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THE *CONSUMER CITY* ONCE AGAIN REVISITED¹

I) Introduction

The Weberian concept which has had the greatest influence on the study of ancient economic history is probably the *consumer city*. The concept is useful for understanding the development of urbanism in preindustrial societies like the Roman empire, because it shows how large cities can develop without having the economic potential inside the city boundaries to sustain their own population. The concept thus allows to escape simplistic arguments that urbanisation in itself proves the sophistication, even the modernism of the Roman economy. Consideration of Weber's *consumer city* ideal-type shows that for the development of this type of city a given society needs social and political, but not necessarily economic sophistication.

To that extent the *consumer city* has certainly had a positive effect on the study of Roman urbanism. However there are problems with the interpretation of the imperial and especially the late imperial city as a *consumer city* which in part originate in the complexity of Weber's city typologies. This paper will reexamine Weber's concept of the *consumer city*, trying to show that, all features of this particular ideal-type taken into account, it perhaps does not fit the Roman imperial city as easily as could be assumed at first sight. Based on this preliminary examination we then turn to, what I would like to call, Weber's developmental ideal-types of preindustrial cities, examining whether for many factors determining function and development, the late Roman city is not rather a medieval than an ancient city-type – in Weber's own terms.

The fullest development of Weber's concepts concerning the development of pre-modern cities can be found in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie* which was first published in 1922 – its section on the city takes up the initially separate

¹ A first draft of this paper was presented at the Ancient History Seminar, *Late Rome: Urbs et Orbis*, in Cambridge in 2001, while I was holding a research fellowship at Wolfson College. I would like to thank the participants at the seminar for many insightful comments, as well as many other colleagues who, since then, have helped me understand better both the late Roman city and Weber's *consumer city* ideal-type. Thanks are also due to Vasile Lica who has pushed me to finally prepare this paper for publication.

publication of 1921 in *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaften und Sozialpolitik*². It is interesting to note that, unlike for instance the 1958 English translation and separate publication by Martindale and Neuwirth which is simply entitled *The City*, the chapter in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* carries the intriguing title *Die nichtlegitime Herrschaft (Typologie der Städte)* and is part of the larger chapter of the *Soziologie der Herrschaft*. Weber's treatment of the city is thus set in the context and the continuity of the evolution of rule or power. It follows charismatic and political-hierocratic rule and precedes rational, modern rule.

It can be argued that both the somewhat puzzling title and the context of Weber's treatment of the city should be relevant for the use made of it by ancient historians. Taking the *consumer city* as just a convenient socioeconomic concept, which helps conceptualise the development of pre-modern urbanism, might after all not be a straightforward, simple usage of this particular ideal-type. Given the context, it is quite clear that Weber is not interested only, or even specifically, in the economic power of urban elites, the consumers of the *consumer city*. In fact the cities and their development are part of a general theory of power which includes political, social, religious and economic aspects.

Of course, what Weber is developing are only ideal-types of cities, i.e. concepts which in order to be useful for historians need to be compared to objective historical developments of the city in antiquity – as far as they can be observed objectively. But given the context of power and rule in the chapters on cities, it would seem important that any comparative application of specific ideal-types – which include the *consumer city* – to actual ancient cities takes into account all aspects of the ideal-type in question. This means, for example, potential interaction between the city and the wider political or social superstructures within which it is situated.

In order to use Weber successfully in an analysis of the Roman city, it must also be noted right from the start that for Weber the *ancient city* is not the Roman imperial city, and certainly not the city of the later Roman empire. Weber is more or less exclusively concerned with the development of the Greek *polis* and with Republican Rome, i.e. with Rome as a city-state. In both cases the emergence of the territorial states of the Hellenistic kingdoms or the acquisition of the empire of the later Roman Republic provide important cut-off points. Chronologically speaking Weber again takes up the history of the

² All quotations of Weber in this paper are based on Weber, M.: *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie*, Winkelmann, J. (ed.), 5th edition, J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen 1985.

city only with the patrician city of the Italian Middle Ages, and then follows it through up to the establishment of rational, modern territorial states. Directly at least, Weber has not much to say about the late Roman city. This implies that the late Roman city for him is not in any sense ideal-typical³, it does not represent any of the three quasi-chronological, developmental ideal-types which are outlined at the beginning of the chapter on ancient and medieval democracy. These three ideal-types are the ancient city (within the chronological limits of Weber's preceding discussion), the medieval south-European city and the medieval north-European city:

