Social boundaries and social-political categories in Early Imperial Roman History[*]

Fronteiras sociais e categorias sociopolíticas na História do Principado Romano

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Abstract: This article discusses different historiographical approaches that dominated the studies on early imperial Roman history during the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. In order to do this, it focuses on two historiographic controversies: in the first place, the modernist-primitivist debate concerning economic history; in the second place, the debate about the constitutionalist approach to Roman politics, and the criticism it attracted. We conclude that historians have paid great attention to the elements that characterize the different spheres of social life, and to the reasons why scholars ought to favour one of them - especially whether to consider more structural or more dynamic aspects of social life. Our article considers the challenges in surveying the elements that integrate and separate these different spheres, i.e. the frontiers, suggesting possible approaches to overcome these limits, mainly by paying attention to their boundaries and connections.

Resumo: O artigo discute as diversas abordagens historiográficas que predominaram nos estudos da história do Principado Romano durante o século 20 e início do século 21. Para isso, analisamos, em particular, dois importantes debates. O primeiro deles diz respeito à história econômica. Trata-se do debate modernista-primitivista. O segundo está ligado à história política e nos leva à abordagem constitucionalista e às críticas feitas a essa perspectiva. Concluímos que os historiadores têm dado bastante atenção ao que caracteriza cada uma das diferentes esferas da vida social e os motivos que temos para dar mais importância a cada uma delas, especialmente considerando aspectos da vida social que sejam mais estruturais ou mais dinâmicos. Indicamos a importância de levantar o que une essas esferas da vida social, e o que integra e separa essas esferas, em uma palavra: para as fronteiras. Por fim, o artigo apresenta alguns caminhos para realizar essa tarefa, particularmente propondo que se dê atenção ao que separa e liga esses campos da vida social.

Introduction

T he purpose of this paper is to discuss how, over time, different historiographical approaches have emphasized one or another aspect of Roman socio-political reality. Such changes, over time, are linked to changes in the actual context of history writing. As it is known, changes in the present reality alter the way historians ask questions about the past. We propose to analyse these different propositions built up over time against the hypothesis that we have constructed for the analysis of Roman society at the time of the Principate. If all forms of interpreting social reality are the result of our own time and change as the situation changes, then it seems useful to look back and evaluate how our reading relates to those that were produced in the past. The aim is to evaluate how pertinent our proposition is to our time.

In our view – and I believe that is a consensus nowadays – the social hierarchy, the formation of solidarities and conflicts are the product of multiple variables.[1] We consider that the formation of solidarities and conflicts are basically an outcome of the forms of interaction resulting from economic, institutional and interpersonal relationships. Namely, we propose to categorise the many and myriad forms of social hierarchy into three types: economic, institutional and interpersonal forms for analytical purposes. I will dwell upon a few examples of these forms of interaction to try to make this point clear.

The economic forms would be generators of different class situations – not of class positions – where people are distinguished by the capability they have to concentrate resources socially produced. Why distinguish between class situation and class position? What we want to stress is that the economy produces social differences, but, by itself, it does not produce different social positions or social groups. We can point out here, as an example, to the distinction between rich and poor, understood in a narrower sense. Thus, economic realities conform one of three modalities that can both generate social differences and promote solidarity and social group formation.

The institutional forms of distinction would comprise those that generate different situations, that is juridical status – and, again, not positions. For instance, these are distinctions determined by certain legal frameworks. The distinction between slaves and free men is an example. Here we also realise that the legal distinctions can both differentiate individuals and foster an awareness of belonging to the same group.

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[1] This approach to social hierarchy thought of as the result of multiple variables begins with the article "Between freedom and slavery", by Moses Finley (1983).

The interpersonal relationships are those that generate differences in a very abstract level, such as prestige. Fundamentally, those who control a vast network of *clientes* and cultivate many *amici* have more prestige. Thus, there are distinctions between those who have many clients and those who seek the protection of a patron. These relations between patrons and clients not only rank the individuals, but produce groups. Solidarity operating for the formation of these groups is different from that observed in the case of economic and institutional relationships. In the case of economic and institutional relationships solidarity between people of the same rank in the hierarchy predominates. In interpersonal relationships, the relations of solidarity occur mainly among people of mixed status.

