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Morality and Alternative Economic Theories
in Ancient History Studies: a Review Article

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Morality and Alternative Economic Theories in Ancient History Studies: a Review Article

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Review of: Sarah C. Murray and Seth Bernard (Eds), *Models, Methods, and Morality. Assessing Modern Approaches to the Greco-Roman Economy*, Palgrave Studies in Ancient Economies, Cham: Springer, 2024.

Abstract

Models, Methods, and Morality discusses moral values in the field of ancient economic history, where neoclassical hegemony in the form of the New Institutional Economics has progressively gained ground. The book mainly criticises mainstream economics for focusing on quantitative growth without much regard to its social consequences. The spirit of this review is a constructive encouragement to build an alternative approach to economic history possibly based on the classical economists' surplus approach, taking also advantage of the familiarity that scholars of ancient societies have with the concept of economic surplus. The risk is that without a resolute criticism of mainstream economics and the adoption of an alternative point of view, mainstream economics might paternalistically reabsorb the legitimate moral criticism that pervades many of the contributions to the volume. Being based on a simple heuristic of the economic sources of the élites' wealth and not possessing a pre-packaged view of human behaviour, surplus theory may usefully be at the core of a socially sensitive, economic history agenda.

Keywords: Economic history, Ancient economies, Surplus approach, New Institutional Economics, Moral economy.

JEL classification: B12, B51, N01

Introduction*

The subject of moral values in science is a traditional one. In economics this issue is particularly relevant given the influence, for good or bad, that this discipline exercises on other social sciences and politics. *Models, Methods, and Morality* discusses this issue in the field of ancient economic history, revealing considerable dissatisfaction with the dominant neoclassical theory (more appropriately called here marginalism). This critical stance attracted my attention as a professional economist himself critical of the mainstream and interested in the economic interpretation of pre-capitalist societies. In this regard, I will comment the various contributions to the volume from the perspective of existence of alternative approaches in political economy.

The book originates from a conference held online, based at the University of Toronto, on November 5-6-2021. The book contains four parts. Part I “Methods and Historiography” mainly discusses merits and demerits of New Institutional Economics (NIE); part II “Measurement and Morality” considers different methods of assessment and quantification in economic history; part III “Paths Forward” intends to present future perspectives on how to incorporate moral themes in ancient economic history; the final part IV “Responses” includes three post-conference papers meant to evaluate the book’s outcomes – including a defence of NIE by Ian Morris – and a final assessment by the editors.

I will begin from a critical discussion of the volume’s main aims as they emerge from the editors’ introduction. I will next examine how these goals have been pursued in the different sections of the book. *Convitato di Pietra* of this review, is the classical economists’ surplus approach to the theory of income distribution. Despite its traditional use, the theoretical background of the concept of social surplus has rarely been discussed in anthropology, archaeology or economic history, no doubt also because mainstream economics has done its best to marginalise dissenting voices so to make them invisible to other social sciences. A full appreciation of the surplus approach, I will argue, would change the perspective on many issues in ancient history studies. In this light, while sympathising with the moral uneasiness felt by many contributors about marginalism – and its filiation NIE – I will encourage them to take a further step through a resolute analytical criticism of marginalism. The risk is in fact a paternalistic reabsorption of the critical

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instance of these contributions in the orthodox context, as witnessed in the book by the contribution of Ian Morris (essay 15).

1. Making mainstream more moral or looking for alternative economic theories?

Purpose of the volume, as stated in the introduction by the book's editors, is a fuller consideration of moral values in the study of the economy of ancient societies. An important inspiration for the project comes from the concept of moral economy originally due to the British historian Edward Thompson. This "moral or ethical approach", the editors argue, "emphasizes social relationships as they shape and respond to economic practices, which may thus be assessed as good or bad on moral terms" (essay 1, p. 2). This view is opposed to the notorious mainstream view of economics as concerned with individual choices on how to best employ scarce resources among alternative uses, what the editors appropriately define "an engineering approach to economics" (essay 1, p. 2). Lionel Robbins's well-known scope for economics is not, luckily, the only available in the history of thought. David Ricardo's definition of Political Economy as concerned with "the laws which regulate (...) distribution" (Ricardo 1981, p. 6) is one possible alternative (that he saw as complementary to Adam Smith's focus on the origins of nations' wealth), possibly closer to the book critical instances. Ricardo's definition relies on a specific theory of income distribution often labelled "surplus approach" on which a brief digression is necessary.

Social surplus is definable as what remains of social output after the necessities for workers and for the maintenance of the means of production are put aside to allow the economy to reproduce itself, at least at the same level, in the next production cycle. The economic magnitudes involved require a sophisticated economic analysis when applied to capitalism (specifically, a consistent theory of prices, as Ricardo and Marx well understood). The concept can be however legitimately used in a heuristic way for pre-capitalist societies appropriately completed by historical institutional analysis (Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico 2021a/b) – it has, in fact, been applied since the early classical economists like Turgot and Adam Smith to "primitive" societies (Meek 1976). The surplus approach has been retrieved by Piero Sraffa (1951) and Pierangelo Garegnani (2024 [1960], 1984) after a long oblivion. Their contributions also paved the way to the famous Cambridge controversy on neoclassical capital theory, which left the analytical foundations of neoclassical distribution and growth theory in pieces (see in this regard the short appendix to the paper).

