

ANCIENT AND MODERN

An Inaugural Lecture given by
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I. Modernity and the Revaluation of Antiquity¹

The idea of modernity is founded on a break with the past. A series of revolutions, industrial, scientific, political, social and intellectual, have created a chasm between the world in which we live and everything that has gone before. Modernity is characterised, if not defined, by a sense of its superiority, in material and intellectual terms, over all previous societies, and by a sense of its own special nature that has made this transformation possible. The present is seen to be radically different from the past, freed from the limitations, both material and intellectual, that had held back our ancestors from realising their full potential.²

This realisation and recognition of difference, this sense of discontinuity, was a relatively late development; long after the commencement of the various economic and social processes which are seen, in retrospect, to have made the triumph of modernity inevitable, writers such as David Hume were seeking to talk up the achievements and prospects of their own society in the face of repeated claims about the boundless superiority of classical antiquity.

All our later improvements and refinements, have they done nothing towards the easy subsistence of men, and consequently towards their propagation and encrease? Our superior skill in mechanics; the discovery of new worlds by which commerce has been so much enlarged; the establishment of posts; and the use of bills of exchange: these seem all extremely useful to the encouragement of art, industry and populousness.³

Even the pioneers of political economy in the later eighteenth century like Adam Smith remained unaware that, in important respects, the rules had now changed and the world – or at any rate certain favoured parts of it – now enjoyed the prospect of a dramatic increase in productivity and material power, which would in time transform every aspect of existence.⁴ By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, this change had become unmistakable: in the development of technology, the rationalisation and globalisation of economic activity and the consequences of such developments for social life, Europe had become modern. As Karl Marx and Frederick Engels put it in the *Communist Manifesto*:

¹ Scholarship is always based on dialogue, even if one of the parties is long since dead, and every academic career is a collaborative enterprise; I particularly wish to thank my teachers at Cambridge, especially Peter Garnsey; past and present colleagues at Bristol, for making it such a stimulating place to work; the School of Humanities, for assistance in organising my inaugural and supporting its publication; and family and friends, especially, as always, Anne.

² See above all M. Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: the experience of modernity* (New York, 1982), and Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, 2000).

³ ‘On the populousness of antient nations’ [1742], in *Essays: moral, political and literary*, eds. T.H. Green & T.H. Grose (London, 1882), p. 412.

⁴ E.A. Wrigley, ‘The classical economists and the industrial revolution’, in *People, Cities and Wealth: the transformation of traditional society* (London, 1987), pp. 21-45; generally on the nature of the modern economic transformation, E.A. Wrigley, *Continuity, Chance and Change: the character of the Industrial Revolution in England* (Cambridge, 1988).

[The bourgeoisie] has been the first to show what man's activity can bring about. It has accomplished marvels wholly different from Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts and Gothic cathedrals... The ongoing revolutionising of production, the constant unsettling of all social conditions, the eternal insecurity and agitation mark out the epoch of the bourgeoisie from all earlier ones. All firm, rusted-shut relations with their entourage of time-honoured ideas and opinions are dissolved, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. Everything solid and permanent evaporates, everything holy is desecrated, and men's eyes are finally opened to the conditions in which they live and their relations with one another.⁵

Society was also seen to be undergoing a process of transformation, increasingly organised on the basis of reason and philosophy rather than superstition and religion, the rule of law rather than unexamined tradition and custom, and the principles of democracy (up to a point, at any rate) rather than the whims of monarchs. Auguste Comte suggested that:

The philosopher will go on to consider, with lively satisfaction, and looking at that part of the road leading to the place where he is now standing, the diminution of slavery, the progress of enlightenment, the gradual improvement of the human race, and, lastly, in the state of the French nation, which today forms its *avant-garde*, the complete abolition of slavery and a readiness to accept a social organisation which has the good of the majority as its primary object.⁶

The transformation of the world ran in parallel with the transformation of knowledge. New disciplines like economics and sociology emerged out of attempts at making sense of the processes of change, and then in turn influenced further developments, as they moved from the analysis of how things were to prescriptions about how they should be. Above all, 'modernity' was conceived as an integrated whole, in which all the different changes in economy, society, politics, culture and mentality were seen as inextricably inter-connected – though this left ample room for debate about which element was the decisive, determining factor of change; whether, to simplify things drastically, the world was experiencing the social and cultural consequences of the industrial revolution or the economic consequences of the Reformation and the Enlightenment. The more that modernity was conceived as a totality in this manner, the greater the gulf between it and earlier societies; even where some apparent continuity or lingering resemblances between past and present might be identified, those could be seen only as superficial, since the underlying organising principles of society had changed radically.⁷

My concern in this lecture is with the relation of these developments, and the way they have been conceived and represented, to conceptions of the classical past. The birth of modernity brought about a radical change in both the interpretation and, more importantly, the valuation of antiquity – but not exactly the change that might have been anticipated. On the face of it, ancient knowledge and knowledge of antiquity alike had at a stroke been rendered largely if not wholly redundant; such knowledge describes a world which is now conceived as being entirely different from and so having little if any relevance to the present, let alone the future.⁸ In so far as one might extract any general principles of political or social organisation from the study of ancient examples, these are validated only through their conformity to present knowledge – do they match what we already know about the way the world

⁵ Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, *Manifest der kommunistischen Partei* [1848], in *Marx-Engels Werke*, 4 (Berlin, 1964), p. 465.

⁶ Auguste Comte, 'Plan of the scientific operations necessary for reorganising society' [1822], in *The Crisis of Industrial Civilization: the early essays of Auguste Comte*, trans. H.D. Hutton (London, 1973), p. 221.

⁷ B. Yack, *The Longing for Total Revolution: philosophic sources of social discontent from Rousseau to Marx and Nietzsche* (Berkeley, 1992).