Thus, in my view, we can highlight that there are multiple forms of social hierarchy and otherwise various stimuli for the creation of solidarity which is necessary for the composition of socio-political groups. We believe that the forms of hierarchy and making of solidarity are manifold and none of them is crucial to determine the chains of hierarchy and solidarity in the Roman Principate. In addition, we should note that the same mechanisms that serve to produce solidarity also generate competition.

Therefore, these different forms of hierarchy, at the same time, generate divisions and bring people into contact and may produce either conflicts or solidarity between them. Although we can separate them here, the forms of economic, institutional and interpersonal interaction are amalgamated. This separation is purely analytical. We like to think that we copied it from Seneca (*Epistolae Morales*, 74, 7) who, writing to Lucilius, said: "Keep this picture in your mind: Fortune plays with men, spreads randomly among them the honours, riches and favours".[2] What distinguishes men in the words of Seneca? Honours are held in higher institutional situations, wealth obtained in privileged economic circumstances and favours enabled by personal relationships.

So, why do we separate them? Our answer: to better understand and, especially, to allow a debate on a whole tradition of historiographical interpretation. This tradition sometimes favoured social distinctions of a classist type, produced by the economic markets. Alternatively, this tradition stressed social distinctions produced by the State, of a juridical character. And more recently, it has valued those relationships of an informal character, markedly friendship and clientelistic relations.

We are used to thinking of society in its political, economic and cultural aspects, separately, yet we insist on saying that they are mixed. In spite of that, historians are in

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[2] In the original: "Hanc enim imaginem animo tuo propone, ludos facere fortunam et in hunc mortalium coetum honores, divitias, gratiam excutere" (Seneca, *Epistolae Morales*, 74, 7).

agreement with the idea of the inseparability of these fields. However, we write of political history, economic history, cultural history, military history among others. Each of these discussions references the others, but they have some autonomy. We propose a new way of thinking that can redeem the challenge of "histoire totale" in the Lucien Febvre way. Therefore, I would like to make a review to illustrate how these pathways of analysis appeared in this tradition. In other words, we will see how we position ourselves regarding this tradition.

The emphases that were given to different aspects generators of hierarchy, conflict and social solidarity in the Roman Empire changed over time. They varied over time and were also linked to different and specific discussions. In our view, these changes can most clearly be seen in two very important debates that we will use as examples. One of these debates revolves around the role of the State in the organization of social life. The other is the so-called debate between modernists and primitivists.

The debate between primitivists and modernists

Let us first discuss the debate between modernists and primitivists. To present these alternations between modernist and primitivist predominance, we will follow the synthesis proposed by Ian Morris, Richard Saller and Walter Scheidel (2007), presented in the "Introduction" to the book *Economic History of the Greco-Roman World*. In the authors' view, the alternation between a primitivist and a modernist domain in historiography analysis depends upon changes in the economic and political scenarios throughout the twentieth century. The "first globalization", prior to the First World War, would have generated a predominance of the modernists and an appreciation of the economic performance, of a social dynamics more closely tied to market-related variables. This interpretation of economic history leads to a reading of ancient societies in which hierarchy, solidarity and social conflict largely follow a class dynamics. The hegemony of primitivists would be consolidated with the lifting of heavy national economic barriers, especially after the consolidation of the post-Second World War. These primitivistic interpretations were focused more heavily on the structures of the economy, seen as almost completely stable, and embodied in both ideas of the *óikos* and of the consumer city as central explanatory categories. This emphasis on the economic structures was made at the expense of economic performance. This reading of the ancient economy spurred a perception of the social framework based on a logic predominantly based on juridical categories. A criticism towards this economic immobility will emerge with the "second globalization", from the 1980's onwards. Since then, strong criticism to this economic immobility has emerged

due to the findings that there were strong fluctuations in basic economic items such as the volume of grain production, population, among others more specific. For instance, research done by Deivid Valério Gaia (2009) demonstrated that there were significant fluctuations in the interest rates between the third century BC and the third AD, showing a sophisticated economic rationality. Economic historians have questioned more and more the strength of economic structures in relation to economic performance as a reasonable explanation. This change has led to a systematic and also a rather broad questioning of social interpretations founded on juridical status, with the consequent growth of ideas that have pointed out to the importance of interpersonal relationships, and the social regulation produced by the individuals themselves, regardless of the constraints produced by the State or the market.

