Workers of the ancient world: analyzing labour in classical antiquity

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces, and briefly discusses, some of the main theories that have been formulated on labour relations and the exploitation of labour in classical antiquity. Each of these theories approaches labour from a totalizing perspective, with the market, class, or status taking a central place. As an alternative, it is suggested here that an institutional-economic analysis of ancient labour might be a profitable way forward.

KEYWORDS

Labour relations, Classical antiquity, Market, class and status

I How do we approach the subject of labour in the Greco-Roman world? As in all pre-modern societies, the primary source of most of the energy expended in the production of goods and services in the ancient Greek and Roman economies was human and animal muscle power, with some additions derived from the harnessing of wind and water and the burning of wood and wood-derived fuel sources. The ancient world, then, was very much a world of work, and hard work at that. Greek and Roman farming populations (and their work animals) as well as urban workers, manufacturers and service providers had to toil long and hard, day-in, day-out, to produce the surplus that made possible the impressive material achievements (in terms of urbanisation, infrastructure, art and architecture) and the luxurious lifestyle of the elites of their respective societies. Labour productivity in agriculture was low, which necessitated the employment of the vast majority of the

ancient world's populations in the production of primary foodstuffs, and condemned the vast majority of individuals making up those agrarian populations (as well as a sizeable element of the urban inhabitants) to a standard of living not much above subsistence.[1] In all this, the ancient world did not differ much from other complex pre-industrial societies. The question which we might then ask is: how were the production of goods and services and the extraction of surplus specifically organised in the Greco-Roman world? How, in other words, was labour employed and exploited in the ancient economy, what was distinctive, comparatively speaking, about the way it was employed, and who drew the primary benefit from the method(s) of employment and exploitation that we find?

Attempts to answer such questions have not been scarce. In what follows, I will draw a necessarily highly schematic overview of some of the main theories, or approaches to, labour in the Greco-Roman world that can be found in the scholarly literature. These approaches for the most part do not focus on labour as such, but are actually larger interpretative models of the ancient economy, in which labour naturally and necessarily occupies a central place. I shall discuss some of the advantages and disadvantages of these existing models in helping us to understand and explain ancient labour, after which I will sketch the outlines of an alternative approach, which might help us overcome some of the disadvantages of these existing models without forcing us to abandon their most productive insights. I start, however, with a brief discussion of concepts related to the notions of "work" and "labour" in antiquity, and of the various categories of working people that we come across, to provide some necessary background for the ensuing argument.

Anthropologists have pointed out that the concept of work may well be a modern western invention. As Erik Schwimmer notes: "Work as a concept is based on the assumption that (...) all economically useful activities are fully comparable by a yardstick transcending their diversity". This "yardstick" he identifies as the notion that "labour has become a commodity".[2] Ancient elite authors, whose views figure most prominently in our extant sources, primarily considered types of work and workers in moral and political terms. Concepts like *ponos* and *labor* were associated with drudgery, manual work was seen as degrading, and a person who had to perform manual labour to ensure his

[1] For an excellent recent overview of the economic history of the ancient world see SCHEIDEL, Walter; MORRIS, Ian and SALLER, Richard. eds. *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007.

[2] SCHWIMMER, Erik. "The self and the product: concepts of work in comparative perspective". In: WALLMAN, Sandra. ed. *The social anthropology of work*. London: Academic Press, 1979, p. 287, as cited by VAN DER LINDEN, Marcel and LUCASSEN, Jan. *Prolegomena for a Global Labour History*. Amsterdam: International Institute of Social History, 1999, p. 8.