In the surplus approach moral values, both of the student and of historical subjects, play a central role in supporting or challenging any given distributional set up. In this regard the statement by the editors that “[i]nequality is *now* a major subject of study” (essay 1, p. 4, my italics) could be qualified as a *return* of the theme of inequality after economic theories where it had a greater centrality were possibly side-lined for their potential disturbing implications.

With regard to the historical role of moral values, Murray and Bernard (essay 1, p. 6) note that: “In the Hobbesian view, moral systems emerge as mechanisms to mitigate humans’ selfish instincts, and instead to encourage community members to work toward collective prosperity”, importantly adding: “sometimes at the *shorter-term* disadvantage of individual actors (my italics).” Going beyond this “short-term disadvantage”, in the Thorstein Veblen’s old-institutionalist tradition, revived in anthropology by Melville Herskovits (1952), moral values have the function of making an unfair income distribution or servitudes, explained through the concept of social surplus, socially acceptable *in the longer term*. In this view “moral systems are necessarily identifiable within specific sociohistorical contexts”, as the editors (essay 1, p. 6) also maintain. Moral values must be *objectively* considered in their *functions* as part of the historical work – unveiling whether supporting, condescending or rejecting the status quo. Deconstruction of the *objective* functionality of the observed cultures might however reflect the observers’ own values and so be incompatible with the cultural relativism later advocated by Viglietti (essay 2), who asserts deep respect for the observed subjective values. In this regard, the classical surplus approach may consent to separate the objective economic (exploitation) mechanism behind the power relation between social groups from their respective subjective cosmologies, letting the student (the historian and her readers) free to interpret the latter as preferred (functionally or otherwise). In this respect, Murray and Bernard (essay 1, p. 7) argue that it would be “possible to imagine a different volume looking at how ancients understood their moral system’s relationship to their economy”.

It is anyway on moral values of the students of ancient economies that, according to the editors, the book focuses its attention: “what modern researchers have chosen and choose to focus on, and what sort of moral systems those choices reflect” (essay 1, p. 7). The plea is for a moral history that “focuses on the social impacts of economic growth or decline as much as upon its material aspects” (essay 1, p. 7). The attention, in this respect, is especially on NIE, on the one hand appreciating its revitalising role, on the other condemning its relative amorality. More specifically,

the influential “Northian framework ... especially promoted by the landmark publication of the *Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World [CEHGRW]* (Scheidel et al., 2007)” (essay 1, p. 9) had the merit of breaking Finley’s view of the antiquity as a stagnant economic reality. In addition, “NIE’s appetite for transforming social and cultural factors into ingredients in differential economic performance was seen to resolve the previous stalemate between primitivist and modernist views on the ancient economy” (essay 1, p. 9). In other words, NIE integrated history and institutions in marginalism, closing the old controversy. This “energising” role would, on the other hand, be weakened by its reaffirmation that “economics and economy provide the only, and the best, approach for understanding human society”, and by a degree of contempt for more cultural oriented studies (Essay 1, p. 10).

Referring to Cristiano Viglietti (essay 2), the editors talk of “hegemony” of mainstream NIE, accused to be not “particularly appropriate in building a robust and humanistic understanding of ancient societies” (essay 1, p. 10). A better quantification of “human misery, anxiety, or instability that often come with economic change, growth, and expansion” is instead advocated (essay 1, p. 12). In this sense, the editors answer affirmatively to the question they pose: “Is it within the purview of the discipline’s mission to determine whether an ancient economy performed well or badly for its constituents according to modern systems of morality?” (Essay 1, p. 13). While I agree with this, I wonder whether the attention to “human misery” just regards the subjective values of the observer or is a result of the theory she adopts. For instance, according to the marginalist harmonic view of distribution (that backs NIE) no single “production factor” does exploit any other (and ultra-marginalist NIE economist would even defend slavery or serfdom as welfare maximizing outcomes under certain circumstances). On the opposite, according to Classical surplus theory exploitation is a constant from past to present economic formations. The understanding of the exploitation mechanisms at the origin of “human misery” will thus allow the economic historian free to feel morally outraged by what she observes; or justify it as a price to a magnificent future (as contended by the mainstream scholars quoted by Viglietti, essay 2, pp. 33-36); or leave the reader free to judge.

Part I of the volume (Methods and Historiography) is particularly concerned with the most general issues just discussed.

2. Immoral economics, which economics?

For Cristiano Viglietti (essay 2) the moral question in ancient studies derives from the centrality that western moral values, taken as a benchmark or even as an aspirational goal, assume in the discipline. This dominant stance does not only derive from mainstream economics, but also from the substantivist tradition, albeit not so much from Polanyi himself, as rather by his student Moses Finley. Incidentally, Viglietti recalls that “Polanyi and his school argued against the universal applicability of that definition of economy/economic” (essay 2, p. 28). We may note here that, unfortunately, Polanyi and his school legitimised in this way marginalism as a correct approach to market economies, only criticising its application to former economies.¹ As far as the latter are concerned, Viglietti continues: “Contrary to formal approaches, substantivism tended to connect or ‘embed’ (...) economic behavior in specific cultural, institutional, moral or ritual practices” (essay 2, pp. 28-9). It can be added here that before Polanyi (and likely inspiring him), Marx distinguished between the price-form that social relations take in capitalism and the personal-shape that they assume in pre-capitalist formations. Viglietti takes indeed Marx as one main source (along Max Weber) both of Moses Finley’s claim of an “overall superiority of modern European economies and societies” (Viglietti 2024, p. 30) and of his early criticism of cultural relativism. Without doubt, whereas Marx, and later Polanyi, both denounced the human alienation in the “disembodied” social relations in capitalism, Marx (perhaps unlike Polanyi) was equally ready to condemn the often-degrading nature of the embodied institutional and ideological ties of the preceding societies. Surplus theory would in fact suggest that those relations hid in fact human exploitation, leaving little space for nostalgia.² I would believe that if Finley, as much as Marx, saw something positive in capitalism it was in its overcoming ancient superstitions hiding exploitation, not in itself.³ (Having said so, I am ready to admit that Marx was too optimistic, or too Hegelian, in reading a finalistic happy end of history, see Wolf ([1982] 2010, p. xxi).