⁸ The essential discussion of this shift in understanding is Reinhard Koselleck's *Futures Past: on the semantics of historical time*, trans. K. Tribe (New York, 2004), pp. 26-42 and 255-75.

works? – rather than having any independent weight in opposition to present conceptions – outside the sphere of culture, that is, where ancient art might still, at least in the nineteenth century, be taken as establishing universal norms and principles. For example, one might identify Aristotle as an honoured predecessor in economic analysis or political philosophy, claiming him as an intellectual ancestor as a means of validating a particular theoretical or methodological approach, but there is no expectation in this that his writings will now be able to make a serious contribution to the subject.⁹ However brilliant his mind was, the limitations of his society inevitably shackled his imagination and understanding. Modern knowledge is so much more powerful a tool for interpreting not only the unique characteristics of modernity but, it was increasingly argued, the patterns of human behaviour in general and in all periods of history. As the economist Jean-Baptiste Say asserted, ‘the principles of political economy are eternal and immutable; but one nation is acquainted with them and another not.’¹⁰ The present now held the key to understanding all other societies.

The privileged status of classical knowledge thus ceased to be taken for granted; knowledge of ancient authorities ceased to be a requisite for the study of society, as it had in previous centuries been abandoned as more or less irrelevant for the study of the natural world and the physical universe. The value of knowledge about antiquity, or indeed about the past in general, was similarly questioned; there could perhaps be some merit in exploring the immediate historical roots of modernity as a means of understanding its present state, but there was little point in expending effort on studying societies that were entirely different and quite unconnected. Adam Smith drew extensively on historical material in his study of the source of the wealth of nations – but then he did not believe in any absolute, qualitative break between past and present; the majority of his successors had a strong sense of discontinuity, and turned away from history.¹¹ In a complex and ever-changing world, demanding ever more refined technical expertise to comprehend and navigate it, knowledge of antiquity seemed more and more like a luxurious indulgence. As Hegel put it:

Are we not entitled to assume that the achievements of modern times, our illumination and the progress of all arts and sciences, have worn out the Greek and Roman garments of their childhood and outgrown their leading-strings, so that they can now advance on their own territory without hindrance?¹²

Faced with the imminent redundancy of their expertise, or even directly attacked for the association of their subject with elitism and established privilege, those with a personal or professional commitment to the study of antiquity were forced to offer new forms of defence for their activities. Some resorted to appeals to the universal human values embodied in their favourite texts – though, as Friedrich Nietzsche caustically argued, most classical scholars were a poor advertisement for the claims of their subject to produce elevated human beings:

Our culture is built upon a wholly castrated and mendacious study of antiquity. In order to see how ineffective this study is, one simply looks at the philologists: they ought to be, through antiquity, the most highly cultivated men. Are they?¹³

Our philologists stand in the same relation to real educators as the medicine-men of the savages do to real doctors. How a distant time will marvel at us!¹⁴

⁹ On modern economic readings of Aristotle, see S. Meikle, *Aristotle's Economic Thought* (Oxford, 1995).

¹⁰ *A Treatise on Political Economy* [1803], ed. C.C. Biddle, trans. C.R. Prinsep (New York, 1971), p. 194 n.

¹¹ N. Morley, ‘Political economy and classical antiquity’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 26 (1988), pp. 95-114.

¹² ‘On classical studies’ [1809], in *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford, 1948), p. 324.

¹³ *Wir Philologen* [unpublished notes, 1875], in *Werke* IV.1, eds. G. Colli & M. Montinari (Berlin, 1967), p. 95. On Nietzsche’s critique of philology, see J.I. Porter, *Nietzsche and the Philology of the Future* (Stanford, 2000).

Alternatively, there was the adoption, if only for pragmatic and political purposes, of a narrow instrumentalism, trying to match the claims of social or economic usefulness of the other human sciences. Classical studies, it was and is asserted, teach what we would now call ‘transferable skills’; even if some doubt may remain as to whether those skills could not be taught equally effectively using material that was less wholly irrelevant to the present. I find it difficult to listen to some of these claims without thinking of the arguments of Antonio Gramsci about the usefulness of studying Latin at school, which, persuasive or not in their own terms, echo the widespread modern assumption that the subject matter of classical studies is entirely dead.

This issue concerns children: they should be made to acquire certain habits of diligence, precision, physical composure, mental concentration on particular objects. Would a thirty- or forty-year-old scholar be able to sit at a desk for sixteen hours on end if, as a child, he had not acquired ‘compulsorily’, through ‘mechanical coercion’, the appropriate psycho-physical habits?

Latin is learned, and it is analyzed down to its smallest basic units; it is analyzed as a dead thing. This is true, but every analysis carried out by a child is bound to be an analysis of a dead thing... The language is dead, it is dissected like a cadaver, it is true, but the cadaver comes back to life continually in the examples and the stories. Could one do the same with Italian? Impossible. No living language could be studied in the same way as Latin: it would be or *would seem* absurd.¹⁵

II. Antiquity and the Interpretation of Modernity

In fact, the relation between ancient and modern, past and present, has been much more complex than my account so far indicates. Modernity has not wholly overcome the past, but it wishes to believe that it has – and remains haunted by the possibility that the past might return with a vengeance; a theme that appears in modern culture from Gothic novels to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, but which has also inspired theories of history as an endless cycle of the rise and fall of civilisations.¹⁶ Defenders of empire, from the French in the early nineteenth century to the British at the turn of the twentieth and the American in recent decades, exhibit a continual anxiety as to whether the cycle can now be broken, through the power of technology or superior knowledge or improved moral values, or whether their fate is already established in the decadence of Rome.¹⁷ Rather than Henry Ford’s aggressively modernist ‘history is bunk’, we find James Joyce: ‘history is a nightmare from which I am trying to wake up’. Further, anything but the most rose-tinted and optimistic perusal of modern society suggests that it has failed to live up to its promises, failed to make a complete break from the past or establish its unchallenged superiority over earlier societies. Rather than taking its achievements for granted, then, commentators insisted on the need to develop a better understanding of modernity, to explain its deficiencies and to determine whether these are symptomatic of a progressive development that is not yet completed, or of a project that was flawed from the outset. As Marx argued, in a speech of 1856:

On the one hand, there have started into life industrial and scientific forces, which no epoch of the former human history had ever suspected. On the other hand, there exist symptoms of decay, far surpassing the horrors recorded of the latter times of the Roman Empire. In our days, everything seems pregnant with its contrary. Machinery, gifted with the wonderful power of

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 160-1.