livelihood could never be truly free: he had no free time (*schole*, *otium*) in which to pursue those activities truly worthy of a citizen: politics, culture, philosophical debate. Craftsmen, manual labourers (*banausoi*, *sordidi*) and especially wage-workers, whose position was likened to that of slaves, should therefore not be given citizen status, or, if that could not be avoided, should at least not be permitted full political rights. This was the upshot of such arguments generally formulated by elite citizens and aristocrats weary of the participative, democratic political tendencies in the ancient city-states, particularly classical Athens and Republican Rome. In other contexts, often no less political, hard work could be praised, and idleness condemned. From Hesiod to Xenophon to Cicero and beyond, working hard on one's farm, whether with one's own hands as a sturdy peasant proprietor or as a dedicated gentleman-farmer directing the labour of others, was uniformly praised. Equally, the diligence, skill and devotion of the craftsman to his trade could be held up as a moral example, while even the wholesale merchant and long-distance trader might be evaluated positively, as providing many necessary and useful goods to the community (e.g. Cic. *Off*. 1.151). The pivotal concerns, throughout antiquity, with regard to work seem to have been, first, wealth, its origin, but above all, its proper use – not (solely) to maximize personal profit, but for the benefit of the community – and second, freedom, defined as economic autarky, as a lack of dependence on others for gaining one's livelihood.[3] To be sure, these were ideals, which, moreover, emanate mainly from a literature written by upper class authors: the voices of working people themselves are harder to discern. But when we do hear them, in inscriptions on vases, sculpture, and funerary steles, or in depictions which the wealthier among them offer us in reliefs on their grave monuments, the message conveyed is one of great pride in work and skills, and a strong sense of occupational identity.[4] Still, it seems unwise not to assume some overlap, however tenuous, with the attitudes we find expressed in texts produced by the elite: on the funerary reliefs of Roman craftsmen and shopkeepers, for instance, the frequently loving and detailed depiction of the workshop, its workers and their tools of trade suggest a concern to emphasize that those commemorated had earned their living and gained their wealth (if any) the *right* way: through hard, honest and diligent work.

[3] For the classic analysis see FINLEY, Moses. *The ancient economy*. Updated edition. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999 [first published 1973], esp. chapters I and II. On craftsmen see BURFORD, Alison. *Craftsmen in Greek and Roman society*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1972. On trade and traders, see MORLEY, Neville. *Trade in classical antiquity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007. For a recent thoughtful analysis of ancient attitudes to work and workers see LIS, Catharina and SOLY, Hugo. *Worthy efforts: attitudes to work and workers in pre-industrial Europe*. Leiden: Brill 2012, chapters 1 and 2.
[4] For a large collection of reliefs (mainly funerary) with work scenes from the Roman world see ZIMMER, Gerhard. *Römische Berufsdarstellungen*. Berlin: Mann, 1982.

Even if, as has been argued (and as the quote from Schwimmer also suggests), abstract, unified concepts of work, labour, or labour power did not exist in antiquity, labour, or, to be more precise, *labourers* certainly were a commodity in the ancient world. That is, one could go to a marketplace and buy labourers, in the form of slaves, who then became one's possession, or hire labourers, either for a specific period of time, or to perform a specific task. Roman legal terminology literally speaks of the "leasing" of labour (*locatio conductio operarum*), generally for a specific period of time, which should be differentiated from a contract for the completion of a specific task (*locatio conductio operis faciendi*), and from the leasing out of a slave one owned as a labourer, which fell under the contract for the leasing out of things (*locatio conductio rei*). Day labourers would gather in the city market at a specific location, which in Athens was called the *kolonos misthios*, where they offered themselves for hire (see also the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard in Matthew 20:1-16, where the procedure is well described).

Thus, in the ancient marketplace, we immediately come across two types of labourers, the slave and the free wage worker.[5] In fact, however, the variety of different labour situations in antiquity was very great. Full chattel slaves were found in many households throughout Greco-Roman antiquity, in the cities and on the land, but there existed numerous other categories of dependent or semi-dependent labourers, from serf-like peasant groups to debt-bondsmen to populations "enslaved" to a particular state, like the helots of Sparta, who were "between slavery and freedom"[6], to public slaves, working in government functions, to freed slaves who were still legally obliged to render some services to their former masters. Free labourers also came in various shapes and sizes, from peasant-proprietors who worked their own land together with their wives and children to tenant farmers, working their landlords' estates, to skilled artisans, owning or renting their own workshop, which they worked with their families, slaves, apprentices and/or employees, to skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled labourers, working for a wage or contracted to do a particular job, as we just saw. And the list could go on. This complexity, which is only aggravated by regional differences, differential developments over time between various regions, and overlap between several categories of labour, has made it difficult for social and

[5] For non-slave labour see GARNSEY, Peter. ed. *Non-slave labour in the Greco-Roman world*. Cambridge Philological Society, Supplementary Volume no. 6. Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society and more recently KEHOE, Dennis. "Contract labor". In: SCHEIDEL, Walter. ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 114-130.

[6] This is the title of a famous essay on slavery and dependent labour in the ancient world by Moses Finley, see "Between slavery and freedom". In: FINLEY, Moses. *Economy and society in ancient Greece*. SHAW, Brent and SALLER, Richard. eds. New York: The Viking Press, 1981, pp. 116-132.

economic historians of antiquity to formulate any general conclusions about ancient labour. Various attempts have been made to overcome this difficulty, which I will discuss under the headings of "oversocialization" and "undersocialization" (what I mean by these terms will become clear during the course of my discussion).[7] I start with the latter.