¹ Polanyi is also critical of the surplus approach (Cesaratto 2024a).

² For Marx, exploitation takes different forms in market and non-market economies, regulated by price mechanisms in the former, through personal relations in the second. Based on Ricardo, Marx went a good deal far in proving exploitation in capitalism, a work one century later completed by Sraffa (1951, 1960) and Garegnani (1960 [2024]). Exploitation is more evident in slavery or serfdom.

³ Moreover, Marx was much interested, well before Graeber and Wengrow (2021), in the early anthropological evidence of primitive egalitarianism.

Be this as it may, by the end of last century, Viglietti points out, Finley's hegemony in ancient studies was substituted by that of NIE. My guess is that this reflected the retreat of Marxism and radical Keynesianism and the bully return of neoclassical economics, which mirrored major political changes (e.g. the collapse of the socialist challenge). This is confirmed by the connection between NIE and the neoliberal Washington Consensus (WoC) (Rodrik 2006): after NIE the slogan getting prices right became getting institutions right. This is noted by Kron (essay 14, p. 415) who denounces that: "North and most of his acolytes were/are very much members of the economics profession with most of the same social and ideological blinders, and their claims and prescriptions for good economic policy frequently reflect their own biases and the smug complacency of 'market' fundamentalism and the disastrous 'Washington Consensus' (WaC) of late twentieth-century Friedmanite capitalist radicalism" (see also Von Reden and Kowalzig 2022, pp. 348-349).

While critical of Douglas North, Viglietti along other contributors has words of appreciation for his having taken institutions "seriously" (Viglietti 2024, p. 32). North's sensitivity was certainly also stimulated by a certain envy for Marx's compact view of the relation between economic structure and institutions, which North's theoretical reference, the Walrasian general equilibrium theory (GET), cannot provide but by default – market failures generate institutions to fix them. He felt later unhappy with this approach but his later attempts to explain exploitative institutions made him progressively evanescent, as Matthijs Krul (2018) and Sheilagh Ogilvie and André Carus (2014) point out.⁴ The main indictment Viglietti (Essay 2, p. 32 and ff) makes to North concerns his enduring faith in economic growth, a recurrent accusation in the book. There is no doubt indeed that the Walrasian background leads to looking at history as an enduring longing for laissez faire-led growth. The passages that Viglietti (2024, pp. 33 and ff) quotes from editors and contributors to the *CEHGRW* stroke me as extremely cynical expressions of Western presumed moral superiority in pursuing laissez-faire growth (albeit with some marginal human cost). Independently of any moral evaluation of Western (pro-market) values, the Classical economic theory, integrated by the most innovative elements of Keynesian analysis, permits today to cast many doubts over the NIE prediction that laissez-faire will lead to general welfare and full employment (Petri 2021). The present distributional, ecological and geopolitical disaster of capitalism is also confirming that

⁴ Interestingly, Ogilvie (2007) supports a conflictual view of institutions (they mainly exist to regulate the distributional conflict) very close to the one naturally associated with the classical surplus approach.

prediction false – with the exception of the now distant Keynesian golden age (1950-1979) elicited by the Soviet challenge.

Viglietti also strongly recommends of approaching past societies “without projecting onto other societies our understandings of what the economy is or should be”, rather describing “phenomena by valorising ‘local’ social and cultural models, cosmologies, schemes of persons and things (...), institutional framework and the factual material realities *as expressed and enacted in the natives’ own terms* (...) (essay 2, p. 40, italics in the original). This is a delicate point already touched upon before in this review: how the observed and the observed moral value should interact. I tend to believe that respect for the “institutional framework and the factual material realities *as expressed and enacted in the natives’*” is part of reconstruction work of how a past society worked. Many researches would go however beyond, following Eric Wolf’s ([1982] 2010, p. xxiv) prescription of looking “more closely at (...) how cosmological orders are built up and invoked to construct and accumulate some forms of power, while muting or disarticulating other forms; and how some mental schemata come to dominate others in the formation of genders, classes, and ethnicities, even as alternative schemata contest that hegemony.” I believe that this suggestion is consistent with Maurizio Bettini and William Short’s commendable recommendation (reported by Viglietti, essay 2, p. 40) of “trying to bring out and give voice (in as much detail as possible) to the natives’ conceptual ways of perceiving and articulating that experience”, against any “reductionist extraction of those few aspects relevant for the observer’s idea of the economy.”

We may note at this point that many contributions to the book tend to identify economic analysis with mainstream marginalism. Particularly in the heydays of the Cambridge controversy mentioned above, when not a few felt that neoclassical theory had received a death blow, the Sraffian retrieval of the surplus approach raised interest also outside economics (e.g. Gudeman 1978). Later, however, mainstream economists have been effective in spreading a blanket of silence over this challenge, thus marginalising the Sraffian critique, so that even if classical economics is cited, it is poorly understood.