Die wesentlich ökonomischen Gegensätze der Stadtbürger zu den nicht bürgerlichen Schichten und ihren ökonomischen Lebensformen waren nicht das, was der mittelalterlichen Stadt ihre entwicklungsgeschichtliche Sonderstellung zuwies. Vielmehr war dafür die Gesamtstellung der Stadt innerhalb der mittelalterlichen politischen und ständischen Verbände das Entscheidende. Hier am stärksten scheidet sich die typisch mittelalterliche Stadt nicht nur von der antiken Stadt, sondern auch innerhalb ihrer selbst in zwei durch flüssige Übergänge verbundene, in ihrer reinsten Ausprägung aber sehr verschiedene Typen, von denen der eine, wesentlich südeuropäische, speziell italienisch und südfranzösische, dem Typus der antiken Polis trotz aller Unterschiede dennoch wesentlich näher steht als der andere, vornehmlich nordfranzösische, deutsche und englische Typus, der trotz aller Unterschiede nebeneinander in dieser Hinsicht gleichartig war⁴.

However, we will return to Weber's quasi-chronological ideal-types of city development only later. At first we are going to examine the more general categories he proposes earlier in his *Typologie der Städte*. These are a priori not tied to specific historic development patterns – even though typical examples are mentioned and the border between model and ideal-type may sometimes seem blurred. The types are outlined in the chapter on *Begriff und Kategorie der Stadt*. It is here where we find the development-independent description of the *consumer city* and it is here where we can ask the question whether Weber has any specific concept of the Roman imperial and specifically late imperial city.

II) The *consumer city*: ideal-types, models, derivations

It has to be noted that Weber does not propose one unique ideal-type

³ The perception that the city of the imperial or late imperial period is not in any sense ideal-typical, or even just typical, is perhaps not peculiar to only Weber. A relatively recent volume on thirty city-state cultures (Herman Hansen, M. (ed.): *A comparative study of thirty city-state cultures*, Copenhagen 2000), twelve of which are grouped under the heading “ancient world”, also contains no contribution on the Roman city of the imperial period. The closest we get are the contributions on the Greek *polis* and the archaic cities in Latium.

⁴ Weber (1985), p. 796 f.

of the *consumer city*, the *Konsumentenstadt*, but establishes instead several types where the city is “more or less” a *consumer city*:

In allen diesen und zahlreichen ähnlichen Fällen ist die Stadt, je nachdem, mehr oder weniger, Konsumentenstadt. Denn für die Erwerbchancen ihrer Gewerbetreibenden und Händler ist die Ansässigkeit jener, untereinander ökonomisch verschieden gearteter, Großkonsumenten an Ort und Stelle ausschlaggebend⁵.

In all types of the *consumer city* the presence of a market is the essential defining feature. The *consumer city* is in fact a concept which is meant to explain the formation of cities around an urban market, not so much their subsequent social and economic development. What distinguishes different *consumer cities* is the quality of the market.

Different consumer cities – candidates for a late Roman type?

First Weber distinguishes the city of a prince or of a small number of patrimonial households, the *Fürstenstadt*. Here the market for urban craftsmen, local and long-distance traders, which makes the city a city, is supported by the purchasing power of the patrimonial elite.

Distinct from this is the city of rent-supported consumers, the *Stadt der Rentner*, where the vitality of the market is determined by either bureaucratic administrators or a class of city-resident rural landowners. This type of *consumer city* where the market is supported from revenue *not* generated inside the city is probably the one most commonly applied to the typical imperial city.

A third type – and Weber insists on the fundamental difference – is constituted by cities where the market is animated by rent-consumers whose purchasing power is based on the exploitation of urban property, i.e. the consumers indirectly depend on trade and artisanate inside the city. It is especially this third type which is interesting, because it is often overlooked in the application of the *consumer city* ideal-type to Roman imperial cities. It needs to be noted in fact that in Weber’s typology the purchasing power which sustains an urban market, and hence a city, can – even in the case of the *consumer city* – be generated inside the boundaries of the city territory: either through production or through trade. It is also interesting that Weber considers this third type of *consumer city* to be the most frequent among ancient cities, up to, and including for once, late antique cities.

Of course there is no a priori reason for us to agree with Weber’s judgment – which is probably determined by the influence Meyer’s modernist

⁵ Weber (1985), p. 729.

theory of the ancient economy had on Weber⁶ – but we should be aware of the fact that when we define the typical *consumer city* of the Roman empire as the *Stadt der Rentner* we depart from Weber's own analysis.