¹⁵ *Prison Notebooks* [1929-35], trans. J.A. Buttigieg (New York, 1996), IV.55.

¹⁶ N. Morley, ‘History as nightmare in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*’, unpublished paper (2002), (<http://seis.bris.ac.uk/~clndgm/History as Nightmare.doc>); N. Morley, ‘Decadence as a theory of history’, *New Literary History* 35.4 (2004), pp. 573-85.

¹⁷ C. Edwards, ed., *Roman Presences: receptions of Rome in European culture, 1789-1945* (Cambridge, 1999); N. Morley, *The Roman Empire: roots of imperialism* (London, forthcoming 2010)

shortening and fructifying human labour, we behold starving and overworking it. The new-fangled sources of wealth, by some strange weird spell, are turned into sources of want. The victories of art seem bought by the loss of character. At the same pace that mankind masters nature, man seems to become enslaved to other men or to his own infamy. Even the pure light of science seems unable to shine but on the dark background of ignorance. All our invention and progress seem to result in endowing material forces with intellectual life, and in stultifying human life into a material force.¹⁸

Marx's reference to the Roman Empire here highlights the new role of antiquity in this debate, as a basis for understanding modernity and its consequences. Antiquity serves as the measure of modernity: it provides the yardstick by which modern power and progress can be evaluated, as Marx used pyramids and aqueducts and Comte used the abolition of slavery. The widespread sense that modernity is characterised by an unprecedented degree of upheaval and constant transformation rests on an image of past timelessness and stability; the sense that its productive power is unprecedented likewise depends on our knowledge of the limitations on earlier societies.

More importantly, comparisons between ancient and modern provide a means of understanding the changes that have taken place, by identifying the differences between ancient and modern and exploring their nature and origins. The past is important because it is different, and thus represents a means of discerning the essential characteristics of modernity. For example, the particular character of modern social life is thrown into stark relief through a contrast with the ancient Greek political community, as Friedrich Schiller argued:

That polyp-like nature of the Greek states, in which every human enjoyed an unsubordinated life and could, when there was need, become a whole, now made way for an ingenious clock-work, where, out of the patching-together of countless, but lifeless, parts, a mechanical collective life was formed. Torn apart from one another now were State and Church, laws and customs; enjoyment was divided from labour, the means from the end, the effort from the reward.¹⁹

This contrast, in Schiller's work and elsewhere, identified a range of significant factors: the increased scale of modern society, making the direct involvement of every citizen in the political process impossible; the shift from an organic community, a *Gemeinschaft*, to a *Gesellschaft* organised rationally or mechanically; the nature of social ties and the nature of the individual's relation to the rest of society, under conditions of increasing specialisation, alienation and fragmentation.²⁰ Benjamin Constant offered an explicit comparison of the liberty of the ancients and the moderns, to highlight the costs of absolute freedom for the modern individual and the modern state in contrast to the benefits gained from the Greeks' choice to submit themselves to the power of their community – 'they sacrificed less to gain more'.²¹ Ferdinand Tönnies, meanwhile, considered the effects of the two-edged sword of rationalisation, the social and psychological consequences of replacing a society based on custom and tradition with one based on reason:

A rational, scientific and independent law was made possible only through the emancipation of the individuals from all the ties which bound them to the family, the land and the city, and which held them to superstition, faith, traditions, habit and duty. Such liberation meant the fall of the

¹⁸ Speech at the Anniversary of the *People's Paper* [1856], in K. Marx & F. Engels, *Collected Works* XIV (London, 1980).

¹⁹ *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* [1795], (Stuttgart, 1965), 6.7.

²⁰ G.E. McCarthy, *Classical Horizons: the origins of sociology in ancient Greece* (New York, 2003); N. Morley, *Antiquity and Modernity* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 52-79.

²¹ B. Constant, 'De la liberté des anciens comparée à celle des modernes' [1819], in *La liberté chez les modernes: écrits politiques*, ed. M. Gauchet (Paris, 1980), p. 502.

communal household in village and town, of the agricultural community, and of the art of the town as a fellowship, religious, patriotic craft. It meant the victory of egoism, impudence, falsehood and cunning, the ascendancy of greed for money, ambition and lust for pleasure. But it also brought the victory of the contemplative, clear and sober consciousness in which scholars and cultured men now dare to approach things human and divine. And this process can never be considered completed.