Carugati (essay 4), for example, identifies “economic models” with simplifying human behaviour, optimization, focus on growth and disregard for the “poor, subordinate, and *exploited* actors” (essay 4, p. 67, my italics). Exploitation is not certainly part of mainstream economics, if not as an aberration from sound market principles. Laudably, Carugati pays some attention to classical economists, unfortunately, however, reading Adam Smith through the neoclassical lenses of

Vernon Smith (essay 4, p. 69). She thus overlooks some aspects of Smith (Adam) that should instead be dear to the contributors of this book, such as the asymmetries in the power of masters (capitalist) and workers, the cultural (and anti-Schumpeterian) explanation of talents, the alienation of work (see the classic Rosenberg 1965). Moreover, her historical excursus jumps from Smith to the early marginalists, skipping the development of classical theory by Ricardo and Marx. Notably, Carugati (essay 4, p. 73) cites Sheilagh Ogilvie's (2007) criticism to NIE but not her view of institutions as a vehicle of regulation of social conflict, something much close to classical theory. According to Carugati it is "thanks in large part to the work of Douglass North and, later, Daron Acemoglu, [that] we tend to understand institutions as the product of conflict and power dynamics" (essay 4, p. 73). In North and Acemoglu this conflict does not regard, however, the "poor, subordinate, and *exploited*", if not indirectly, but rather the clash between market friendly and non-market friendly élites.⁵

In this regard, Lisa Eberle (essay 5) raises what I believe is the central issue of a moral sensitive, alternative approach to economic history: "economic inequality calls for an explanation, and beyond measuring it, we might inquire how it was created" (essay 5, p. 90). The question reminded me of one raised by Geoffrey de Ste. Croix (1981). For Croix the main question about any social formation concerns how the élite derived its surplus; in other words, it concerns: "the main way in which the dominant propertied class of the ancient world derived their surplus, whether or not the greater share in total production was due to unfree labour" (1981, p. 53, original emphasis, see also p. 133 and *passim*).

Promisingly, Eberle also questions classical economists first. Ricardo is presented as proposing "the distribution of wealth subject to a set of unchanging laws", as opposed to Marx's view of inequality as a "result of politics" (Eberle 2024, p. 92). I would more precisely say that Marx inherited his conflictual view of income distribution precisely from Ricardo (a noble pedigree that rendered Marx's intellectual challenge particularly dangerous). It is also not *exactly* true that according to Adam Smith it is the "invisible hand" that "creates wealth" (Eberle 2024, p. 93), it is rather the surplus extraction from labour, within the institutional context of free market. This is sufficiently clear from *The Wealth of Nations* (1776, e.g. p.83). In this regard, the legal system

⁵ For Acemoglu *et hoc genus omne* income distribution between labour, capital and land is regulated by the respective marginal productivities (nobody exploits anyone else). State élites extract tributes from all "production factors". On the contrary, for classical economics profits, land rent, *and* tributes are all components of the social surplus extracted from labour.

legitimises the extraction of a surplus, something on which Eberle rightly insists in her paper (essay 5, e.g. p. 94) (quoting György Lukács, Finley noted that "economic and legal categories are objectively and *substantively so interwoven as to be inseparable*" [1973, p. 50, original emphasis]). The legal context must be, therefore, associated with an economic theory of profits and land rent, and there are only two games in town: the surplus approach and marginalism, *tertium non datum* (unless one falls back to what Marx defined as vulgar economics where anything goes).

3. The morality of numbers: question of method or of theory?

The contributions to part II ("Measurement and Morality") tackle the book's topic from the point of view of the alternative value perspectives that may guide the quantification of historical facts. Taco Terpstra (essay 5, p. 125) discusses the issue of the moral assessment of economic growth, once unveiled by quantification, when this growth clearly required significant sacrifices by substantial sections of the population. Historical distance and the evolution of attitudes towards human rights clearly emerge as the main determinants of our (lower) degree of tolerance of the mentioned sacrifices (compared to that of observers closer to the events). However, another methodological aspect attracted my attention: Terpstra (2024) takes it for granted that quantification of growth may safely rely on neoclassical theory in which it is the adoption of more capital-intensive techniques that leads to per capita growth. While leaving aside the theoretical shortcomings of this theory after the Cambridge controversy (see the appendix), there is an inconsistent cohabitation in Terpstra of neoclassical growth and exploitation:

The logic of intensive growth dictates that wealth acquisition is not a zero-sum game and that raising individual prosperity does not necessitate taking it away from someone else. That is all very well, but undeniably under the Roman empire prosperity was taken away from a good many people, mainly slaves but also free day-laborers and peasants. Any intensive growth that may have occurred was accompanied by brutal exploitation and searing inequality (Terpstra 2024, p. 127).

Which exploitation theory is Terpstra referring to? In the standard marginalist model of intensive growth to which Terpstra refers to, no "factor of production" exploits any other. The question here is therefore not to judge the morality of quantitative economics per se, but which is the theory behind economic history research: different theories may have unlike moral implications. Branko Milanović, Peter Lindert, and Jeffrey Williamson (2011) is, for instance, an excellent example of a

quantitative study of exploitation based on the surplus approach.⁶ “To invest you have to have profits (that is, surplus above subsistence)” Milanović (2024a) wrote recently. (A NIE economist might reply that slavery and serfdom are violations of a fair free-labour wage determination based on the labour marginal product. After the Sraffian criticism, however, the marginalist explanation of distribution can be safely rejected. There is therefore a continuum of labour exploitation under the different institutional frameworks of free-labour, serfdom and slavery. As attested by historical research, the boundaries between these forms of exploitation are, in fact, often tenuous).