II

What we might call an "undersocialized" approach to ancient labour can be found in market-based analyses of the ancient economy. Late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century ancient historians such as Eduard Meyer, Tenney Frank and Michael Rostovtzeff analyzed the Greek and Roman economies in strongly modernising terms, attributing modern market economic motives to ancient individuals, institutions and states.[8] These were highly empiricist scholars, who distrusted the theories and models developed by sociologists and economists, so their market economics remained largely implicit, in the form of "common sense" assumptions about economic behaviour derived from their own educational background and the socio-economic context of their day and age. Thus they could discuss the rise of ancient slavery as the consequence of the development of a capitalist market economy in Classical Greece and Late Republican Rome, could speak of Greek and Roman professional associations as if they were modern labour unions and describe free wage labourers as an urban proletariat crowded out of the rural and urban labour markets by the availability of cheap slaves. In recent decades, however, various scholars have developed a much more theoretically sophisticated market-based approach to antiquity.[9] Particularly the work of the economist and economic historian Peter Temin on the Roman empire stands out in this respect.[10] Formulating his analysis in explicitly neo-classical terms, Temin has argued that the Roman empire was in fact an

[7] I borrow these terms from Ian Morris's introduction to the 1999 updated edition of Finley, *Ancient economy*, where he uses them to characterize different categories of critical responses to Finley's work on the ancient economy. They derive ultimately from Granovetter's famous discussion of the embeddedness of economic action. See GRANOVETTER, Mark. "Economic action and social structure: the problem of embeddedness". *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 91 (1985), pp. 481-93.

[8] See e.g. Meyer's essays "Die Sklaverei im Altertum" and "Die wirtschaftliche Entwicklung des Altertums", both in MEYER, Eduard. *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichtstheorie und zur wirtschaftlichen und politischen Geschichte des Altertums*. Halle: Niemeyer, 1910; FRANK, Tenney. *An economic history of Rome*. Second edition. London: Jonathan Cape, 1927; ROSTOVTZEFF, Michael. *The social and economic history of the Roman Empire*. Second edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957.

[9] See e.g. RATHBONE, Dominic. *Economic rationalism and rural society in third century A.D. Egypt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991; COHEN, Edward. *Athenian economy and society: a banking perspective*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

[10] See most recently TEMIN, Peter. *The Roman market economy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.

integrated market economy, with a unified labour market. Wage-labour was widespread, according to Temin, while wages for work requiring comparable levels of skill were fairly equal across the empire. Slaves and free workers, moreover, were part of the same labour market, not just because they often performed the same jobs interchangeably, but also because Roman slaves, with their *peculium* or working capital that they could manage and amass, and with which they might eventually buy their freedom, were in fact sort of long-term employees.[11]

Marxist analyses of the Greco-Roman world supply yet another "undersocialized" take on ancient labour. As the *Communist Manifesto* famously declared in 1848: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Free man and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another..."[12] Marx and Engels' implicit conceptualisation of antiquity as a "slave economy" or "slave society" (note also *Capital* Vol. 1, p. 719: "The Roman slave was held by chains; the wage labourer is bound to his owner by invisible threads"[13]) has given historians of antiquity, both the Marxists and the non-Marxists among them, considerable headaches. This is so for two reasons: first, because apart from various summary statements here and there, Marx did not provide a systematic analysis of the ancient economy (since his primary subject was modern capitalism), and second, probably partly due to the first reason, because the actual, systematic application of Marxist concepts, particularly "class" and "class struggle", to ancient society proved fairly difficult in practice.

The work which, in the English-speaking world at least, rose most heroically to this formidable challenge was G.E.M. de Ste. Croix's *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (which, despite its title, covers the entirety of ancient history, Greek, Roman and late Roman/early Byzantine).[14] This is a difficult work to summarize, both because of its wide-ranging discussion of many different topics and because of the long time-span it covers. Nonetheless, de Ste. Croix's main contention is that in the ancient world a landowning propertied class was dependent for its wealth on the expropriation of the agrarian surplus produced by a class of more or less dependent labourers composed of chattel slaves where possible (i.e. where supply was sufficient), and, where not , of various categories of serfs (among whom he

[11] TEMIN, Peter. "The labor market of the early Roman Empire". *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 34, n.4, 2004, pp. 513–538.
[12] MARX, Karl and ENGELS, Frederick. *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. In: *Selected Works in One Volume*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1968, pp. 35-36
[13] MARX, Karl. *Capital Vol. I*. Trans. B. Fowkes. London: New Left Books, 1976.
[14] de STE. CROIX, Geoffrey. *The class struggle in the ancient Greek world: from the Archaic age to the Arab conquest*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981.