It extinguishes differences and inequalities, gives all the same behaviour, the same way of speech and expression, the same money, the same culture, the same cupidity, and the same curiosity. It forms the abstract human being, the most artificial, regular and unscrupulous type of machinery, which appears as a ghost in broad daylight.²²

Defining the particular nature of modern society in this way also served as a basis for understanding its origins. This could involve the identification of a long-term historical process, whose origins might be found in the classical past but whose full development had occurred only in more recent years, such as Tönnies' focus on rationalisation or Adam Smith's on the division of labour and specialisation – which in turn raised the question of why this process had suddenly accelerated, or why it had been thwarted in earlier periods. Comparison with antiquity offered a basis for testing different theories of change; the impact of empire on economic development, for example, or the relation between slavery, technology and productivity.²³ Thomas Malthus drew on a vast array of historical examples both to establish to his own satisfaction the validity of his 'principle of population' and to show how this principle might have different consequences in different historical contexts, and insisted on the importance of such an approach:

The principal cause of error, and of the differences which prevail at present among the scientific writers on political economy, appears to me to be a precipitate attempt to simplify and generalise... [These writers] do not sufficiently try their theories by a reference to that enlarged and comprehensive experience which, on so complicated a subject, can alone establish their truth and utility.²⁴

Alternatively, historical change might be interpreted in terms of a series of discrete stages, as Marx drew on historical evidence simultaneously to establish that the essential dynamic of all history was changes in the organisation of production and to insist on the fundamental differences between different modes of production.²⁵ The laws of motion of human history thus identified pointed the way towards future developments; the fact that antiquity and modernity were organised on entirely different principles, with the exploitation of labour taking place through slavery in the first instance and wage labour within the capitalist system in the second, established to Marx's satisfaction that capitalism was not eternal – it had not always existed, so there was no reason to assume that it would always exist in future. This meant, of course, that attempts at representing antiquity as modern, by overweening economists or naïve ancient historians, had to be resisted at all costs.²⁶

The materials and means of labour, a proportion of which consists of the products of previous work, play their part in every labour process in every age and in all circumstances. If, therefore, I label them 'capital' in the confident knowledge that 'semper aliquid haeret', then I have proved that the existence of capital is an eternal law of nature of human production and that the Xinghiz

²² F. Tönnies, *Community and Society* [1887], trans. C.P. Loomis (New York, 1963), p. 202.

²³ Morley, *Antiquity and Modernity*, pp. 34-9.

²⁴ Malthus, *Principles of Political Economy* [2^e 1836] (London, 1936), pp. 4-5.

²⁵ On Marx's theory of history, see G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: a defense* (Oxford, 1978) and E.M. Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: renewing historical materialism* (Cambridge, 1995).

²⁶ Morley, 'Marx and the failure of antiquity', *Helios* 26 (1999), pp.151-64.

who cuts down rushes with a knife he has stolen from a Russian so as to weave them together to make a canoe is just as true a capitalist as Herr von Rothschild. I could prove with equal facility that the Greeks and Romans celebrated communion because they drank wine and ate bread.²⁷

In these various attempts at analysing modernity and identifying its essential characteristics through comparison with past societies, classical antiquity had a particular importance, for a number of reasons. It was still the best-known and most intensively studied of past societies; its history and its key texts were familiar elements in different systems of education, offering a common store of examples and references – though a number of these thinkers also took great pleasure in demonstrating their superior knowledge of the subject. There was a sense that it was more directly comparable to the present than other past societies, because it had reached such a high level of development despite the limitations of technology and economy. Further, there was a widespread belief in the existence of a direct connection between modern Europe and classical antiquity, conceived in different ways in different countries but undoubtedly powerful – Greece and Rome were generally perceived as the point of origin of modern civilisation, far more than, say, the medieval society of the countries involved. Above all, there was the high value placed on the achievements of classical culture, setting the standard against which modernity *had* to be judged if its claims to have surpassed all earlier societies were to be taken seriously.

The normative status of ancient art and literature was taken almost entirely for granted; the crucial questions were whether modern culture could ever hope to match the achievements of the Greeks, and, rather more pressing, the reasons for its abject failure so far to do so.²⁸ Indeed, as the state of culture was now seen to be intimately connected to the nature of the society that produced it, the perceived deficiencies of modern culture in comparison to its ancient rivals became one of the main elements of the critique of modernity. The problem might be, as Richard Wagner suggested, a matter of modern values:

Our modern stage materialises the ruling spirit of our social life... It denotes, to all appearance, the flower of our culture; just as the Grecian tragedy denoted the culminating point of the Greek spirit; but ours is the efflorescence of corruption, of a hollow, soulless and unnatural condition of human affairs and human relations.²⁹

Alternatively, modern culture might be seen as reflecting the impact of rationalization and disenchantment, as the advent of mastery over nature through technology and productive power removed the original sources of creative inspiration. Schiller, in his poem 'The Gods of Greece', expressed his concern about such developments: 'Where now, as our wise men tell us, a ball of fire revolves soullessly, then Helios drive his golden chariot in silent majesty... Of those warm and living images, only the skeleton remains behind for me.'³⁰ Marx struggled with the implications of modernisation for the relevance and continued production of art on the classical model.

Is the view of nature and of social relations on which the Greek imagination and hence Greek mythology is based possible with self-acting mule spindles and railways and locomotives and electrical telegraphs? ... All mythology overcomes and dominates and shapes the forces of nature in the imagination and by the imagination; it therefore vanishes with the advent of real

²⁷ *Results of the Immediate Process of Production* [1863-6], trans. B. Fowkes, included in Marx, *Capital: a critique of political economy* I (Harmondsworth, 1976), pp. 998-9.

²⁸ Cf. P.J. Kain, *Schiller, Hegel and Marx: state, society and the aesthetic ideal of ancient Greece* (Kingston & Montreal, 1982); S.L. Marchand, *Down from Olympus: archaeology and philhellenism in Germany, 1750-1970* (Princeton, 1996).

²⁹ R. Wagner, *Art and Revolution* [1849], in *The Art-Work of the Future and Other Works: prose works I*, trans. W.A. Ellis (London, 1895), p. 43.