Dan-el Padilla Peralta (essay 8) also discusses “the extent to which practices of quantification smuggle in ideologies through the back door” (2024, p. 222), particularly the neoliberal ideology through the pages of the *CEHGRW* (essay 8, p. 228; see also Kron, essay 14, p. 408). For Peralta (essay 8, p.225 and passim) numbers are not innocent, they give authority to the observer and discipline to the observed (an obvious example is the measurement of processing times to control labour in Taylorism, see the classic Braverman 1974). On the opposite side, however, the risk (for the observer) “of not pursuing quantification is that our qualitative interpretive procedures thereby suffer a kind of impoverishment” (Essay 8, p. 230). Yet, quantification is often criticised because it “downplays the agency of politics and of political leaders” (essay 8, p. 231). According to Peralta, a greater emphasis on politics would favour the study of deeper macroeconomic forces, a shift from the subjective to the objective that the present reviewer supports. “Politics” is in fact better understood in a macroeconomic context, with the proviso that different theories have opposing moral and political implications.

Quantification, in the sense of standardization of measures, is discussed by Andrew Riggsby (essay 7). “Metrological standardization” is one institutional reform predicted by NIE as a long run natural result of efficiency tendencies. Unexpectedly, however, this prediction failed in the case of the Roman world. The absence of an invasive imperial imposition of standardization over local customs might be seen as a policy of reinforcement of local institutions (essay 7, p. 216).

Dimitri Nakassis (essay 6) discusses the evolution in the interpretations of the Aegean Bronze Age from an “extreme redistribution-and-command-economy model”, a tributary economy in which

⁶ Milanović (2024b) recalls that in his formation years in former Yugoslavia, he was perfectly familiar with Sraffa and Garegnani (who was, incidentally, my “maestro”). For an application of Milanović’s methodology to serfdom see Korchmina and Malinowski (2024).

the Palace controls all economic activity, to a more composite model in which household production and trade assume more prominence (also as the initial trigger of developments that eventually generated the Palatial system). Nakassis (essay 6, pp. 174-175) sees some “disquieting” Eurocentrism around some persisting “cartoonish” view of the Aegean Bronze Age as “Oriental despotisms” whereas “three decades of recent research has shown that these systems were far more complex”.⁷

4. “Va’ dove ti porta il cuore”, or the Theory?

Part III (Paths Forward) is devoted to promising methodological lines able to “re-humanising” ancient economic history. Seth Bernard (essay 9), an editor of the volume, looks at two: complexity science, in particular the agent-based models (ABM); and environmental sciences. Bernard’s concern are theories that pay “more attention to individual agency within social networks”, and are “interested in relating how economic development affected all people in ancient Mediterranean communities, losers as well as winners” (essay 9, p. 247). To this purpose Bernard turns to “complexity science” which “focuses on systems composed of many dynamically interacting parts, which interact in often unpredictable ways”. In this view heterogeneous agents (with different backgrounds) make decisions and take learning in an uncertain environment (essay 9, p. 249). This may however sound far from a history-based, socio-economic approach that looks at the production and reproduction skeleton of economic and social relations, and at the accompanying cultures; one in which individuals move as member of social groups. This I would call structural complexity, as opposed to chaotic complexity.⁸ Appropriately Bernard recognizes that “the underlying assumptions of ABM (...) have tended to be market based” excluding “non-market forms of exchange”.⁹ I also welcome Bernard support to environmental studies, a materialist approach to events traditionally popular among processualist archaeologists.

⁷ For an account of the variety of socio-economic arrangements in the Middle East see Marcella Frangipane [2019], who, incidentally, adopts a surplus approach.

⁸ Bernard accuses “neoclassical approaches (...) to turn people into “cogs” in a dehumanizing economic machine” (essay 9, p. 270). The ABM seems however similar in this regard.

⁹ Brancaccio et al. (2022) found that a large majority of ABM are based on neoclassical theory and not on heterodox economics. Similarly, Kron (essay 14, p. 415) observes that: “Complexity Economics is in some small way designed to provide a critique or perhaps alternative to neoclassical economics, but in other ways it might be seen to represent a concession to the worst tactic of intellectually dishonest claims to an air of authority and scientific rigor through mathematical models”.

The theme of the “losers and winners” in economic growth is taken up by the other editor of the volume, Sarah Murray (essay 10), who sets out to quantify the other side of the ledger of economic growth, that of its social costs. Admittedly, the neoclassical background of the prevailing approaches is a cold “growth accounting” based on the availability of “production factors” (typical labour, capital, and natural resources) that tends to hide the social relation behind growth (essay 10, p. 284). It is perhaps true that “we do not currently possess a set of numerical proxies for both growth and suffering that might allow us to systematically weigh the gains against the damages” (essay 10, p. 285). Better than that, however, we possess a theory – or more modestly an analytical framework – to be filled with the historical social relations, institutions, and conflicts. Human suffering is *ab ovo* part of the picture, perhaps not so directly measurable in surplus-labour-time as Marx (after Ricardo) hoped, but certainly in terms of rates of exploitation (Milanović et al. 2011). Murray resorts to a labour-time measurement of the human costs of big construction projects in the antiquity (including lives lost in the works). Some of these works (say the Roman aqueducts), she argues, may have eventually benefited the population at large, while many did not (essay 10, p. 288-289 and *passim*). By quantifying both social costs and benefits Murray estimates the *net* long-term benefits in terms of social development of some historical large-building projects from the Bronze Age Mycenae to classical Greece that we currently look at with acritical admiration. Doesn’t, however, Murray concede too much to the conventional economists’ religion of cost-benefit analysis (with the accompanying arbitrary quantification metrics) by including present tourism revenues among the benefits of ancient works?¹⁰