includes tenant-farmers), debt-bondsmen, hired labourers and so forth. In the case of free peasant farmers and other free workers, exploitation was, throughout most of antiquity, effected by the state (Hellenistic kingdoms, Roman Republic and empire), which represented the interest of the propertied classes, via taxation, military conscription, *corvée* labour and suchlike. The tension which all this exploitation produced de Ste. Croix understands as the ancient class struggle, which represents the primary law of motion of Greco-Roman history.[15]

Both these approaches, the market model (as represented by Temin), and the Marxist model (as represented by de Ste. Croix), can be criticized on their own terms. For instance, Temin's idea of Roman slavery as some sort of long-term labour contract ignores the crucial fact that in antiquity slaves were in fact regarded, by law and in practice, as property. In neo-classical terms, slaves were capital goods, valuable assets over which owners exercised full property rights just as they did in case of other capital goods such as land, farm buildings, workshops etc. In de Ste. Croix's analysis, even from a Marxist perspective the ancient class struggle looks decidedly one-sided, consisting mostly of the exploitation visited by the propertied class upon their dependent labourers. There were, throughout antiquity, very few uprisings by slaves or other categories of dependent workers (though it should be noted that those controlling dependent labour put a lot of effort in preventing resistance or rebellion), and those that occurred happened in very specific contexts and were not aimed at abolishing slavery or other forms of dependence as institutions.[16]

My main problem with both these models as analyses of ancient labour, however, is that they tend, in a surprisingly similar way, to minimize or (partially) ignore the great diversity and socio-political complexity characteristic of the Greek and Roman labour situation, which is why I have dubbed them "undersocialized". The market model, in Temin's version, whilst offering a seductively logical analysis on its own terms, not only lumps freeborn workers, freedmen and slaves together, minimizing the importance of the considerable social, legal and political differences between these categories of individuals, but also does not pay much attention to differences between these and yet other types of labourers (e.g. different forms of often serf-like tenancy, especially in the eastern provinces of the Roman empire, debt-bondage, forced labour, public slavery). In his Marxist analysis, de Ste.

[15] For good discussion of de Ste. Croix's views see the reviews by Paul Cartledge in *The English Historical Review*, vol. 99, 1984, pp. 566-569, 1984 and John Crook in *The Classical Review*, New Series 33:1, 1983, pp. 71-71.

[16] See SHAW, Brent. *Spartacus and the slave wars: a brief history with documents*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001 for a brief overview of the Roman Republican slave uprisings, with much primary source material (in translation).

Croix, in his effort to present the dependent labourers of the ancient world as one single class of exploited workers, despite his deep knowledge of the ancient sources is similarly prone to minimizing the overall importance of real legal, social and economic differences between various categories of (rural) labourers (slaves, tenant-farmers, serfs, debt-bondsmen and so on). Despite the theoretical sophistication on display in both Temin's and de Ste. Croix's analyses, one is left with the feeling that precisely that which makes the ancient world historically interesting, that is, the institutional, legal, social and cultural specificities and idiosyncrasies of ancient Greece and Rome, is often smoothed over or judged to be of secondary importance only, all for the benefit of the overall model.

This brings us to a third and, to this day, most influential account of the Greco-Roman economy, one that was born precisely from impatience with the generalisations of (an earlier generation of) "modernising" market-focussed historians (chiefly Rostovtzeff and Meyer) as well as those of orthodox Marxists, namely Moses Finley's model of "the ancient economy". Inspired by Max Weber, Finley argued that social status, in which class position was subsumed, was the ordering principle of ancient society. Ancient man was a *homo politicus* instead of a *homo economicus*. The accumulation of wealth was not an end in itself; it served, and was in its shape and substance constrained by, the acquirement of status.[17] In tune with his overall discussion of ancient economic behaviour, Finley suggested that, when analyzing ancient labour, we should take into account "a spectrum of statuses with the free citizen at one end and the slave at the other, and with a considerable number of shades of dependence in between".[18] Greeks and Romans, Finley suggested, citing the views of ancient authors mentioned at the beginning of this paper, evaluated the various categories of labourers primarily in moral terms, related to status. Since wage labourers and craftsmen were likened to slaves, their situation was unbecoming of the freeborn citizen. Due to such ideological considerations, Finley argued, citizens were generally unavailable as labourers, and slaves and other unfree groups (e.g. the helots at Sparta) or semi-free groups such as freedmen often took their place. Consequently, no proper labour market, in the modern sense, ever developed.

