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Debate Article

Nothing else to think?

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"Power, power everywhere, and how the signs do shrink. Power, power everywhere, and nothing else to think" (Sahlins 2002: 20).

I am grateful to Fernández-Götz *et al.* (2020) for raising an important question regarding 'the material turn' within Roman studies in particular, and post-humanism in general. What, precisely, are the intellectual, methodological, theoretical and ethical consequences at stake with this paradigmatic shift? This aspect has indeed remained underdeveloped in the discussions as part of, and following, the 2014 'Romanisation debate' in *Archaeological Dialogues*. Fernández-Götz *et al.* (2020) raise the concern that a recognition of the active role of material culture will result in an underestimation of human responsibility and suffering, and will limit archaeology's capacity for social critique. They even suggest that proponents of such views will produce a "sanitised past" (Fernández-Götz *et al.* 2020: 1630–1639) that risks obscuring or even forgetting the human dark side of history.

This is an important admonition, particularly as our field continues to debate and develop the practicalities of these ideas. While I therefore applaud the discussion that their debate piece will stimulate, I consider its main intellectual critique to be misconceived. Symmetrical approaches do not forget about humans or blot out human agency, responsibility or ethical issues. They provide a more complete understanding of world history that should also include the agency of things (Hodder 2019). Ethics, and all the other issues that Fernández-Götz *et al.* (2020) urge us to consider, are still in play. The point is that these are now put into better perspective—*pace* the quote from Woolf (2017: 216)—as objects are no longer reduced to passive proxies of human intention. Within the philosophical debate on (flat) ontologies, the critique that these approaches would neglect the issue of power has already been effectively countered (e.g. Bryant 2011; Harman 2018): flat ontologies do not lead to 'flat' ethics. Indeed, Fernández-Götz *et al.* (2020: 1630–1639) reach a similar conclusion themselves, stating that it is the "bidirectional process in which people create material culture while simultaneously being constructed by it that leads to warfare and exploitation *in new ways* [my emphasis]". I have previously advocated exactly this type of analysis (Versluys 2014)—one that concerns power and Roman violence simultaneously.

The case studies presented by Fernández-Götz *et al.* (2020) show what really is at stake for the authors in terms of our interpretation of the Roman world: that we should not forget about the dark side of Roman state power. I fully agree with that, and their examples illustrate how much progress has been made. New technologies and data allow for a focus on the direct social impact of conquest, and bring mass violence and enslavement into sharper perspective. The archaeology of rural communities shows the massive impact, demographic and otherwise,

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of Roman conquest—and, indeed, that conquest was often not a friendly story of elite negotiations on equal terms. Nevertheless, if one does not focus on these specific events from this particular perspective, does that automatically imply a 'sanitisation' of the Roman past?

It strikes me that the case studies presented to support the critique of approaches such as my 'objects in motion' (Versluys 2014) are rather specific. My aim was to outline an intellectual agenda for Roman archaeology as a whole, incorporating globalisation studies as well as 'material turn' paradigms, to move us beyond the Roman-Native dichotomy, and to advance fruitfully the 'Romanisation' debate. Fernández-Götz *et al.* (2020), however, are interested in Roman expansion and, specifically, its predatory political economy in the late Republic and early Empire. This represents a much more limited subject and perspective—particularly as they retain the traditional Western European focus of post-colonial Romanisation studies, instead of examining the wider Empire. While both perspectives are important and worthwhile, they are different. When studying the Second World War, scholars can focus on Nazi atrocities, Stalin's great terror or the bombing of German cities by the Western Allies; it is estimated that around 75 million people died during the war and many more suffered enormously. But scholars can also study how the Second World War propelled the USA into an irresistible 'empire of commodities' (de Grazia 2005), laid the foundations for a period of unparalleled economic growth and prosperity in Europe, stimulated technological developments of all kinds, changed women's fashion, and allowed African-Americans to escape rural poverty—amongst many other things. Focusing on these latter topics does not 'sanitise' the past or deny the immense human suffering experienced during the war. Both approaches tell important historical truths without contradicting or denying the other: they ask different questions at different levels of analysis, and integrating these approaches enriches our overall understanding of what happened. As Morris (2014) has argued, taking a long-term perspective may even show that it is thanks to war that we now live longer and more comfortable lives than ever before. Directing attention to processes of collaboration, integration and 'hybridisation' or diasporas of material culture is not intended to deny the aggressive aspects of Roman expansion, but to provide a more complete picture and hence a better understanding of the Roman world. Fernández-Götz *et al.* (2020) provide no examples for which a focus on these aspects is shown to be a direct and deliberate denial of the latter.

If scholars concentrate on what Fernández-Götz *et al.* (2020: 1630–1639) refer to as the "bright aspects" of Roman conquest, such as literacy, villa landscapes, public architecture and *terra sigillata*, are they perhaps unconsciously guilty of producing non-inclusive and unbalanced accounts? This is an important question, as decolonising Roman studies remains crucial, perhaps now more than ever. There are, however, more productive ways to do so than by focusing exclusively on the dark sides of Roman imperialism. My own response to what I consider an ethical call for *all* Classicists has been to attempt to decentralise Rome through globalisation studies (for examples of winners and losers—both conquerors and the conquered—and without associated neoliberal narratives, see Pitts & Versluys 2015). Similarly, focusing on how Rome, in fact, comprised the cultures that it conquered (Versluys 2015, 2017) effectively halts the 'fetishisation' of the Romans (van Dommelen 2014). There is certainly more to effective post-colonialism and Roman archaeology's capacity for social critique, therefore, than shifting the interpretation from 'good Romans' to 'bad Romans'. Moreover, I feel that the authors insufficiently acknowledge progress within Roman studies more broadly.

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Following the publication of *The Romanization of Britain* (Millett 1990), for example, post-colonial approaches soon developed into a leading theoretical paradigm in Britain and other Western European countries. The last 30 years, therefore, have rightly seen attention devoted to previously neglected subjects, albeit sometimes in an unbalanced way (Terrenato 1998; Versluys 2014). The discipline of Classics, in general, is also attempting to interrogate critically its own colonial premises and racist entanglements, as illustrated by the work of Mary Beard, Edith Hall or the website www.eidolon.pub. Much, however, remains to be done. While post-colonial scholars have made important contributions to these developments, they should continue to ask critical questions, including about their own ideological premises and misconceptions.

There are two important conclusions here: firstly, archaeology should no longer be considered the study of "people through things", as Fernández-Götz *et al.* (2020: 1630–1639) state, but rather the study of how the entanglement of humans *and* things shapes society and history. Secondly, pursuing 'the material turn' can only make Roman studies more comprehensive—even when the predominant intent is to highlight the dark side of Roman expansionism in the western provinces in the late Republic and early Empire.

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