ROME'S PLACE IN HISTORY

A. SCHIAVONE: *The End of the Past. Ancient Rome and the Modern West*. Pp. viii + 278. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2000. Cased, £29.95. ISBN: 0-674-00062-5.

'Why did the historical course of the West contain within itself the greatest catastrophe ever experienced in the history of civilization?' (p. 2). This kind of grand question about the shape and dynamics of human history is often regarded with suspicion by historians, who have little time for the poorly founded generalizations of Marxists, sociologists, and other 'philosophers of history', and little inclination to venture beyond the relative security of their areas of expertise. Schiavone's rich and provocative study insists that such questions are basic to our understanding of the past, whether or not we are conscious of this; it also provides ample evidence that such attempts at all-encompassing synthesis may yield insights, ideas, and ways of thinking about the past that would otherwise pass us by.

Commenting on recent trends in scholarship, S. notes that 'our images, though they gain in definition, lose proportionately in breadth and depth' (p. 2). This work offers the polar opposite of such specialization, drawing not only on a wide range of ancient evidence and modern studies, but also on modern authors like Defoe, Engels, and above all Marx. S. might profitably have spread his net still further, to consider other pre-industrial and non-Western economies in more detail; indeed, he might sometimes be accused of taking a Eurocentric perspective, not least in the assumption that the fall of Rome was the 'greatest catastrophe' in human history—what of the disastrous impact of European expansion on the civilizations of America, Africa, and Asia? Nevertheless, this is scholarship that smells not of dust and shuttered rooms but of mountain-tops, oceans, and the infinite reaches of space.

One of the most striking features of the book is its style: highly polished, rhetorical, and figurative, the tone of the original Italian well captured by the translator. It has an inclination to opacity: I am not at all sure what it means to suggest that 'the disparity in rhythms [between rapid changes in the political sphere and the slow pace of the economy] was absorbed physiologically' (p. 63)—the Roman Empire as a living body, one assumes, whereas in the previous sentence it was an ocean. Likewise some of the aphorisms are elegant but unhelpful: 'the ancient economy seems to have been more dependent on geography and anthropology than on history' (p. 87). More often, however, S. offers striking new ways of describing and hence thinking about different aspects of antiquity: for example, fortifications such as Hadrian's wall seen as 'petrified projections of the secret fears of the age' (p. 14). It undoubtedly adds to the pleasure of reading this work to be ambushed regularly by such phrases as 'the historical thrombosis which took place at the zenith of the ancient world' (p. 31).

S. highlights the question that underpinned the long debate between primitivists and modernizers on the nature of the ancient economy, that of its similarity to or difference from modern capitalism, and seeks to break free from these old polarities. He acknowledges Rome's sophistication and degree of development, in contrast to the essentially negative primitivist vision, but also insists on distinguishing clearly between the performance and above all the potential of ancient and modern economies. The main elements of his picture are familiar: an emphasis on slavery and its negative effects, above all in the downgrading of the entire productive sphere; the limitations of ancient science; and the exclusion of traders and manufacturers from political and social power.

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https://doi.org/10.1093/cr/52.1.146 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The Italian title, *La storia spezzata* (the 'broken' or 'interrupted' history), suggests a perspective like that of Weber, who recognized the 'failure' of antiquity but interpreted it in terms of the frustration of 'natural' tendencies towards capitalism and development. S. regards early Imperial Rome as already doomed, capable only of stagnating or declining, but identifies the possibility of an alternative history back in the first century B.C. If the crisis of the late Republic had resulted not in autocracy and the consolidation of slavery but a Ciceronian political settlement and more free labour, perhaps Rome would have followed a different path. 'Counterfactual' approaches highlight assumptions about causality, forcing us to consider in what circumstances things might have been different; it is frustrating, however, that S. sees the alternatives as either Western-style development or stagnation, rather than considering the possibility that a pre-modern society might have had its own particular dynamic.

S. concludes with Marx's characterization of antiquity as 'childlike', circumscribed, and self-referential, in contrast to modernity's sense of infinite possibility and quest to abolish all limits. He does not seem to empathize with Marx's sense of the possible attractions of such limits, nor with his project of developing a critique of modernity's inhumanity and injustice through the contrast with antiquity. Here, rather, the contrast of ancient and modern tends to confirm the self-satisfaction of modernity, in its undeniable power and its claim to offer infinite possibilities to all. Nevertheless, by raising such questions, S. compels us to consider how far the study of the past both reflects and influences our attitude to the present; one more reason why this book is eminently worth reading.

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THE CONTINUITY OF LATIN

J. FARRELL: *Latin Language and Latin Culture from Ancient to Modern Times*. Pp. xiv + 148. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Paper, £12.95. ISBN: 0-521-77663-5.

Farrell's book is the latest entry in the series 'Roman Literature and its Contexts'. Like its companion volumes it is written as an extended essay, and develops its points through implication and example rather than through exhaustive consideration of evidence and alternatives. Farrell's theme is the damage done to the study of Latin language and literature by periodization (i.e. classical, late antique, medieval, and Renaissance; but also 'golden' and 'silver' within the classical period), and by persistent use of metaphors that represent Latin language and culture as male, dead, and impoverished in comparison with the lexical and grammatical richness of Greek. In place of such divisive and enfeebling strategies F. proposes a reconfigured study of Latin that would emphasize continuity across time and space while paying special attention to the range of voices (male, female, high and low status, Christian, pagan, etc.) contained within it.

The book is provocative in the best sense, for it invites the reader to reflect on assumptions that shape the practice of scholars, teachers, students, and publishers yet too often go unexamined. As a provocation—and a genial, lucid, and well-written one, at that—I can recommend the book warmly; but only as a provocation, for I find myself in serious disagreement with the overall thrust of F.'s argument, as well as with the unexamined assumptions of his own approach. F. writes as though language and culture are coextensive: but surely such a belief is only a residue of Romantic

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