Thus, the preference for primitivist models coincided with the predominance of an increase in State interventions in the economy, notably by creating barriers of national character. On the other hand, the hegemony of modernists would be linked to the greater opening of the economic frontiers worldwide. Although the authors conclude that "each generation gets the ancient history it deserves" (MORRIS; SALLER; WALTER, 2007, p. 5), they nevertheless acknowledge that

> [...] it would also be naïve to reduce the 115 years of debates to mere reflections of underlying socioeconomic forces. The changing world we live in surely makes certain questions about the past seem more interesting than others, and may direct our attention to bodies of evidence that previous generations of scholars have overlooked; but it does not shape the data themselves, or the logic of our methods (MORRIS; SALLER; WALTER, 2007, p. 5-6).

In this sense, they agree that we have, generation after generation, improved our knowledge about the sources and methods. For them, it is a challenge for historians of the twenty-first century

> [...] to build on twentieth-century advances in understanding institutions and ideology by clarifying the relationships between structures and performance" [...]. The second challenge, we suggest, requires ancient historians to continue Finley's and Hopkins' engagements with the social sciences (MORRIS; SALLER; WALTER, 2007, p. 7).

Finley (1983) is remembered for his contribution for using Weberian concepts in ancient history and Hopkins, for using elements of Keynesian macroeconomics.

The constitutionalist approach and its critics

Another important debate in the twentieth century in the study of hierarchies, conflicts and social solidarity is one that involved the creation of a constitutional perspective and the criticism that emerged from this perspective. As it is known, this debate is centred in political history.

There is an important point of consensus in this debate that I would like to highlight beforehand. Despite all the controversy, the interpretations are always centred in the scenario of the city of Rome and also in the Roman aristocracy and the emperor. Although Rome had gone from being a city-state to become the centre of an empire of continental proportions, interpretations of the exercise of imperial powers have dealt predominantly with the scenario of the city of Rome. Those analyses do not take into account broad alliances that Roman elites built with various sectors of society which we can distinguish with difficulty (*plebes, legions, provincials,* for instance). The political histories of the Principate show a clear elitist trend almost entirely centred in Rome, restricting the political scenario to interactions between the emperor and the aristocracy, with minimal involvement of the subaltern sectors and elites located outside of Rome.[3] It is important to say that the aforementioned elites always developed their own strategies of alliances with Rome associating themselves with specific aristocrats located in Rome. They did not ally themselves with the aristocracy as a whole, or even with the Senate. Therefore, in many respects, they are subordinate to some members of the elite of Rome, but not to all of the Roman elite. Naturally, the institutional order is important and it constraints the strategies that can be adopted by different elites. But the institutional order by itself does not explain the richness of phenomena that can be perceived in the construction of the Empire, the social solidarity and relations of conflict operated in the core of the Roman empire. That is what has been shown in the studies by Carlos Augusto Machado (2010; 2006) on the statue habit.