Finley's status-based approach allows us to take proper account of the social, legal and political complexities of the ancient labour situation. However, it has its own problems. I mention two. First, precisely because Finley's status-based methodology is so sensitive to specific social context, it might make us

[17] FINLEY. *Ancient economy*. *op.cit*.
[18] FINLEY, Moses."Was Greek civilization based on slave labour?" In: FINLEY, Moses. *Economy and Society in ancient Greece*. *op.cit.* pp. 97-115, at p. 98; FINLEY. *Ancient economy*. *op.cit*. pp. 67-68.

lose sight of broader patterns of labour relations of precisely the sort which Temin and de Ste. Croix each in their own way strive to bring to light. Finley himself tried to remedy this problem by focussing much of his research on the Greek Classical and Roman Republican periods, during which the division between free citizen and slave was most clearly demarcated, often citing views expressed in sources from these periods as representative of antiquity as a whole, whilst steering clear, for the most part (though certainly not entirely), of the more complex status structures of the Greek Archaic, Hellenistic and High Roman imperial periods.

Second, and most importantly, just as neo-classical or Marxist-inspired historians might be accused of "undersocialization", so it is possible to accuse Finley of "oversocializing" the ancient economy, including ancient labour, and, as Ian Morris points out in his introduction to the 1999 edition of Finley's *Ancient Economy*, many critics have done just that (though without using the term). Finley, it can be argued, takes the moralizing strictures expressed in elite-produced literary texts too much at face value. Xenophon or Cicero were engaged in ideological polemics, and whatever they said, in reality some (many?) citizens did work as wage labourers, some (many?) freedmen and even slaves might function relatively independently, become well-off or even rich, and cities did need their grain, wine and oil, peasants their manufactured products, and elites their luxuries, so there were lots of possibilities to make a good profit as a merchant, and even elites were not averse to some involvement in this kind of money-making. Evidence to back up all such statements has been brought to light in increasing quantities in recent years, especially for the Hellenistic and Roman economies[19], and this is all well and good as far as it goes, but there is perhaps a more important argument to be made concerning Finley's supposed "oversocialization".

Finley, in line with the views of substantivist anthropologists such as Karl Polanyi, regarded ancient economic behaviour as "embedded" in social, political and ideological institutions and morals. In the pre-industrial world, according to Polanyi, the economy did not develop into a clearly demarcated social sphere, separated from moral considerations and social and political institutions. Capitalism, with its disembedded, price-setting markets, impersonal exchange and contractual wage-labour, and, consequently (in this line of thinking), economic growth, only became dominant features of western society around 1800 or so.[20] Anyone, therefore, who wished to argue for a market economy or even economic growth in classical antiquity did well

[19] The bibliography is enormous, and growing. It is best to consult SCHEIDEL, MORRIS, SALLER. *Cambridge Economic History*. *op*. *cit*.
[20] POLANYI, Karl. *The great transformation: the political and economic origins of our time*. New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1944.

to steer clear from this model of an "embedded" or "socialized" economy, while Finley, in turn, used it precisely to argue against what he regarded as the anachronistic market-economic modernising of ancient historians like Rostovtzeff and Meyer. In Finley's view, the ancient economy was a relatively static structure without much development or *per capita* economic growth. In the absence of significant technological developments (due to a non-productive mentality), labour served to produce the means of subsistence, or, in its dependent forms, as a subject of exploitation.

In recent decades, however, economic sociologists and economists have pointed with increasing frequency to the role played by mentalities, institutions and organisations in structuring economic behaviour. The crux of these arguments is that every economy is, to some extent, embedded in social structures. As economists associated with the New Institutional Economics (NIE) have particularly pointed out, institutions, if anything, determine the incentive structure in any given society, and hence economic outcomes.[21] If we follow this line of thinking, we can only conclude that Finley was right to attach pivotal importance to Greek and Roman social structures, mentalities and institutions in his analysis of the ancient economy. At the same time, however, we can no longer be so certain as he was that such institutional embeddedness necessarily prevented any form of economic dynamism or growth. It is increasingly acknowledged that economies in different periods and cultures have their own internal dynamics, their own "bounded" forms of rationality or efficiency, all stimulated by their particular institutional set-ups. Now, and this is the question which concerns me here, what happens when we look at ancient labour relations through such institutional lenses?