³⁰ 'Die Götter Griechenlands' [1788], in *Gedichte 1776-1799: Schillers Werke Nationalausgabe*, I, eds. J. Petersen & F. Beissner (Weimar, 1943), pp. 190-5.

mastery over them...Is Achilles possible with powder and lead? Or the *Iliad* with the printing press, not to mention the printing machine? Do not the song and the saga and the muse necessarily come to an end with the printer's bar, hence do not the necessary conditions of epic poetry vanish?³¹

For Nietzsche, meanwhile, the contrast between classical culture and the 'culture' of the modern world revealed the hollowness at the heart of modernity: the emptiness of its claims to superiority, and its lack of originality, creativity or genuine life.

If a contemporary man was compelled to return to that world through some enchantment, he would probably consider the Greeks very 'uncultivated' — whereupon the so painstakingly disguised secret of modern culture would be uncovered to public laughter; for we moderns have nothing at all of our own; only by filling and over-filling ourselves with alien ages, customs, arts, philosophies, religions and insights do we become anything worthy of attention, namely, walking encyclopedias, which is how an ancient Greek who wound up in our own time would perhaps regard us.³²

III. Reinterpreting Antiquity

For Schiller, Marx, Nietzsche and many other such writers, the comparison of antiquity and modernity revealed the true nature of modernity: it explained how things had come to be as they were, and explained their nagging sense of dissatisfaction with different aspects of modern society and culture. For many of them, it also formed the basis for a wholesale critique of modernity, a call for its radical reform or its replacement with a better, more human form of society. There was considerable room for debate about how far antiquity might supply viable models for the future, given the extent of the gulf that separated modernity from the past, but the ancient world, especially Greece, certainly supplied the political, social and cultural ideals which were to be realised in a new form and a new context.³³

One of the most significant flaws in all these arguments was that they rested on the assumption that antiquity was a stable object of which we could possess detailed, objective knowledge, which could then be used as a means of delineating the essential characteristics of modernity and deciding between different interpretations. However, knowledge of antiquity was not fixed; on the contrary, at the same time as ancient examples shaped the understanding of modernity, modern knowledge and the experience of modernity were changing the understanding of the classical past. The wish to understand the present through the past inspired a huge increase in research, expanding the volume of knowledge, introducing new techniques of investigation and setting new questions, all of which transformed the subject.³⁴ The development of new systems of knowledge and theories offered new ways of interpreting the past, new ideas about what we might wish to know and new means of trying to establish this. Above all, antiquity was now conceived in terms of its relation to and, for the most part, its differences from modernity; it became, variously, not-modern, pre-modern or proto-modern, or even, in the eyes of some ancient historians, quasi-modern, differing quantitatively but not qualitatively — but it could no longer be seen except through the lenses of the present and of present concerns.

³¹ *Grundrisse* [1857-8], trans. M. Nicolaus (Harmondsworth, 1973), pp. 110-11. Discussed by R. Müller, 'Hegel und Marx über die antike Kultur', *Philologus* 118 (1972), pp. 1-31.

³² *Zum Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben: Unzeitgemässige Betrachtungen*, II [1874], in *Sämtliche Werke: kritischen Studienausgabe*, I, eds. G. Colli & M. Montinari (Berlin, 1967), pp. 273-4.

³³ Cf. G.E. McCarthy, *Marx and the Ancients: classical ethics, social justice, and nineteenth-century political economy* (Savage MD, 1990).

³⁴ See Marchand, *Down from Olympus*, on developments in Germany.

The most obvious example of this transformation of understanding is ancient economic history, a quintessentially modern subject since the concept of an ‘economy’ as something that one might wish to study, or indeed manage, was a modern invention.³⁵ The advent of modernity created economic history as a field of knowledge, and, through a number of its more prominent theorists, offered a series of arguments as to why this might indeed be the key to understanding ancient history. It raised a host of new questions about antiquity, for many of which the ancient evidence was simply too fragmentary, or too entirely absent, for any adequate answer to be offered. Consider the study of ancient demography. Since the pioneering work of Malthus, it has become ever clearer how far the dynamics of the relationship between population size, demographic structures and the availability of resources may set limits on a society’s capabilities, and, by establishing the context within which political, social and military activity takes place, may indeed shape the course of events. A crucial example is the case of Italy under the later Roman republic, where various ancient sources complain about the decline of the peasantry and the depopulation of the countryside as a result of the intrusion of slaves.³⁶ The introduction into the discussion of ideas drawn from modern population studies has shown that traditional interpretations of this development are largely untenable, and has suggested a number of possible reconstructions of the events of this period – one of which sees Italy as underpopulated, with the native population all too vulnerable to crisis, and another of which emphasises the possibility of serious over-population in relation to available resources (which doesn’t leave the native population any better off).³⁷ The ancient evidence, such as it is, is wholly inadequate to adjudicate between these different interpretations; the figures for the census of Roman citizens carried out under Augustus suggest a population that is either too small or too large to be remotely credible. The major contribution of demography to ancient history has so far been to open up exciting new areas of doubt, uncertainty and anxiety, emphasising how little we know about aspects of ancient society that would have the potential to transform our entire understanding of antiquity.

Another destabilising aspect of the impact of modern knowledge on ancient history has been the way it can effectively persuade historians that they know things which are in fact wholly uncertain. That is the treacherous nature of modern concepts; not so much those, like ‘class’ or ‘patriarchy’, that clearly signal their association with a specific theoretical approach and are consciously adopted by the historian for that purpose, but those that appear natural and uncomplicated.³⁸ One important example is the use of the term ‘city’ in the study of ancient economy and society. There is a strong association in western culture between cities and modernity, and one consequence of this has been a widespread assumption that urbanisation can be taken as a straightforward proxy for economic development in general; ‘a town is a town wherever it is’, argued Fernand Braudel, characterising them as ‘so many electric transformers’, ‘accelerators of all historical time.’³⁹ The fact that some past cities showed little sign of being economically dynamic led to the development instead of urban typologies, distinguishing the ‘producer’ city from the ‘consumer’ or the ‘generative’ from the ‘parasitic’, and giving rise to interminable debates

³⁵ M.I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy* (Berkeley, rev. edn 1999); N. Morley, *Theories, Models and Concepts in Ancient History* (London, 2004), pp. 33-50.