The *producer city*, the *Produzentenstadt*, on the other hand does not distinguish itself from the *consumer city* by the importance of its production or trade, but rather by the fact that the consumers of its products or its traded goods are found outside the city. Indeed the *producer city* as well is constituted as a city by the consumption of its wealthy citizens on the urban market.

Given the importance of the market for making a city a city it could be said perhaps that for Weber any city is a “*consumer city*”. The difference between his third type of *consumer city* and the *producer city* is economically slight, but politically fundamental: in the third-type *consumer city* the market is sustained by consumers who indirectly derive their income from trade and production, in the *producer city* the class of producers and traders operating in the city represents itself the leading consumers of the city.

The fact that Weber's city typology is more socio-political than economic is apparent also in the third basic ideal-type of the city which he proposes: the *city of citizen-peasants*, the *Ackerbürgerstadt*. These cities are distinct from large villages because they not only possess urban artisan production – villages possess craftsmen, too –, but because they also have a permanent urban market. The economic qualification for city-status is supported by their political construction in which citizenship and landownership coincide. An important part of the population is directly engaged in agricultural exploitation near the city, their landholdings being too small to allow rent-based consumption like in the case of the *Stadt der Rentner*. This type is Weber's original ancient city, the city of the *polis*-formation period:

Wenn wir heute den typische “Städter” im ganzen mit Recht als einen Menschen ansehen, der seinen eigenen Nahrungsmittelbedarf nicht auf eigenem Ackerboden deckt, so gilt für die Masse der typische Städte (Poleis) des Altertums ursprünglich geradezu das Gegenteil. Wir werden sehen, daß der antike Stadtbürger vollen Rechts, im Gegensatz zum mittelalterlichen, ursprünglich geradezu dadurch charakterisiert war: daß er einen Kleros, fundus (in Israel: chelek), ein volles Ackerlos, welches ihn ernährte, sein eigen nannte; der antike Vollbürger ist “Ackerbürger”⁷.

Obviously Weber's general city types are *ideal*-types and it is stated explicitly that empirically observed cities are always mixed types which can

⁶ See for example E. Meyer, *Die wirtschaftliche Entwicklung des Altertums*; in: *Jahrbücher für Nationalökonomie und Statistik*, 3rd series, 9, 1895.

⁷ Weber (1985), p. 731.

be classified only by deciding which ideal-type related component of the city is determinative in their socio-political and socio-economic construction. However it is clear from Weber's discussion that at least at a practical level his ideal-types are really historical models, i.e. simplified representations of actual cities. Sometimes this is even explicitly stated: the archetypal city of bureaucratic rent-consumers is Peking, whereas Moscow represents rent-consumers who derive their income from rural estates. The *Ackerbürgerstadt* is derived from the archaic Greek or Roman *polis*, the third-type *consumer city* of an urban elite relying on rents from trade- and production-related city property, is a model of archaic Rome – the link is more or less explicit in Weber's later description of Rome⁸.

Basic ideal-types and late Roman cities, a problematic fit

What is important for our discussion is the fact that no Weberian basic city ideal-type is modelled on Roman imperial or late Roman cities: there is no Constantinople-, no Alexandria- and also no Hermopolis-type. Or generally speaking no capital city, no provincial megalopolis and no average provincial city type. This does not imply that the basic ideal-types, with their different criteria of analysis and qualification, are not useful for the study of late Roman urbanism, but merely that we cannot easily equate these cities with any of Weber's *consumer cities*.

Certainly, Constantinople has features of both the *Fürstenstadt* (city of a prince) and of the *Stadt der Rentner* (city of external rent-supported consumers). The imperial court itself, senatorial landowners and imperial bureaucrats provide demand for an urban market, for local producers and import merchants. But on the other hand there are also indications that imperial capitals are to some extent third-type consumer cities where a substantial part of the consumer elite derives its income from urban property. To illustrate this point we can refer for example to the property of Vestina in early fifth century Rome which includes a bakery, two baths and six houses (which are probably rented out) inside the city⁹.

All this implies that a late Roman capital is perhaps a Weberian *consumer city*, but not necessarily of the rentier-type. The comparison between ideal-type and actual city is further complicated by the fact that late Roman Constantinople is indeed an imperial capital with an Empire: a substantial part of consumption, namely the various *annonae*, is in fact extra-market. These consumption requirements are not imported through the

⁸ Weber (1985), p. 739.