III

An institutional analysis of ancient labour might, I would argue, well provide a solution to some of the problems associated with the analyses sketched above (i.e. the oversimplifying abstractions of the market- and Marxist models, and the overly complex status-based analysis of Finley), without, however, in the process doing away with their chief merits: alerting us to the presence of markets and exploitation respectively in the case of Temin and de Ste. Croix, and to the importance of social structure in case of Finley. In terms of the NIE, every society produces its own institutions (formal legal rules, informal norms, i.e. "the rules of the game") which are shaped by its

[21] GRANOVETTER, Mark. "Economic action and social structure". *op.cit.*; NORTH, Douglass. *Institutions, institutional change and economic performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990; NORTH, Douglass. *Understanding the process of economic change*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

prevailing world view (a shared mental model). Organisations, i.e. groups of people bound to achieve some common objectives, can then be conceived of as "the players of the game", responding to the incentive structures created by the institutional framework. In practice, the line between institutions and organisation is fuzzy at best, and the two often appear to overlap. Hence in what follows I will generally speak of institutions/organisations.

Focussing on institutions/organisations allows us to bring some analytical order to the great variety of different categories of labour and types of labourers which we come across in ancient sources. This is so because institutions/organisations functioned as structuring actors, that might simultaneously "consume", i.e. buy/hire and employ, and supply labour to third parties. Thus, they in effect operated as allocation mechanisms (or channels) via which labour and labour power were distributed in ancient society. An institutional/organisational focus, moreover, can also provide us with some rationale for the great diversity of labour statuses which we encounter in antiquity, since within a given institutional/organisational context, different status positions and the specific labour relations associated with them might well serve to reduce costs of oversight, transaction and information so as to maximise "efficiency", in terms of output, profit or, indeed, exploitation (rent-seeking, predation).

By way of example, I shall very briefly discuss three instances of such institutions/organisations in Greco-Roman society: the household (*oikos*/*familia*), the association (*collegium*), and the city (*polis*/*civitas*), though others can easily be thought of (e.g. the temple, the court). I should point out that some of what follows here is still partly hypothetical, the subject of ongoing research by various scholars: I present these examples merely as suggestions towards what I think could be a fruitful new line of research in the study of ancient labour.

The Greek or Roman household (*oikos*/*familia*), comprising the core family (parents and children) as well as slaves, freedmen and sometimes other dependents, is a prime example of an organisational structure that served as a mechanism for the allocation of labour, buying it, employing it, and also supplying it to others. Households might be small, just a farmer or manufacturer in his workshop, with his family members, apprentices, and a few slaves or freedmen, or large, like an elite *oikos*, comprising many individuals, and having both an urban (city villa) and rural base (estates), or even several of either of these. As units of production, both for home consumption and for sale on the market, households bought labour, in the form of slaves, for a multitude of tasks, ranging from secretarial duties or educating the children to hard manual labour on the estates. They also hired labour, mostly in the form of low-skilled casual wage-workers, in Republican

Italy, for instance, primarily to assist the slave workforce on the estates during peak periods in the agricultural year (harvest primarily).[22] To be able to function at all, the household always needed a basic or core workforce, to accomplish the necessary tasks. Slaves, being the property of the household, and hence totally dependent on it, legally, socially and economically, were the obvious choice here. They could be fully controlled, and were always available. For similar reasons, slaves, as well as freedmen who, by law, custom and/or economic necessity, were generally still tied to their former masters, were also the ideal type of worker to serve as agents for the household in any trading, manufacturing and financial activities its core members might undertake. Especially important in this respect were freedmen who had served the household for a long time as slaves, which meant that their former masters knew them and their abilities well, and had had time to develop a relationship of trust with them that would have been hard to establish with outsiders.[23] Hired labourers the household needed only for short-term tasks, such as helping to gather in the harvest. Hence, there was no need for a similar level of control and building up of trust. Households might also lease (part of) their land to tenants, who were less expensive than a slave workforce in terms of costs of oversight.[24] Finally, households also supplied labour to third parties, in the form of slaves but also freedmen who were hired out to others –probably often to individuals belonging to the household's circle of friends and acquaintances.

Professional associations (which the Romans called *collegia*) flourished in Greek and Roman cities, chiefly during the Hellenistic and Roman imperial periods. Uniting members of the same or similar professions, they provide a window on a category of work that is often overlooked in studies of labour: that of the self-employed, the manufacturers and service providers in their workshops, supplying their specialized skills and products to the community. *Collegia* have long been regarded as primarily social clubs, not to be compared with early modern European guilds, but in recent years scholars

[22] GARNSEY, Peter. "Non-slave labour in the Roman world". In: GARNSEY, Peter. *Cities, peasants and food in classical antiquity: essays in social and economic history*. Edited with addenda by SCHEIDEL, Walter. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 134-150.