Another theoretical perspective is put forward by Astrid Van Oyen (essay 13) eliciting some considerations on my part that she would possibly find quite distant from her “posthumanist” approach (or may be not). Van Oyen’s incipit that “the reconstruction of human history through its material traces is usually the purview of archaeology” (essay 13, p. 381) reminded me of Vere Gordon Childe’s autobiographical note published in the year of his tragic death. This note explained the attraction of Marxism to archaeology (even during McCarthyism, Childe ironically noted) by referring to the fact that means of production were a typical archaeological finding,

¹⁰ Importantly, absent in the paper is a consideration of public works as a traditional way of creating jobs and consensus, apart from a short remark recalling that “the ancient Inca, hauling stones was said to be used by political leaders to keep peasants busy, and was clearly not seen as a self-actualizing or fulfilling occupation” (essay 10, p. 299). Famously, John Maynard Keynes (1936, p.129-130) evoked the examples of pyramid-building, as well as gold-mines, Middle-Age cathedrals and wars, as means to increase wealth “if there are political and practical difficulties in the way” of doing anything better.

naturally leading collectors to wonder first and foremost about the material organization of the society that employed them (Childe 1958, p. 72). Similarly, Van Oyen's thesis is that "things (...) make people", since objects "are not passive tools wielded by omnipotent humans; instead, they leak, disobey, tweak, and shape people's" activities. This prompted me a second recollection concerning Marx's *The Poverty of Philosophy* where he argued that: "In acquiring new productive forces men change their mode of production; and in changing their mode of production, in changing the way of earning their living, they change all their social relations. *The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill society with the industrial capitalist*" (Marx [1847] 1955, p. 49, my italics). Van Oyen regards the causality from means of production to human agency as a criticism to the one-way causality of NIE where humans exercise a total control over "a passive material world" (Essay 13, p. 382 and passim) (this is why, as far as I understand, the author calls her approach "post-human"). *Technologies of production* are not innocent either in Marx or in Van Oyen. To prove this, she studies two storage techniques, one related to corn, the other to wine production. Corn storage can be read as an occasion for a Hobbesian social contract through which humans socially manage the stored resources. An alternative reading is however possible in which corn storage gave origin to a transformation of a communitarian management of the social surplus to its control by an élite (Testart 1988, Scott 2017 among many). "[G]rain storage was poised to divide the world into haves and have-nots, spinning webs of mutual dependency between vulnerability and power" concludes Van Oyen (Essay 13, p. 391). Storage in wine production, related to fermentation, promotes instead the appearance of a "speculative entrepreneur" willing to invest in this time-consuming activity (essay 13, p. 391). Thus, two similar techniques give origin to different social characters, that can well coalesce in the same person: a "prototypical elite landowner (...) wielding a large granary and wine storeroom, could position himself (yes, still him) variably as conservative patron (grain thinking) and as shrewd businessman (wine thinking)" (Essay 13, p. 391). This passage provokes another recollection from Marx who, in vol. III of *Capital*, argued that, while *forms of exploitation* are the "innermost secret" of any society, nonetheless this "does not prevent the same economic basis [...] from showing infinite variations and gradations in appearance, which can be ascertained only by analysis of the empirically given circumstances" [Marx (1894) 1974, pp. 791-792]). This is a more mature version of Historical Materialism (HM) compared to the rather mechanical one of *The Poverty of Philosophy*.

I also very much appreciate the Van Oyen's important point that not much importance should be attached to the concept of bounded rationality in criticising mainstream theory (as does, e.g., Carugati in essay 4), proposing to study choices as conditioned by the material experience:

bounded rationality is not enough of a correction to neoclassical economics. It still posits atomic human actors, only now caught up in various external formal or informal 'institutions'. Bounded rationality should actually be taken to mean materially mediated subjectivity: it is through situated practices that not only the means of achieving wants, but also the wants themselves, are shaped (Essay 13, p. 392).

The remaining two papers of part III focus on specific research methodologies based on skeletal remains to assess the level and evolution of standards of living in ancient societies. Maeve McHugh (essay 11) moves from the centrality of agricultural activities in ancient economies. Her focus is not, however, on the variety of productive and social arrangements through which such centrality found expression since, in "these instances, the farmer is an abstract character derived from economic criteria rather than an individual" (essay 11, p. 318). In this way "we miss the farmer's experience and reduce the individual to a cog in the wheel of a much larger mechanism that governs their [sic] existence" (essay 11, p. 318). I feel rather uneasy with this stance: how can we equate the experience of "male or female, adult or child, free or enslaved persons, hired or independent" farmers (essay 11, p. 319)? Farmers are farmers, seems yet to argue McHugh. (More interesting is the applied section of her paper in which she studies the evidence from skeletal remains at Archaic Cemetery at Agia Paraskevi [Thessaloniki]).