⁹ Davis, R. (ed.): *Liber Pontificalis*, p. 42, *Innocentius*, Liverpool University Press 1989.

purchasing power of the city-resident elites, but by political entitlement and requisition. This means that at the very least it would be necessary for purposes of studying late Roman cities in a Weberian framework to distinguish between an imperial and a non-imperial *consumer city*.

Likewise the matching of late antique Alexandria with a Weberian ideal-type is problematic. Parallels with for example Weber's *merchant city*, the *Händlerstadt*, are seductive – a good deal of economic activity in the city is concerned with transshipment, both of Egyptian grain and of luxury commodities arriving from the East – however it is impossible to entirely apply this simplifying match. Much of the transshipment activity in Alexandria is conditioned by an imperial context, not economic factors.

A substantial part of the grain “trade” is *annona*-related and it seems doubtful that *navicularii* fit Weber's concept of merchants in a *merchant city*; their potential wealth and purchasing power does not depend on markets beyond the city, but the existence of an imperial state and its transport requirements beyond the city. Moreover Alexandria is also a *consumer city* of the rentier type. The Appianus estate¹⁰ in the third century can serve to illustrate the existence of a class of resident property owners whose purchasing power is based on rents from rural properties – Appianus seems to own property in at least 40 villages of the Fayum.

Even the standard provincial city of the later Roman empire, Hermopolis for example, is not easily captured by one of the Weberian ideal-types. Hermopolis is an interesting test case, because we have relatively detailed data for rural landholdings by the city population in the fourth century¹¹. Less than 20% of urban population in Hermopolis own any land and Bagnall calculates that 53% of all these city-resident landowners own less than 10 *arouras* (2.75 ha), many of them much less. This means that in Weberian terms they fall neither in the *Ackerbürger* nor the rentier categories, their consumption requirements, like those of the majority of non-landowning citizens, must be met predominantly from revenue from inside the city.

In the next group 35% of urban landowners own between 11 and 100 *arouras*, which is sufficient either for direct exploitation of their property or for the raising of sufficient rent to meet consumption requirements on the market. However it is again doubtful to what extent these landowners can be counted as rentiers who sustain the urban market, given that many of them are

¹⁰ See Rathbone, D.: *Economic rationalism and rural society in third-century A. D. Egypt*, Cambridge University Press 1991.

¹¹ Bagnall, R.: *Egypt in late antiquity*, Princeton University Press 1993, especially p. 68 ff. It has to be admitted that the data is incomplete, but it can be used to evaluate the plausibility of ideal-types which themselves have only tendential value.

not far above the minimum subsistence level.

Finally there are 11 landowners in the 101 to 200 *arouras* class, 6 own 201 to 500, 3 between 501 and 1000 *arouras* and finally 6 have landholdings above 1001 *arouras*. In terms of inequality this means that 2 landowners of one family own 38.8% of all land, and the next two families own another 17.5%. Now, in terms of property distribution this seems to fit quite well the political definition of Weber's concept of a city of rent-consumers. The interests of this narrow and dominant landowning elite are quite likely to dominate the politics of Hermopolis.

The economics however are more complex. Bagnall in fact estimates that the cumulative surplus of the urban-based landowners, if converted into wages, would theoretically sustain a population of 80.000, that is 16.000 households. More realistically, of the 7000 actual households of Hermopolis about 450 or 6.5 % could be entirely supported by income from rural estates. The important question however is to what extent the production for the urban market of Hermopolis is effectively targeted at urban consumers, or whether there is also a substantial production for rural consumers from outside the city – a pattern which would fit a *producer city* type. Evidence here can only be anecdotal, but there is some indication that even the processing of agricultural products, especially milling and olive oil production, are largely urban activities¹², i.e. also serving the consumption requirements of rural consumers using the urban market.

To capture the economic reality of an average provincial city like Hermopolis the concept of the *consumer city* is therefore only partly useful. Consumption by a rentier elite and its dependents can theoretically dominate the urban market, but we cannot be certain to what extent this is really the case. And there is also the problem of the imperial context: all households of Hermopolis are imperial tax payers, this cuts across patterns of political domination of the rentier class which are an important feature of the *consumer city* ideal-type.

It is in fact precisely the link between economic and political features of the basic Weberian ideal-types which makes their application to late Roman cities difficult despite their theoretically universal quality.