[23] In Classical Athens, for instance, citizens engaged in banking and financial activities often co-operated professionally with slaves in their household. See COHEN, *Athenian economy and society: a banking perspective*. *op.cit*. pp. 73-101. On the widespread use of freedmen as economic agents in the Roman world see MOURITSEN, Henrik. *The freedman in the Roman world*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011 esp. pp. 213-216; BROEKAERT, Wim. "The demise of status. Freedmen and agency in Roman business". Forthcoming.

[24] In some places, such as Sparta, Thessaly and (parts of) Hellenistic and Roman Asia Minor, due to specific regional socio-political conditions, households were able to make use of semi-servile native populations as labourers.

have increasingly placed stress on various forms of economic co-operation between *collegia* members.[25] To protect their interests in the often highly volatile pre-industrial markets and also vis-à-vis the far wealthier and more powerful urban elites who dominated city politics, artisans and service providers banded together. *Collegia*, it has been argued, were trust groups, where sense of community was reinforced by the sociability provided by common meals, common festivities and common cults, and members were bound to help one another. As trust networks, *collegia* facilitated the provision of credit and the exchange of information among members at low transaction costs, and they also allowed members to present their skilled labour and its products to society at large on terms over which they exercised some level of control. Many members of *collegia* of artisans and craftsmen would have been workshop owners and consequently employers of (mostly only a few) skilled workers. Given that ancient labour markets for skilled workers in particular were often thin and fragmented, *collegia* likely served as networks co-ordinating the allocation of skilled labour among members (and between members of different *collegia*).[26] In addition, while *collegia* members themselves could be freeborn, freedmen, and sometimes even slaves, the *collegium* as a collective could also possess its own slaves, whom it bought, employed, and might manumit, in which case the *collegium*, as a collective, became the *patronus* of the now manumitted slaves.[27] Thus, in terms of an institutional analysis of labour, *collegia* might be regarded as institutional/organisational structures coordinating and facilitating the labour of various important categories of workers in the urban economy: the self-employed of various statuses (freeborn, *liberti*, slaves working fairly independently, with their workshops as their *peculium*), skilled wage-labourers, and (skilled) slaves.[28]

I now turn to my third and final example, cities. The ancient world was a world of cities, and, for long periods of its history, also one of city-states (*poleis*/*civitates*). It was the city-states such as Athens, Sparta and particularly Rome that engaged in imperialist adventures which produced streams of war

[25] See VERBOVEN, Koenraad. "Professional *collegia*: guilds or social clubs?" *Ancient Society* 41, 2011, pp. 187-195 for a good discussion.
[26] See in particular HAWKINS, Cameron. "Manufacturing". In: SCHEIDEL, Walter. ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 175-194. For *collegia* as trust groups consult BROEKAERT, Wim. "Partners in Business. Roman merchants and the advantages of being a *collegiatus*" *Ancient Society*, 41, 2011, pp. 219-254.
[27] LIU, Jinyu. Collegia centonariorum: *the guilds of textile dealers in the Roman west*. Leiden: Brill, 2009, pp. 176-178.
[28] Liu cites an example of a *collegia*-owned slave who was the association's *arcarius*, or treasurer, a responsible post requiring specific skills. *Ibid*., p. 177.

captives who could be employed or sold as slaves.[29] Cities too provided both the material infrastructure and organisational context for that most notorious of ancient "labour markets", the slave trade.[30] In this most direct and immediate sense, cities certainly served as an important labour allocation mechanism. However, we can go further. The political structure of the ancient city, with its annually rotating amateur-magistrates and its mass citizen-councils and -assemblies, did not allow for the development of professional bureaucracies. A partial solution to this problem was found in the form of public slaves, owned by the city, to carry out important public tasks as a permanent workforce that could easily be monitored and controlled by the annually appointed magistrates.[31] The slave status of these workers meant that they had virtually no bargaining power, so they could be employed at low transaction costs. Cities might also employ a number of free salaried officials who assisted the magistrates with their official tasks – writers, clerks, heralds, *lictores* and so forth. Moreover, as a service to the citizenry, doctors, teachers, rhetoricians and philosophers might be publicly employed, that is, free intellectual specialists of a fairly high status. Last but certainly not least, cities also generated (and partly co-ordinated) employment for those with no or only marginal ties to the allocative institutions thus far described (elite households, *collegia*): free poor day labourers. Many such individuals were employed in civic public building, often on a temporary basis and generally via a whole series of subcontracts. Due to the periodic nature of public construction, it made little sense for urban communities or contractors to keep on a large permanent slave force for building projects.[32] In this sphere, then, casual wage labour found one of its most important niches.[33] For poor urban

[29] For the classic analysis of the impact of Roman imperialism, including the import of massive numbers of war captives as slaves, on the Italian economy, see HOPKINS, Keith. *Conquerors and slaves. Sociological Studies in Roman History 1*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.