Let's move on and examine the debate about the constitutionalist perspective itself. The restraint of the political game to two players, namely the emperor and the aristocracy, resulting in a specific social formation has a long history, dating back to the constitutional vision of Theodor Mommsen – but the original inspiration, without a constitutional character, clearly dates back to Tacitus. In the view of the German historian, Augustus and his successors sought to endow their privileged positions as a legal form by holding *specific magistrate powers* – as *proconsularis imperium and tribunicia potestas* – based on

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[3] A highly influential example of this alternative is Andrew Wallace-Hadrill (1996, p. 283-308).

the political structure of the Republic. The Senate, in turn, remained "sovereign" under the Empire, dealing with the election of magistrates and the care of legislation. Moreover, the Senate ratified the rise of a new emperor through the *lex de imperio*. There should be no conflicts between the powers of the emperor and the Senate, but coexistence, therefore a "dyarchy" (WINTERLING, 2009). The disruption of this harmony in the distribution of powers led to a crisis within the elite, characterized by a conflict between the emperor and senators. These were the moments of crisis.

The relative continuity between the Republic and the Principate in the thought of Mommsen was a result of the way he conceived the great stability of the Roman Republic, based on a legal culture that had a normative effect on the political and social agency of individuals, providing exceptional structural stability to the republican society. Mommsen sought to describe the essence of the *State* through its public law. Then, the topics relative to processes and historical conditions, as well as the interactions established between the social agents constituting a social universe more complex than predicted by law had no priority in his approach. It is evident that it did not interest him to explain the Principate as an extra-legal reality. For instance, we can remind his observations about the influence of slaves, freedmen and friends of the emperors, an issue that, in his words, was a matter of history (Geschichte) and not public law (Staatsrecht) (WINTERLING, 2009. p. 102). Mommsen's ideas were the foundations of our way of thinking about ancient history. That is well known. Mommsen's ideas about legal order influenced our views about social hierarchy, leading to a predominance of juridical status as the main form of hierarchization. This view predominated in many studies of social history, and even today some works derive from this matrix. As shown by Winterling (2009), our reading of Mommsen is indeed reductionist. The same process of rehabilitation, but focused on Christian Meier's work, is found in Hölkenskamp's (2010) book recently translated into English. These comparisons between what these classic authors actually have written and what later authors attribute to them are very interesting. The differences between what one can read on the classics and what later interpreters have said about them are large and show the importance of resuming the reading of the classics. But this is not our main point. Let's, therefore, go back to the debate about the constitutionalist's approach.

The critique of the constitutionalist paradigm of analysis of Roman history gained strength in the first half of the twentieth century, when studies have shifted from the legal order to the practical arrangements for the functioning of the political republican and imperial systems. This shift, according to David Potter (2006, p. 2), who organized an interesting *Companion to the Roman Empire*, was due to the fact that

> [...] legality seemed to matter little to a generation that had seen Stalin promulgate a constitution for the Soviet Union, Mussolini proclaim a new vision of the Italian future that drew on the reconstructed physical remains of Rome's past, and Hitler's democratically elected government come to power in Germany.

The analysis of the oligarchic groups and moral concepts structuring relations among elite members – *gratia, amicitia, fides, pietas*, etc. – came to the foreground – what we might call a social and political history of the Republic and the Principate. This kind of history is well exemplified by the work of its principal exponent, Ronald Syme (1960*)*, which focused on the elite, especially the senatorial aristocracy. His work was devoted to the study of Roman history using the prosopographical method, outlining aristocratic family connections by marriage, careers and public offices held, in addition to relations of patronage and clientelism that were established between aristocrats. The argument of Syme (1960, p. vii) in *The Roman Revolution* illustrates the abandonment of the constitutional perspective:

> The composition of the oligarchy of government therefore emerges as the dominant theme of political history, as the binding link between the Republic and Empire: it is something real and tangible, whatever may be the name or theory of the constitution.

Present time: the predominance of cultural and socio-political approaches

More recently, it is noticeable a shift in the focus of research towards more strictly cultural or socio-political aspects of power relations. In this sense, the permanence of the use of the Republican vocabulary by the emperors would be mere rhetoric in the pejorative sense of the term. Vasily Rudich (1993), for example, in an important study about Nero, says that the Principate invented by Augustus was indeed autocratic, even though it claims to be the opposite, a "restored Republic". This primary contradiction between *de jure* and *de facto* had an effect in "a variety of gaps between *verba* and *acta*, words and deeds, manifest in collective as well as individual behaviour. It was an uncanny world of illusion and delusion, of ambivalences and ambiguities on all levels of interaction" (RUDICH, 1993, p. xv).[4]