III) What ideal-type for the late Roman city?

From the discussion up to this point it follows that an application of Weberian ideal-types like the *consumer city* or the *producer city* to the late

¹² See examples from Bagnall (1993), p. 79 f.

Roman urban reality is problematic. It may be more promising in fact to return to Weber's developmental discussion of preindustrial city types in Europe and try to distinguish factors which, even though they are applied by Weber to medieval types, are relevant to an explanation of the functioning and development of the late Roman city – taking into account of course that there is no single ideal-type of *the* late Roman city. This return to the various medieval types of development seems justified also by Weber's own suggestion, which we have quoted above, i.e. his qualification of the south-European medieval city type as similar to the ancient city.

Even though the Roman empire in its earlier periods can be classified as a federation of cities rather than a unified state, it is one of the distinctive innovative features of the late Empire that it comes much closer to a rational bureaucratic – and indeed unified – state than earlier Roman formations. This is a relevant point for our discussion of the city because on the one hand it accounts for some of the difficulties encountered when we try to apply the basic categorical ideal-types to late Roman cities, and on the other hand the context of developing bureaucratic states is explicitly recognised as an important factor of city development by Weber:

Schon die antike Polis wurde so in der Vorstellung ihrer Bürger zunehmend eine anstaltsmäßige "Gemeinde". Endgültig entstand der "Gemeinde"-Begriff in der Antike im Gegensatz zum "Staat" allerdings erst durch ihre Eingliederung in den hellenistischen oder römischen Großstaat, welche ihr auf der anderen Seite die politische Selbständigkeit nahm¹³.

Of course, the relevant point of historical development for Weber in this passage is the initial formation of a Roman state under the Republic. However to us it would seem equally if not more justified to take the transition from the high empire to the late empire, with its more developed state administration, as the more significant step in state formation in the Roman world.

The late Roman and the medieval city

This partial departure from Weber would mean that we can expect the late Roman city, the city which is part of a developed state, to be more integrated than its predecessors, with less clan-like formations to prevent the development of a city community. This in turn implies greater social mobility of the citizens inside the city, as a strengthened state weakens the social boundaries established by gentilitial divisions. Instead of the often postulated social inertia, the bureaucratic empire of the late Roman period can therefore

¹³ Weber (1985), p. 745.

be expected to produce the opposite effect in the cities¹⁴. This causal relationship between state organisation and dynamic urban development is hardly an obvious conclusion in any type of positivist analysis of late Roman city development. It is an illustration of the relevance of Weberian ideal-types to a better understanding of city development.

It is also important to note that in the fourth century, with the christianisation of the Empire, the cities increasingly adopt a unique community religion, a relevant factor in the formation and development of the city community. Weber in fact sees this as one of the distinctions between his ancient and medieval city types because in the ancient city gentilial divisions are constantly reinforced by corresponding boundaries between exclusive cult groups. In the medieval city on the other hand there are no religious obstacles to the formation of a city community. In that sense the late Roman city is again much more a medieval than an ancient city – in Weberian terms.

Finally we could cite the existence of “guilds” in the late Roman period, again an important element of the Weberian medieval type. Indeed Weber’s medieval guilds strikingly resemble the late Roman *corpora*:

Diese waren keineswegs primär zum Zweck der Einflußnahme auf politische Verhältnisse geschaffen worden. Sie ersetzen vielmehr ihren Mitgliedern zunächst das, was ihnen in der frühmittelalterlichen Stadt besonders häufig abging: den Anhalt an einer Sippe und deren Garantie. [Sie] gewährten ihnen Hilfe bei persönlichen Verletzungen oder Bedrohung und oft auch in ökonomischer Not, schlossen Streit und Fehde zwischen den Verbrüderten aus [...] sorgten für [ihre] Geselligkeitsbedürfnisse durch Pflege der noch aus heidnischer Zeit stammenden periodischen Gelage [...], ferner für [ihr] Begräbnis unter Beteiligung der Bruderschaft¹⁵.

Like the late Roman *corpora* also Weber’s guilds, *Gilden*, are not primarily professional organisations. This role is played later in the development of the medieval city by the organisation of professional unions: *Zünfte*. The existence of similar types of guilds or *corpora* in Weber’s medieval and our late Roman cities hints at a comparable level of community formation.