A timely exhortation to exercise caution in the utilisation of health data is made by Kim Bowes (essay 12) precisely because they have so far been employed "as support for both the positive and negative pictures of Roman physical health, and by extension economic well-being" (essay 12, p. 347). Indeed, early haste associations between singular health indexes and economic performance inspired by the "cliometric turn of the 1980s" look now rather simplistic (essay 12, p. 349 and passim). Consequently, the essay sets out to "to scrutinize both the economic-historical use of skeletal data, as well as the historical models used by physical anthropologists in their interpretation of their own data" (essay 12, p. 347). The paper inspects the cases of the alleged correlation between stature or caries and standard of living that neglect, however, other factors like genetics or age that may matter (essay 12, p. 352 and ff). Thus, the paper advocates a more careful consideration of "physical, social and mental components" (essay 12, p.370) pointing to a direction somehow opposite to that of McHugh (essay 11).

5. What did we learn?

The final part IV (“Responses”) includes three reaction papers. Geoffrey Kron (essay 14) points to the Western (white) bias of neoliberal economic history that also passes through “the manipulation and aggressive exploitation and weaponization of pseudo-statistics” (essay 14, p. 408). Ideally connecting to my reading of Van Oyen (essay 13), Kron also notes that: “Aside from Morris’ references to Marx’s witticisms (in essay 15), Marx and the Marxist tradition do not have a prominent position in this volume” (essay 14, p. 408). Unexpectedly, though, Kron lessens Marx’s relevance denouncing “his condescension toward his beloved working classes” (essay 14, p. 409). The latter, however, have historically been a positive force of social emancipation and democracy (not always the case for “lumpen proletariat” and “petit bourgeoisie”). Kron sees also a *continuity* between classical and neoclassical theories by rescuing “the ideological claims of classical economic theory by putting them on a more rigorous scientific basis”, or believed to be so (essay 14, p. 415). The scope of the marginalist revolution of the late nineteenth century was even more subtle: saving the liberal claims of classical economics while discarding the conflict implications of the surplus approach. The *discontinuity* between the two theories is deep in this regard.

Anne McCants’ paper (essay 16) debuts by condemning the unequal partnership between economics and the sister social sciences (essay 16, p. 459), and also the short-lived solution offered by NIE to the “fundamental incompatibility between neoclassical economic theory and the economic lives of ancient peoples” (essay 16, p. 460). She also endorses (essay 16, p. 460) Viglietti’s plea, which we met above, of valorising “local social and cultural models”. Nonetheless, with some discontinuity with this humanistic stance, the rest of the paper proposes an over-ambitious, mathematical model of economic history aimed to refute the overwhelming importance that NIR attributes to having institutions right to generate economic growth (essay 16, p. 463). The model’s results would prove “quite definitively that institutions do not rule” (essay 16, p. 470). This is of course a momentous result since it denies the practical relevance of the WoC’s recipe of getting institutions right. The paper does not, however, provide enough information about the background economic model it relies upon. In absence of specific indications, one may

presume this is the conventional neoclassical growth model (another natural victim of the Cambridge controversy).¹¹

A general discussion of the book's themes in defence of mainstream economics comes from Ian Morris (essay 15). This is, in a sense, the most important essay of the book given the standing of the author within the field. "Politics are often a fruitful starting point for scholarship, but putting a label on a theory we do not like and acting as if that then allows us to ignore it is a terrible idea", reacts Morris to the criticism moved in the book e.g. to *CEHGRW* (essay 15, p. 427). No politics please. Only facts, better if quantitative; and if you see shortcomings in the analysis, please help to fix them. Light candles, do not blow the candles out. Morris well represents what he calls the WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic) establishment, the accomplished liberal section of the American hegemony that feels to be sitting on the positive side of history. This side claims that free markets brought about Pareto advantages, bringing conspicuous wealth to some without depressing the welfare of others (Vilfredo Pareto, a conservative, is however never mentioned). Other metrics are yet possible, most typically that of relative incomes: an increasingly unfair income distribution might offend the sense of justice and depress perceived welfare (Milanović 2007). This is a severe oversight that the WEIRD scholar would, however, paternalistically reply: please complete the analysis, there is a D for democrat in our trademark. It should not be forgotten that neoclassical economics is an ecumenical church that welcomes opiose believers and accepts variations in the rites, as long as they do not cast doubts on basic truths (in particular on income distribution as determined by factors' relative scarcity and marginal productivities). It is the articles of faith that one must question, for instance the neoclassical foundations of Morris's (supply-side) explanation of economic growth. This is nowadays possible.

Involuntary encouraging an alternative approach, Morris (essay 13, p. 434) has words of appreciation for the "classic paper" by Branko Milanović et al. (2011), a surplus-based, empirical analysis of income distribution in past societies in line with classical economics. "[The] task of the economic theory of any system consists in formulating the laws governing the volume of economic surplus and its utilisation . . ." wrote Witold Kula, a Polish student of Eastern European feudalism ((1970 [1962], p. 10, my translation). Both Kula and Milanović et al. put numbers where their

¹¹ For alternative growth models along classical, Sraffian and Keynesian lines, see Luigi Pasinetti (1981) on structural change, and Morlin, Passos, Pariboni (2024) for a modern comparative political economy exercise using a demand-led "classical-Keynesian" approach.

tongue is, so the crucial question is not quantification (numbers) but the theory behind it (the tongue).