[30] To give one well-known, if extreme, example, Strabo 14.5.2 reports that the slave market in late Hellenistic Delos had a turnover of ten thousand slaves a day.

[31] During the Classical period, for example, the Athenian *polis* owned a group of Scythian archers as public slaves to keep order during meetings of the council and assembly. In addition, it employed public slaves (*demosioi*) for street cleaning, the repair of roads and a range of other tasks, including administrative ones. The imperial city of Rome, even though no longer a city-state in the original sense, still kept on public slave gangs for the upkeep of roads, public buildings and shrines, and the water supply system (aqueducts).

[32] The public slave workforces in imperial Rome, with its one million inhabitants at the time of Augustus, of course constitute a partial exception to this generalisation. See e.g. the 700 public slaves under the command of the *curator aquarum*, who were responsible for the upkeep of the water supply system, a permanent necessity, especially in such a large city: Frontinus, *On aqueducts* 116-117.

[33] BRUNT, Peter. "Free labour and public works at Rome". *Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. 70, 1980, pp. 81-100. DELAINE, Janet. "Building the Eternal City: the building industry of imperial Rome". In: COULSTON, Jon and DODGE, Hazel. eds. *Ancient Rome: the archaeology of the Eternal City*. Oxford: Oxford University School of Archaeology, 2000, pp. 119-141.

workers, underemployment was a significant problem, especially when there were no major building projects going on (or, for rural wage workers, outside harvest periods), and many free urban poor would, in addition, have had recourse to informal street trading, as do the urban poor in developing countries today.[34]

As I hope these brief examples indicate, an institutional analysis potentially has some advantages over the methodologies discussed earlier on in this essay. The prominent role played by trust groups and social network-type institutions/organisations (such as the *oikos*/*familia* or the *collegium*) in the allocation of labour suggests that ancient labour markets functioned less well than is sometimes supposed. Then again, the prominent role of these same institutions/organisations also suggests that the ancient labour situation cannot be reduced to a simple model of one class exploiting another. While the *oikos* or the *familia*, for instance, no doubt offered excellent opportunities to the head of household and his kin to exploit the household's dependent labourers (as evidenced e.g. by the harsh lot of chattel slaves working a household's landed estates), it should be understood that the household's diverse status composition also allowed the development of close bonds of trust between members that were beneficial to its operation as an economic unit and which could in turn strongly, and positively, affect actual labour relations within the household.

Overall, an institutional approach to ancient labour offers at least an indication that the ancient status structure did not necessarily have a negative impact on economic outcomes in the Greco-Roman world: rather, it might facilitate economic processes since it helped individuals to co-ordinate their activities in order to navigate a harsh, volatile world of insecurity, high risk and fragmented, imperfect markets. Finally, an institutional analysis of labour such as proposed here seems to fit in well with the methodological preoccupations of Global Labour History (GLH) to which this issue of *Workers of the World* is devoted. As an approach to labour, institutional economic analysis does not abstract from culture-specific idiosyncrasies of ideology, class and status, rather, it makes these central to the analysis, but in such a way as to facilitate and encourage rather than obstruct cross-cultural comparisons. This seems to suit the diachronic and trans-cultural agenda of GLH, whose proponents are actively engaged in developing comparative and

[34] HOLLERAN, Claire. "Migration and the urban economy of Rome". In: HOLLERAN, Claire and PUDSEY, April. eds. *Demography and the Graeco-Roman World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 155-180. It should be noted that urban and rural casual wage workers were often overlapping categories, since the urban poor might find temporary employment on neighbouring estates during harvest time, and the rural poor might find occasional employment in cities (where, however, they might subsequently stay put, attempting to scrape a living in the informal economy).

trans-cultural models themselves.[35] As will be apparent from this essay, I think that the study of ancient labour relations can certainly make an important contribution to this trend.

[35] See VAN DER LINDEN and LUCASSEN.. *Prolegomena for a Global Labour History*. *op.cit.*