

Aldo Schiavone, *The End of the Past. Ancient Rome and the Modern West*. Translated by Margery J. Schneider (Revealing Antiquity 13) Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000. Pp. viii + 278. ISBN 0-674-00062-5. Price not stated.

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Why did the Roman Empire fall? For Edward Gibbon, the answer lay with the triumph of superstition and barbarism. Other answers have been sought, from manpower supply to lead poisoning. More recently, scholars have preferred to think in terms of continuities and innovations that make the world of late antiquity a vigorous one, and well worthy of study. Now along comes Aldo Schiavone with a different analysis. For him, the study of late antiquity is a valuable enterprise: the age presents the historian with ‘an entirely new universe ... in which simplistic and teleological explanations have no part’ (p. 24). At the same time, however, he suggests that the study of late antiquity ‘tends to overshadow an essential point’, by ‘downplaying the disruptive and catastrophic aspects of the changeover’ between antiquity and the Middle Ages (p. 25). For Schiavone, then, there is still an essential disjunction in history to be explained: why did western history not follow an untraumatic path of linear evolution between the Roman Empire and our own era (pp. 23-4, cf. 175)? To this end he suggests a new analysis; namely, that the roots of Rome’s fall are to be found not so much in the centuries of imperial collapse, as in the centuries of its apparent greatness. Put baldly, it is that the slave-based economy of the

Roman Empire could not expand in the way that modern economies do, and that the Empire's fall was, in some respects, inevitable.

Schiavone is an established figure in Italian scholarly circles (this book is a translation of *La storia spezzata: Roma antica e Occidente moderno*, published by Laterza in 1996), at least from the days when he was instrumental, with Andrea Giardina, in the organisation and publication of the Istituto Gramsci seminars on slave-based production in Roman antiquity. His approach is a discursive one. Along the way, readers will find themselves in the company of, amongst others, Daniel Defoe (pp. 91-2), Milan Kundera (p. 205), and (of course) Karl Marx (e.g. pp. 72-3, 169-71); searching criticism of the ideological underpinnings of arguments by modern historians of the ancient world, notably Mikhail Rostovtzeff, finds lengthy exposition (esp. pp. 19-29, 46-52). I have a feeling that such an approach, which integrates the study of modern historiography with ancient historiography and history, might still strike some Anglophone readers as continental idiosyncrasy. But I would urge them to persevere with Schiavone: his interpretations are thought provoking.

The book begins its account of Rome's fall, just as Gibbon did, with the 'Golden Age of the Antonines'; Aelius Aristides, eulogising Rome before Antoninus Pius, occupies centre stage. Amid the praise, however, Schiavone detects 'a veil of uneasiness, perplexity, and anxiety' (p. 9; cf. 11). Here, as so often in the course of his argument, Schiavone undercuts our expectations. This anxiety is not that spiritual distress that E. R. Dodds once thought he had identified, and which more recent analyses of late antiquity have done much to discount. For Schiavone, rather, the anxiety is this: if, as Aristides would like us to believe, the Roman Empire had now reached the apogee of its existence,

then the only way for it to go thereafter was down; in other words, no future progress was conceivable (pp. 12-15). This issue lies at the crux of Schiavone's analysis: for him, the reasons for the collapse of the ancient world are to be sought within its own socio-economic structures at the very moment of its greatness. In Schiavone's view, this period stretches from the third century BC to the second century AD, its limits set by the First Punic War at one end and Trajan's conquest of Dacia at the other (p. 53). Throughout these centuries, he identifies a number of key factors that characterise the imperial economy and set it apart from both what went before and what was to come after. Trade flourished, and with it came the rise of merchants and the expanded use of coinage; the population of Roman citizens grew and with this arose a new context within which social relations occurred; above all, slaves came to be used in large numbers (pp. 56-9). This last factor provides the key to Schiavone's thesis.

For such an analysis to be valid, Schiavone argues that we must be quite sure about what we mean by 'the ancient economy'. Yet again, we find that Schiavone will not allow us to think in terms of the categories to which we have grown comfortable; instead he argues that we must rethink what we think we know about the economy of the ancient world. He is critical of efforts to understand the ancient economy through the application of modern economic theories. Nor does he have much time for debate about the relative 'primitivism' or 'modernism' of the ancient economy (how retarded or advanced it was when compared with modern economies): in Schiavone's view, such analysis get us nowhere (pp. 46-52). Indeed, he suggests that it is *une question mal posée*, since elements that we would describe as 'primitive' (such as limited, localised trade and

subsistence production) and 'modern' (such as long distance maritime trade) existed side-by-side (pp. 63-9).