6. The Epilogue

Across a certain variety of themes summed up in the editors' conclusions (essay 17), an emerging common criticism across many contributions regards economic growth as the dominant focus of current research, particularly for its assessment of historical institutions in terms of their relative growth promotion efficiency, with scant attention to social costs. A risk I have seen is that this allegation might be paternalistically accommodated by the mainstream (please, light the candles), as shown by Morris' contribution (essay 15). My suggestion is therefore to reinforce the moral critical stance with a more direct analytical criticism to mainstream economics. The familiarity that the scholars of ancient economies have with the concept of social surplus might in this sense facilitate the conversation with the modern retrieval of classical economics.

For classical economists the economy is circular (Quesnay 1758; Pasinetti 1981). *Tout se tient*, distribution, accumulation, institutions (including cosmologies) having the concept of the social surplus at the centre. Economic change must be studied in this organic context that include its moral content. Moreover, economic change is not just a supply side phenomenon but it involves the (monetary) demand side (Hopkins 1980). This approach goes against piecemeal research à la Popper (Cesaratto 2024c). Instead, it does not run against Viglietti's recommendation to valorise the subjective point of view consistently with Marx's method of the "determined abstractions" – take first some distance from the confused reality to delineate some abstract guidelines, and then go back to history to give substance to the theory with historical (and why not, local) elements, now allocated within an organic framework. According to Andrea Ginzburg (2016, p. 158), Antonio Gramsci endorsed this method, while, according to Sen (2016), Ludwig Wittgenstein appreciated the 'anthropological way' of Piero Sraffa (who of Gramsci and Wittgenstein was one main interlocutor).¹² For Ginzburg (2016) while the classical surplus approach fitted in this method, GET is a typical example of Marx's "generic abstractions" (theory without history).

A final question is whether the choice of the theory is itself prejudiced by our initial moral values – be they socialist or liberal. Ian Morris (essay 15) regards the moral stance as a *preliminary* stimulus

¹² The late Sraffian economist Andrea Ginzburg was brother of Carlo, well known to historian for his path-breaking research on minor history, and both were sons of Natalia Ginzburg, a great Italian writer, and of Leone Ginzburg murdered in Rome by the nazi-fascists in 1944.

to research. While discussing this issue, also Joseph Schumpeter (1949) began “from the full admission of the existence in economic research of a continuous overlap between values, facts and theoretical analyses. (...) This, however, according to Schumpeter, does not at all mean that the scientific process is in any way ‘conditioned’ (...)” (Schiattarella 2022, p. 77, my translation). Indeed, time can do justice to the most blatantly prejudiced analysis. Unfortunately, though, this is only partly true, given the economic theories' connection to vested material interests. Acutely, Schumpeter also argued that “Marx was the economist who first discovered ideology for us and who understood its nature. Fifty years before Freud, this was a performance of the first order” (1949, p. 354). Expectedly, yet, he accused Marx of not having applied the suggested auto-analysis to his own theory. However, the effort that Marx put in solving the problems with the classical theory of distribution bear witness to his sensitivity to scientific criteria. No similar sensitivity has been shown by mainstream economists regarding the troubles of marginalist capital theory, after the MIT clumsy (and admittedly failed) attempt led by Paul Samuelson (1966) to defend at the apex of the Cambridge controversy (see the appendix).

To sum up, the book legitimately advocates a more humanistic and social approach to economic history. My preoccupation is that, after Ian Morris' response to such instance, the mainstream may paternalistically welcome this criticism (*Plus ça change...*). With this motivation, I put forward a constructive encouragement to endorse an alternative economic approach that may respectfully fit a socially sensitive research agenda without meta-disciplinary imperialist ambitions, an approach that is based on a simple heuristic of the economic sources of the power of élites and does not dictate any pre-packaged conception of human behaviour.

Appendix - The Cambridge controversy

As well known, marginalism intends to determine equilibrium prices, output and income distribution on the basis of the relative scarcity of “production factors”, say labour, land and “capital”. Intuitively, the quantities of labour and land supplied in the market are measurable in physical terms (say number of heads and hectares, respectively). But, how to measure the supply of “capital”? The *value* of any daily shopping we know based on the price of goods we buy. Similarly, “capital” is a collection of heterogenous means of production, whose *value* depends on the prices of each capital good. We are then in a vicious circle: to determine prices we must know the *value* of the given capital supply, but to know the value of capital we must already know prices. This “supply side” problem was recognised by some great early marginalist like Eugen von Böhm-

Bawerk and Knut Wicksell who struggled (and failed) to fix it (Garegnani 1960 [2024]). After Sraffa (1960) other more complicated perversities of neoclassical capital theory emerged on the “demand side” to invalidate the theory, the subject of the dispute between the two Cambridges, the American MIT and the Cambridge (UK) where Sraffa had been living since 1926 called by Keynes to escape fascism.

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2. Cristiano Viglietti, For Those Who Curse the Candle: A Culturally and Historically Relativistic Proposal for Rethinking the Approach to the Ancient Economy (via Archaic Rome)
3. Federica Carugati, Can Ancient History Still Engage the Social Sciences?
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6. Dimitri Nakassis, Before the Economy? Growth, Institutions, and the Late Bronze Age
7. Andrew M. Riggsby, Standardization as Economic Institution
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9. Seth Bernard, Science, Morality, and the Roman Economy
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13. Astrid Van Oyen, Why a Human Ancient Economy Should Be Posthuman
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15. Ian Morris Cursing the Candle: Models, Methods, and Morality
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