³⁶ P.A. Brunt, *Italian Manpower, 225 BC – AD 14* (Oxford, 1971).

³⁷ See W. Scheidel, ed., *Debating Roman Demography* (Leiden, 2001); N. Morley, ‘The transformation of Italy, 225-28 BC’, *Journal of Roman Studies* 91 (2001), pp. 50-62; L. de Ligt & S. Northwood, eds., *Peasants, Citizens and Soldiers: the social, economic and demographic background to the Gracchan land reforms* (Leiden, 2009).

³⁸ Morley, *Theories, Models and Concepts*, pp. 1-31.

³⁹ F. Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life, 1400-1800*, trans. M. Kochan (London, 1973), p. 373. Generally, R.J. Holton, *Cities, Capitalism and Civilization* (London, 1986); R. Williams, *The Country and the City* (London, 1973).

about which description best matched the ‘typical’ ancient city.⁴⁰ This was to judge the Greek or Roman city solely in terms of its resemblance to the image of the late medieval city as the birthplace of capitalism, an image propounded by one, much disputed account of the rise of modernity; it simply assumed that other types of city would be impediments to economic change, whereas in fact a city like Rome – undoubtedly a ‘consumer’, and as parasitic a city as one would hope to find – nevertheless had a far-reaching impact on the economy of the society that supported it.⁴¹ Further, the taken-for-granted concept of ‘city’ may itself be misleading, carrying over into the historical discussion modern myths about the dynamic, progressive urban centre acting on the passive, backward countryside, and drawing attention away from the nature of broader changes in society and economy as a whole, changes of which ‘the city’ is a product rather than a cause.⁴² Counting cities and estimating their sizes, on the assumption that this will automatically tell us something useful about the level of economic development of the ancient world, is a classic example of the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, which historians have all too readily adopted through the pervasive influence of contemporary perspectives.

A third impact of modernity on ancient economic history has been its – largely unnoticed – politicisation. One reason why the debate between ‘primitivist’ and ‘modernising’ accounts of the ancient economy has proved so incapable of resolution is that the ancient evidence is too fragmentary and uncertain to decide between these radically different conceptions of the past.⁴³ Another reason is that these positions are founded, wittingly or not, on ideological preconceptions as much as on empirical evidence. As Marx noted, it is *possible* to describe antiquity in the terms of modern economics, to talk of ancient trade, markets, globalisation and the like, and the use of modern economic theory and concepts can suggest new ideas and interpretations. However, there must always a suspicion that such a choice of vocabulary thereby presents antiquity *as* modern, and serves to naturalise modernity and capitalism as universal phenomena.⁴⁴ Conversely, it is always possible to present ancient economic behaviour in quite other terms, emphasising the absence of ‘economic rationalism’, the prevalence of non-economic forms of exchange, the dominance of social and cultural rather than economic motives, the limitations of the market under conditions of extreme uncertainty and so forth.⁴⁵ Do such accounts reinforce the sense of superiority of the modern world in a crude, mythologizing manner, putting antiquity firmly in its place, or do they emphasise the possibility of alternatives to capitalism, new ways of organising economic life? Of course, ancient historians insist for the most part that they’re interested in the past for its own sake, and simply trying to identify the most appropriate concepts and theoretical tools for this purpose, but their conception of antiquity and hence their ideas about what tools and concepts are appropriate is

⁴⁰ M. Weber, *The City*, trans. D. Martindale & G. Neuwirth (New York, 1958); M.I. Finley, ‘The ancient city from Fustel de Coulanges to Max Weber and beyond’, in *Economy and Society in Ancient Greece*, eds. B.D. Shaw & R. Saller (London, 1981), pp. 3-23; H. Parkins, ed., *Roman Urbanism: beyond the consumer city* (London, 1997).

⁴¹ N. Morley, *Metropolis and Hinterland: the city of Rome and the Italian economy, 200 BC – AD 200* (Cambridge, 1996).

⁴² N. Morley, ‘Cities and economic development in the Roman empire’, in A. Bowman & A. Wilson, eds., *Settlement, Urbanization and Population (Oxford Studies in the Roman Economy II)* (Oxford, forthcoming). On the ideology of ‘urbanism’, see M. Castells, ‘Theory and ideology in urban sociology’, in C.G. Pickvance, ed., *Urban Sociology: critical essays* (London, 1976), pp. 60-84, and P. Abrams, ‘Introduction’ and ‘Towns and economic growth: some theories and problems’, in P. Abrams & E.A. Wrigley, eds., *Towns in Societies: essays in economic history and historical sociology* (Cambridge, 1978), pp. 1-33.

⁴³ For the latest attempts at finding a way out of the ruts of the old debates, see the papers in W. Scheidel, I. Morris & R. Saller, eds., *The Cambridge Economic History of Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2007).

⁴⁴ On the rhetoric of ancient economic history, N. Morley, ‘Narrative economy’, in P.F. Bang, M. Ikeguchi & H.G. Ziche, eds., *Ancient Economies, Modern Methodologies: archaeology, comparative history, models and institutions* (Rome and Bari, 2006), pp. 27-47.

⁴⁵ Cf. the various approaches to understanding ancient trade discussed in N. Morley, *Trade in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2007); an interesting new discussion of different ideas of the market in P.F. Bang, *The Roman Bazaar* (Cambridge, 2008).

inevitably shaped by contemporary concerns, and above all the fundamental issue of the nature of modernity and its place within world historical development.