Similarly, he is sceptical about the ultimate value of efforts to bring statistical analysis to bear on ancient economic life: 'we must abstain', he insists, 'from almost all of the formulas, both verbal and mathematical, that economic historians of the modern era are accustomed to employing so abundantly' (p. 60). The reasons for this have less to do with the absence of sufficient raw data (pp. 33-4) than with the conceptual frameworks that guide ancient and modern economies. At the most basic level, the difference is this: central to modern economics is the concept of growth generated from within the economy (pp. 60-2); in the ancient world, however, such growth as occurred was caused by external factors, primarily wars of conquest (pp. 60, 70-4, 80-6). In short, the economies of the modern capitalist world and classical antiquity are fundamentally different (pp. 91-107; cf. 175-8).

This prompts Schiavone to undertake a different analysis of the ancient economy, one that has much in common with the basic principles elucidated by Moses Finley. Put basically, this is that the Roman economy was embedded in a culture where elite attitudes categorised manual labour either as something that happened in a distant idealised past (the early Roman state of the citizen farmer that Tiberius Gracchus sought to recreate) or as a phenomenon that was associated with the activities of slaves (pp. 108-142). Associated with this was a complete lack of cogent technological innovation of the sort that was so important to development of the modern economy at the time of the Industrial Revolution (pp. 142-64). Production was in the hands of chattel slaves, not paid labourers, and hence there was little interest on the part of those involved in production to

engage in any activity that might be comparable with the growth dynamics found in modern economies (pp. 164-75). In other words, the primacy of slavery in agricultural and industrial production ‘cut off any possibility of further evolution’ in the Roman economy (p. 174). Once it came under pressure with the end of imperial wars of expansion, and thus the drying up of a major source of slaves, the system was too rigid to develop in any dynamic way, and collapse was inevitable (pp. 196-202).

Some might view Schiavone’s central argument as too bleak: was the Roman world incapable of the sort of growth dynamic with which we ourselves are familiar? For Schiavone, in his most whimsical moments, it is a tale of missed opportunities. By setting side-by-side Hero of Alexandria’s steam engine and the *liburna*, the oxen-powered paddle ship described in the fourth-century AD treatise *De Rebus Bellicis* (§ 17), he argues that the Romans had the technological capability to develop something akin to a paddle steamer. Crucially, however, the connection between the two mechanisms was never made, precisely because of the different conceptual frameworks that drove the Roman Empire and the Industrial Revolution (pp.145-6). He suggests also that the Roman world could have developed along different lines: in the social upheavals of the late Republic there existed conditions that could have led to a very different society and economy, and one less reliant on slavery: again, however, the possibility was never realised (pp. 179-90).

Throughout, Schiavone articulates his arguments forcefully, and he is not afraid to be controversial. To see Henri Pirenne’s *Mahomet et Charlemagne* (Paris, 1937) dismissed as ‘possibly overrated’ (p. 25) might shock those early medievalists who have extolled the Belgian historian’s greatness. Yet the combative nature of such remarks may

be appropriate to the bold thesis that Schiavone is arguing. There are still many late antique historians content to stress the continuities apparent in the age that they study, while ignoring or downplaying disjunctions. Much of this is in deliberate counterpoint to Gibbon's insistence on *Decline and Fall*. Hence the emphasis on more neutral terms, notably 'transformation', as in the recent European Science Foundation project on *The Transformation of the Roman World*. And yet there are signs that the notion of a cataclysm at the end of antiquity is making a comeback. Wolf Liebeschuetz's recent study of late Roman urbanism deliberately evokes Gibbon in its title: *Decline and Fall of the Roman City* (Oxford 2001). As Liebeschuetz remarks (pp. 414-15), any verdict on whether the changes engendered by late antiquity were 'an improvement, or the reverse, is a value judgement'; nevertheless, by analysing the variety of aspects of urban life that were obliterated he argues that 'it abundantly merits to be described as a decline'. But others will undoubtedly disagree, and the rejection of the sort of precipitous and catastrophic collapse for which Schiavone argues so stridently (e.g. at p. 32 he describes it as a 'historical thrombosis') seems set to remain entrenched as the scholarly orthodoxy. In such circumstances, it may be inevitable, even necessary, that the heretics adopt a combative tone. I hope that such polemic does not distract readers, for Schiavone has produced a volume that deserves to command our attention, whether or not we agree with its central arguments.