From the late 1980s and especially during the 1990s, times of construction of a unipolar global order, marked mainly by the fall of the Berlin Wall, this perspective has gained strength in studies devoted to the relations of patronage, defined as organizers

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[4] Rudich's second book about Nero - *Dissidence and Literature under Nero. The Price of Rhetoricization*. London: Routledge, 1997 – also follows this thesis.

of the elites, creating a privatization of the politics in the Roman Empire. More than the constitutional powers of the emperor, recent interpretations gave importance to the distribution of benefits to the imperial elites and imperial court members through networks of patronage, which ensured the extension of the emperor's prestige to all parts of the empire.[5] The imperial court would be the locus where this interaction between the emperor and the aristocracy took place, including providing a model for the organization of other noble houses of Rome.[6]

In the perspective adopted by these authors, there is a devaluation of other elements concerning the organization of social life. Personal interactions, relations of friendship and patronage are what matter. They organize and give meaning to economic relations and also to the institutional positions. But then, in our view, those interpretations deserve criticism, once they do not give great importance to other aspects such as those related to the economy and the formal organization of society conforming to regulations dictated by the state.

Moreover, this approach emphasizes the role of "personal interactions and [the] perception of vertical orientation in the formation of social groups. Therefore, social struggles and conflicts between sectors of society would encompass individuals with different social conditions", opposing groups of mixed status. However, given that they "underestimate the role played by subaltern sectors in such social struggles, they fail to create mechanisms that may explain its dynamics" (FAVERSANI, 2003, p. 39-40). Interpersonal interactions, thus, apply only to the elite and so prosopography has focused mostly on rebuilding the ties that integrate these elites,[7] and the cultural history predominantly investigates the values that unite the Greek and Roman elite in the Empire.[8]

Others contemporary approaches focus more on cultural aspects, which postulates at the elite level, the occurrence of a gradual unification, both political and cultural, producing a sophisticated culture, both in Greek and Latin. At the level of the masses, the integration would be more difficult. The integration of the masses was given by local networks of patronage. This is the main reason because they had several difficulties of communication in this vast Empire. Consequently, it was impossible for the masses to integrate themselves or to define common goals. This integration happened around religious beliefs, namely Christian. Christianity was to become the official religion of the Empire. Thus, the alliance of conservative elites represented a pact that kept the empire

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[5] Cf., *e.g.*, Richard Saller (1982) and Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller (1987).

[6] It is the interpretation of Andrew Wallace-Hadrill (1996, p. 283-308).

[7] See Cloud (1989, p. 205-218).

[8] For an example, the recent work of Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *Rome's cultural revolution* (2008).

together for centuries. Under this perspective, alliances among elites, especially the aristocracy based in Rome, and the emperor, to whom everything converged, were all that mattered. The unity of the empire was accomplished mostly by the existence of a common culture among those elites.

We can quote some examples of works related to these cultural approaches. In Lendon's view, for instance, this cultural element which gives unity to the empire would be an honour. Talking about the object of his *Empire of Honour*, he says:

> It is, therefore, a study of government, but not a study of government institutions: it is an investigation of a slow-changing facet of human motivation, an investigation carried on with an eye to fears, desires, and beliefs expressed across the empire – common to the Greek East and the Latin West, to the capital and the provinces. The focus, moreover, is not on what changed over time, but on methods of rulership that can be shown to have worked consistently over the four centuries from the founding of the Empire to the barbarian sack of the city of Rome (LENDON, 2001, p. 2).

As a further example, we mention Clifford Ando (2000, p. xi), for whom:

> The study of Roman interaction with provincials at the local level likewise suggests that the internal stability of the empire relied not on Roman power alone, but on a slowly realized consensus regarding Rome's right to maintain social order and to establish a normative political culture.

