others once deemed arcane. Visual and archaeological material, as in Beard, North and Price, underscores the differences and similarities of Roman religious phenomena from our own. In many works, as in the last named book, we find attention to priesthoods, "congregations," rituals and the like, institutions influencing Roman religious activity.

The plethora of material and interests leads me to the other revolution I cite, the explosion of information technology. This impacts us in two major ways. First, it has enabled scholars to compile and navigate enormous databases of information. Thus, for example, W. Scheidel and others have launched ever more ambitious and compelling investigations into the Roman economy and Roman demography. Analogously, analysis of Roman inscriptions for what they can tell us about family relations, occupational identity, education or the like has taken off following the groundbreaking work of Saller and Shaw in 1984. Well-constructed databases allow quantitative analyses, helping to reveal patterns in the welter of disparate data for Roman history. On the other hand, various websites and databases on the Internet now provide easy access to an almost limitless amount of information from maps, to epigraphic, prosopographical and papyrological corpora, to images. All of these advances are key to current concerns with the diversity of the Roman world and the interdependence of Rome's institutions, of all types.

Now some caveats: It is terribly hard to keep abreast with new websites, and not all sites are good. Furthermore, the proliferation of data on the Web, just like the growing popularity of biographies of Roman leaders, demands knowledge of Rome's social and political institutions. Without that understanding the myriad bits of information are indistinguishable; absent the structures of Roman life, the biography of any Roman, no matter how influential, is just psychological invention. More importantly, I worry that in our laudable modern attempts to discern the social history of the Romans, to give a voice to those traditionally ignored, we might exaggerate fragmentation. Those who lived

and died in the Roman world participated, however peripherally, in a polity and society unique precisely because of its politics and institutions. Attention to Rome's diversity must be complemented by recognition of the ties that bound it together. Finally, knowledge of Roman institutions enables scholars and students to work comparatively, to use to good result models developed in other disciplines. Our own familiarity as professionals with "kings and things" should not cause us as teachers to ignore Rome's indispensable political and institutional history.

I end with three topics for discussion and thought. The first concerns undergraduate education. In our undeniable need and desire to attract students to our classes, we may devise "specialty" courses appealing to popular images, such as a course on Spartacus and Roman Slavery, or one on Roman Prostitution, Gender and Sexuality. Such courses can be immensely rewarding for us to teach as well as for students to take. But in these courses we must ensure that our students get a comprehensive understanding of Roman history and civilization rather than interesting tidbits of information about slivers of the Roman world. My second topic concerns graduate education. Classicists tend to embrace change slowly, and my unscientific review of graduate programs (including my own) suggests that the canon of authors and disciplines examined in PhD exams has not changed much in the last thirty years. Put another way, although Josephus now figures in a wide range of scholarship, he appears but infrequently on PhD Reading Lists. We must work to have our PhD programs incorporate the widened scope and methods of our discipline. My third concern relates to us, the scholars and teachers who are crafting new approaches to political and

institutional history. We must be honest in our interdisciplinary efforts; we cannot superficially and/or selectively apply documentary or visual evidence, or arguments taken from the social sciences. If we turn to art and archaeology, such evidence has to more than simply illustrations.

To address my concerns takes time and work. On the other hand, as I hope to have demonstrated, Roman institutional and political history is thriving and invigorating, and well worth our effort.