

# Finley, Moses (1912–1986)

DANIEL P. TOMPKINS

Moses Finley (1912–1986), born Moses Finkelstein, received a BA at Syracuse University in 1927, then an MA in public law at Columbia University in 1929, with a thesis on the first Justice Harlan, famed dissenter in civil rights cases. In the 1930s Finley served as an editor for the *Encyclopedia of the social sciences*, writing its entry on Wellhausen; he edited, translated, and wrote wide-ranging and argumentative reviews for the Frankfurt School scholars in New York; he co-founded, with Franz Boas, the left-liberal American Committee for Democracy and Intellectual Freedom; and he began graduate work in history at Columbia. After wartime service as a manager for Russian War Relief, he took a position at Rutgers University (Newark), receiving the PhD in 1951.

Finley's left-wing past led to his being fired at City College (1942) and Rutgers (1952). Unemployed for nearly two years, he participated in Karl Polanyi's seminar at Columbia (1953–4), then moved to England. There he rose to professorship in 1970, became Master of Darwin College at Cambridge in 1976, and was knighted in 1979.

Finley sought to capture the "desperate foreignness" of ancient society. His insistence on argument may explain his apparent preference for lectures and essays over books. The essays, written in lucid prose, incorporate evidence from a wide range of fields and periods, revealing rather than proclaiming his acknowledged *paideia*: Marx, Max Weber, and European social thought. Trade, money-lending, agriculture, slavery, technology, and other practices served, he argued, different functions in antiquity from those they had in later societies, and productivity, economic interdependence, and class formation never reached modern levels. Skeptical and impersonal, he explored institutions, not great men

or events. Finley responded to the thinness of ancient data and lack of "controls" by developing models; he was particularly influenced here by Weberian ideal types.

Although *The ancient economy* (1973) distilled earlier work, Finley's long-standing preference for an explanatory Weberian "spectrum of statuses" over "class" surprised some Marxists, and his use of models irritated the "Baconians" (Finley's term). Finley rejected "primitivism" but minimized ancient economic growth and interdependence, urging "comparative study of literate, post-primitive [...] pre-industrial, historical societies." He portrayed the Greco-Roman world as complex and varied, but united by geography, periodization, "cultural-psychological framework," and ultimately politics (pp. 26–34), often merely hinting at underlying models with minimalist brushstrokes, like the simple privative "no": "no guildhalls" meant no guilds; the absence of binding sales, credit creation, cities based on manufacture, fiscal reserves, and other "modern" commercial practices signaled the overall distinctiveness of the ancient world.

Finley ultimately rejected many received formulae, including "charismatic leaders," "feudalism," "modes of production," and "class struggle." Influenced partly by the publication of Marx's *Grundrisse*, Lukacs' *History and class consciousness*, and contemporary British discussions, but primarily by ancient evidence, he challenged the use of "class" as an analytic category, finding little "class cohesion" (except among aristocrats) or "class struggle." In the last essay published during his lifetime, on "revolutions," these themes merged with his denial of a major "change" in antiquity. Acknowledging "popular discontent," Finley nevertheless asked: "Where [without a takeoff as in the Industrial Revolution] [...] was a social basis for a revolutionary economic programme to come from?" and then he replied: "there was no revolutionary transfer of power to a new

class [...] because there were no new classes [...]. The Graeco-Roman world was from beginning to end an agrarian one” – and SOLON and PEISISTRATOS were its most successful revolutionaries: not seizing “the reins of production,” but changing the nature of popular participation.

Finley’s writing and teaching framed much of the later debate about ancient society. Among efforts to move in new directions, the new *Cambridge encyclopedia* stands out, with an important chapter by Kehoe and Frier exploring the explanatory utility of New Institutional Economics, which began with Coase’s “The Nature of the Firm” in 1937: precisely when Finley was formulating his own ideas. Analysis of the intersection or opposition of these historiographies over the twentieth century will enrich understanding of the ancient economy.

## REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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