IV. Ancient and Modern

The Greek historian Thucydides, writing at the end of the fifth century BCE, made a strong claim about the usefulness of his history of the Peloponnesian War:

It may well be that my history will seem less accessible because of the absence in it of any romantic element. It will be enough for me, however, if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which, human nature being what it is, will, at some point or other and in much the same ways, happen again in the future. My work is not a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public, but was created as a possession for ever. (1.22)

Thucydides thus offered historians a convenient alibi for any amount of turgid prose. More importantly, he articulated what has become one of the most common justifications for the importance of historical study. Of course, his argument is founded on the assumption that human nature is a known and constant quality, so that people will continue to act and react in much the same way in the future as they have done in the past; further, it takes no account of the possibility that the circumstances in which people will find themselves in future may be radically different, so that a study of past events in a very specific political context may be of little help. We might therefore have expected that Thucydides, like so many other ancient authorities, would have fallen by the wayside as a sense of the gulf between antiquity and modernity became ever more pervasive. On the contrary: the nineteenth century saw a dramatic upsurge in his popularity and influence.⁴⁶ For some of his readers, Thucydides' account of the war between Athens and Sparta revealed timeless truths about political behaviour and inter-state relations; for others, his methodology, not to mention his dogmatic assertions about the superiority of his approach to historical study over those of his rivals, was the foundation of modern scientific historiography.

Thucydides was read in many different and often entirely contradictory ways, and invoked as an authority to support quite incompatible positions and projects; more or less the only constants in the history of his reception are the fact of his authoritative status and the characterisation of him as a 'realist' – though the meaning of that label was also understood in very different ways.⁴⁷ For the traditions of political theory that traced their ancestry and ideas back to Thomas Hobbes, Thucydides' realism implied a clear-sighted, illusionless, non-judgemental, more or less amoral view of the nature of relations between men and between states. For Wilhelm Roscher, the political economist who in 1842 wrote the first detailed study of Thucydides as a historian, it stood for the possibility of a truly scientific history grounded in reality and experience, rather than the abstract theories of the philosophers.⁴⁸ For Nietzsche, one of the few to read Roscher's book with any great attention, it provided an alternative to and respite from idealism, Platonism and classicism:

⁴⁶ S. Meineke, 'Thukydidismus', in *Der Neue Pauly*, vol. 15 (Stuttgart & Weimar, 2003), pp. 480-94; F. Murari Pires, 'Thucydidean Modernities', in A. Rengakos & A. Tsakmakis, eds., *Brill's Companion to Thucydides* (Leiden and Boston, 2006), pp. 811-37; K. Harloe & N. Morley, eds., *Thucydides: reception, reinterpretation and influence* (Cambridge, forthcoming).

⁴⁷ L.M. Bagby, *Thucydides, Hobbes and the Interpretation of Realism* (DeKalb, 1993).

⁴⁸ W. Roscher, *Leben, Werke und Zeitalter des Thukydidēs* [1842] (Hildesheim, 2003); N. Morley, 'Thucydides and the idea of history in Wilhelm Roscher', in Harloe & Morley, eds., *Thucydides: reception, reinterpretation and influence* (forthcoming).

Thucydides and, perhaps, Machiavelli's Prince are my close kindred because of their absolute determination to pre-judge nothing and to see reason in *reality*; not in 'reason', still less in 'morality'... Nothing cures us more thoroughly of the wretched habit of the Greeks of glossing things over in the ideal, a habit which the 'classically educated' youth carries with him into life as the reward for his gymnasium training, than Thucydides.⁴⁹

Self-proclaimed realists, a category that includes many historians, at least in their suspicion of any sort of abstract theory or excessive generalisation, might have little time for concepts like 'Antiquity' and 'Modernity'.⁵⁰ They are too broad, erasing or obscuring the wide differences within the periods they claim to characterise: does it really make sense to talk of 'the ancient economy', when the differences between archaic Greece and the height of the Roman Empire were so vast? Does the early twenty-first century really have much in common with the early nineteenth? Further, such concepts seek to explain too much, asserting that everything within that society is, at some level, shaped or determined by whatever underlying factor has been identified as crucial by a given theory of modernity. The reflex response of the realist historian to such grand assertions is always: 'Yes, but it's actually much more complicated than that.' This is one reason, of course, why historical knowledge may seem in general less powerful and useful than the knowledge generated by various of the social sciences – but also less dangerous, less likely to be acclaimed and adopted as 'The Answer' by politicians who have little time for nuance or qualification.

'Antiquity' and 'Modernity' are ideas, creatures of the imagination; each constructed on the premise that the other is a fixed and known quantity, so that the bewildering present can be made comprehensible through comparison with the stable and familiar past, or the fragmentary and obscure past can be reconstructed on the basis of our understanding of the present. Such ideas are fluid, elusive, vague, often frustrating. But they have power; they shape people's understanding of the world, and thus shape their actions, and they can be used to influence the actions of others. Claims about the nature of the modern world are employed to legitimise programmes to change or manage that world; claims about the classical world, and the invocation of its aura, are employed to legitimise institutions and practices.⁵¹ Why else would we find Roman triumphal arches and the like in cities that were never Roman, like the Siegestor in Munich – or never even in the Roman Empire, like Berlin or Washington? Thucydides, whose work can be read as a meditation upon the motives behind human actions and decisions, would have no quarrel with the study of two of the ruling concepts of the last couple of centuries. Further, I think it is no coincidence that two of the most influential theorists of modernity and its relation to classical antiquity were equally concerned with understanding the way that their contemporaries used and abused the past and were unconsciously shaped by their conception of it.

Karl Marx, in his essay 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', explored the way that earlier generations, above all the French revolutionaries, had looked to the past as a source of inspiration and heroic examples, as proof that what they were attempting was possible because it had been done before – and as a means of disguising from themselves the full import of what they were doing:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just of their own free will; not under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and

⁴⁹ 'Was ich den Alten verdanke', *Götzen-Dämmerung oder Wie man mit dem Hammer philosophirt* [1889] in *Werke* VI, p. 156.