And further on he says that: "The emperors and governing class at Rome did not have to provide their world with Scripture, but merely with a system of concepts that could shape, and in so doing slowly unite, the cultural scripts of their subjects" (ANDO, 2000, p. 23). After this, he asks: "What were the basic features of the generative grammar dictated by Rome to its provincial audiences?" (ANDO, 2000, p. xi). His answer is:

> At a superficial level, the Roman imperial government advertised to its subjects the existence of a shared history and a common political theology: the history was that of Rome in the era of her empire, and the one constant in the religious firmament was the emperor (ANDO, 2000, p. 23).

More recently, we have the contribution of John Alexander Lobur (2008, p. 208) in a book published in 2008. In his view,

> The emperor 'had' power not because people recognized him as the leader of an armed gang who simply had the capacity to enforce his will because soldiers followed him out of their own interest [...], but because he promoted and guaranteed values encapsulated by these very powerful concepts. Embracing a set of powerful symbols, activities, ceremonies and speech acts, they shaped and structured set of shared ideas that were influential and very attractive. In fact, one

might say that the success of the Roman imperial system as the culmination of western antiquity – and the influence on what it bequeathed to the period after – was precisely the strength and attractiveness of these ideas. Even upper-class Goths wanted to be Romans.

He could add: or maybe they would like to be Americans if they lived today... but I wouldn't be so sure.

We evaluate that propositions above, among others that predominate today, all well tuned to the current context when it prevails in a unipolar world order, and all of them indicate that the Roman elite was expanded and unified through a rational framework of interests or even simply through one more abstract element determined by common cultural values. In my view, however, there are significant divisions in the field of elites both in regard to their interests as well as in the cultural field. In Tacitus, especially in the *Annals*, the *plebs* of Rome presents a larger unit than the Senate itself and, in regard to slavery, there are tensions within the senatorial aristocracy concerning to better ways of managing slaves and freedmen. Moreover, as demonstrated by Fábio Duarte Joly (2006), discussions on how best to manage the slaves by the aristocracy are also largely a metaphor about how the emperor should relate to the aristocrats, especially the senators. Thus, the political, economic, legal and cultural elements in the ancient sources as separate aspects in the aristocrats' discourses are more a creation of our analysis than an actual element which existed in the minds of the ancient speakers and especially their audiences. Similarly, the boundaries of powers and duties between emperor and Senate do not obey a purely formal or constitutional logic, but were a territory of conflict over expectations involving benefits and advantages, harassment and fear.

Conclusions (or "and now, what is next?")

In conclusion, we have seen that concerning the economy and its influence on social dynamics it proves important to try to take into account the economic structures and performances in an articulated manner. In the case of politics, it seems increasingly clear that we should be concerned both with the rules of the game and the ways in which the game is played. This way of playing the game often changes the rules of the game, of course. But the rule of the game remains. We must also find ways to reconcile these two aspects in an integrated analysis.

For this, I quote Seneca again. In a passage of *Questiones Naturales* (2, 4, 1) in which he talks about the atmosphere, we have a good clue about one path we can follow to think the connection between these various spheres of social life. He says:

> In the same way air is a part of the world, and a necessary one. For it is what links heaven and earth, what separates the lowest and the highest levels and yet joins them: it separates them because it comes in between; it joins them because through it they can communicate with each other; whatever it receives from the earth, it passes upward, and, conversely, it spreads energy from the heavenly bodies over things on earth.

The separations between the spheres of social life are purely disciplinary and artificial. They do not exist in reality. The ancients and we do not think economically, politically and culturally every time. These spheres are amalgamated into each of our actions and thoughts, even if each of them may have dominance at any given time. Over time, historians have given enough attention to what characterizes each of these spheres and the reasons we have to give more importance to them. At the present moment, the challenge is to survey what unites these spheres of social life, and what integrates and separates these spheres. In other words, we think it is important to study the very elements that make the social life. This is crucial and must be rehabilitated in its most important and productive traditions. But the focus can be totally new if we concentrate on the frontiers between these spheres. Rather than each element taken in analytic isolation, it is time for us to start thinking about the 'atmosphere' that links and separates them.

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