⁵⁰ Cf. I. Morris, 'Hard surfaces', in P. Cartledge, E.E. Cohen & L. Foxhall, eds., *Money, Labour and Land: approaches to the economies of ancient Greece* (London, 2002), pp. 8-43.

⁵¹ See for example K. Fleming, 'The use and abuse of antiquity: the politics and morality of appropriation', in C. Martindale & R. Thomas, eds., *Classics and the Uses of Reception* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 127-37; Morley, *Antiquity and Modernity*, pp. 141-63.

handed down. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And if they nevertheless seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something that has not yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they fearfully conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes, in order to present the new scene of world-history in this time-honoured clothing and with this borrowed language.⁵²

However, while this borrowed language and sense of precedent may once have been necessary, it could equally become a trap. Too much consideration of the past might make it impossible for us to believe that a genuine revolution could ever succeed, offering instead a vision of history as a mere catalogue of accidents, or, as Hegel had put it, ‘the distant spectacle of a confused mass of wreckage’, which revealed human beings as eternally incapable of rising above the limitations of their society and themselves, and established the nature of modern society as a universal, eternal condition.⁵³

The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has cast off every superstition about the past... The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead.⁵⁴

There is a similar ambivalence in Friedrich Nietzsche’s essay ‘On the uses and disadvantages of history for life’. On the one hand, Nietzsche argued, a historical sense, an awareness of change and of the passage of time, is an indispensable part of being human; on the other hand, it can be a serious impediment to happiness and a whole-hearted commitment to life. History can be a source of inspiration, courage and hope, but it can equally become ‘the gravedigger of the present’, uprooting the future ‘because it destroys illusions and robs the things that exist of the atmosphere in which they alone can live’.⁵⁵ Nietzsche offered a psychological analysis of different kinds of history, the needs and desires that they serve, and their possible consequences for the relation of the historians and their readers to the present.⁵⁶ Study of the past, he argued, may lead to the sort of constructive dissatisfaction with the present that can inspire action and creativity, but it may equally provide reassurance for the anxious inhabitants of modernity that they are indeed the pinnacle of the world-historical process, the completion of nature, as they find traces of humanity in the living slime at the bottom of the sea and marvel at the miracle of modern man who is able to comprehend his own development.⁵⁷ The illusions that history provides are necessary for life, but an over-development of the historical sense is dangerous, above all if it involves a failure to recognise the true nature of the relationship between antiquity and modernity.

The man who no longer dares to trust himself but involuntarily asks history for advice on his feelings — ‘How should I feel about this?’ — gradually becomes through his timidity an actor, and plays a role, more often a number of roles, and therefore plays them badly and shallowly. Gradually all congruence between the man and his historical context is lost; we see impertinent little fellows associating with the Romans as if they were people just like them, and they scabble and dig in the remains of Greek poets as if these *corpora* had been provided for their dissection and were as *vilia* as their own literary *corpora* may be.⁵⁸

⁵² *Die achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte* [1852] in *Marx-Engels Werke* 8 (Berlin, 1960), p. 115.

⁵³ *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* [1840], in *Werke*, 12 (Frankfurt, 1970), p. 35.

⁵⁴ Marx, *Die achtzehnte Brumaire*, p. 117.

⁵⁵ *Zum Nutzen und Nachteil*, p. 295; Morley, *Antiquity and Modernity*, pp. 129-34.

⁵⁶ N. Morley, ‘Unhistorical Greeks: myth, history and the uses of antiquity’, in P. Bishop, ed., *Nietzsche and Antiquity: his reaction and response to the classical tradition* (Rochester & Woodbridge, 2004), pp. 27-39.

⁵⁷ *Zum Nutzen und Nachteil*, pp. 312-13.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

Why study antiquity today? Not, or not only, because we seek reassurance, or a sense of superiority over the past, or an escape into nostalgia; such desires may indeed be implicated in our choice of subject, and Nietzsche's account of the nature of the desire for the past poses some awkward questions to historians which in general they have been quite happy to ignore. However, for all their criticisms of the ways in which history has been abused or has shaped people's ideas about the world in damaging ways, neither Nietzsche nor Marx argued for the abandonment of a historical consciousness, but rather for its controlled employment for the right ends. History matters because the past matters to people and thus shapes our world: conceptions of the history of the world economy, for example, founded on conceptions of the relationship between ancient and modern, underpin policies for the 'development' of countries that are not yet modern enough, with far-reaching practical consequences; readings of Thucydides, of varying degrees of naiveté, have played their part in inspiring recent US foreign policy. These are things that we need to understand.

But history is not only a source of understanding in this rather defensive manner, a means of inoculating ourselves against myths and misconceptions; it can take on a more positive role, by offering us the possibility of stepping outside the present, in our imaginations, to gain a new perspective on our situation. This can raise questions about things which we might otherwise take for granted, as Marx struggled to make sense of the enduring appeal of classical art despite the manifest limitations of the culture that had produced it. It can provide a source of new ideas, as Roscher found in Thucydides an inspiration for a new approach to historiography, fully uniting its scientific and literary dimensions – a shame that no one took any notice. Above all, it emphasises the fact that the present state of things is not the only possibility: the future could be as different from the present as the present is from the past. Comparison with antiquity need not only arouse dissatisfaction, it can also offer hope. In place of the study of the past for its own sake, within a culture that generally regards the past as irrelevant or inconvenient, we need a constant dialogue between past and present, antiquity and modernity.

For I do not know what meaning the study of antiquity would have in our time if not that of working in its untimeliness — that is to say, against our time and thereby on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 247.