Given these typological similarities we have to ask why the late Roman city does not continue to develop along the lines of the medieval

¹⁴ The idea of social inertia in late antiquity, being embraced by classics like Otto Seeck, has of course already been rejected numerous times, not least in one of Keith Hopkins' early publications, *Elite mobility in the Roman empire, Past and Present*, 32, 1965, p. 13. The innovation our present argument offers is that explains social mobility (at least partially) as originating directly from the changing state-city relationship in the later Empire.

¹⁵ Weber (1985), p. 753.

ideal-type as described by Weber in his developmental treatment of the city. Namely we need to explain why there is no phase of *Conjuratio* where the citizens affirm their autonomous community against the remnants of gentilitial, patrimonial or indeed episcopal power.

Here the imperial superstructure of the later Roman empire, which is missing in the case of the medieval and especially Italian cities is relevant. In a similar context of explaining the unique development of the European medieval city Weber points out that the Asian city shows no tendency of urban communality because of the impositions of an imperial bureaucracy. The development of the quasi-rational state of the later Roman empire is thus at the same time an enabling, as we have seen above, and limiting factor on urban communality. Late Roman citizens cannot fully unite against any form of dominant elites in the city because of the imperial relevance and contacts of these elites.

Weber's subsequent discussion of the medieval city type however shows that – at least for the south-European type – the *Conjuratio* is not a durably significant stage in the developmental history and typology of the city. The emergence of the gentilitial city, the *Geschlechterstadt*, where political power is exercised by a restricted minority of the economic elite, re-differentiates the medieval city community temporarily united in the *Conjuratio*.

Still, differences notwithstanding, it seems to be justified to pursue our analysis of the late Roman city in terms of the medieval type of development.

The late Roman and the gentilitial city

Weber's title for the chapter dealing with the gentilitial ideal-type, *Die Geschlechterstadt im Mittelalter und in der Antike*, is misleading for our purpose of analysing the late antique city, because the gentilitial ancient city he deals with is archaic Rome. A type which – at least in my view – shares far less features with the Italian gentilitial city than the late imperial city. To be more explicit: the opposition of a gentilitial elite and a wider class of upper-class property owners in a city like medieval Venice appears to be better mirrored in the *principales* versus ordinary *curiales* division of the late Roman city, than the senator-led city of the archaic Republic.

Jene Honoratioren welche die Stadtverwaltung monopolisierten, pflegt man als "die Geschlechter", die Periode ihres verwaltenden Einflusses als die der "Geschlechterherrschaft" zu bezeichnen. Diese "Geschlechter" waren in ihrem Charakter nichts Einheitliches. Gemeinsam war ihnen allen: daß ihre soziale Machtstellung auf Grundbesitz und auf einem nicht dem eigenen Gewerbebetrieb entstammenden Einkommen

ruhte. Aber im übrigen konnten sie ziemlich verschiedenen Charakter haben. Im Mittelalter nun war ein Merkmal der äußeren Lebensführung in spezifischem Maße ständebildend: die ritterliche Lebensführung¹⁶.

This characterisation of the medieval city closely resembles the observable social make-up of the late Roman city where we see a parallel split of the city elite, with effective administrative control falling into the hands of the *principales*. Like in the Italian cities their cohesion is reinforced by the collective opposition against the rest of the propertied class.

What is perhaps the main attraction of an identification of the late Roman city with this particular medieval ideal-type for the historian of late antiquity is the possibility to move away from the problem of elite sources of revenue: income from rural estates, participation in long-distance trade, involvement in city industries, credit operations or enrichment through imperial office and patronage. The decisive factor for the domination of the Weberian gentilital elite is not a specific type of revenue, but conspicuous consumption. Of course, this is no answer to, for example, the question to what extent late Roman elites were engaged in commerce, but it makes the answer less politically (and historiographically) relevant: in a gentilital type city political standing is not determined by the source of revenue. In Weberian terms this is charismatic nobility, defined by birth on the one hand and life-style on the other, a description which also fits late Roman municipal elites.

The stability of this type of rule in the city depends on the degree of cooperation and consensus inside the gentilital nobility. In both the medieval and the ancient version of this city type Weber assumes fighting between gentilital families to be the norm. The obvious exception for him is Venice which is discussed at some length: here cohesion of the leading elite families is ensured by the dependence of the city on trade, supported by military power, and the precarious political situation of the gentilital families facing a large and wealthy broader elite class. The question which has to be asked for our comparative purposes is how the *principales* of the late empire achieve a comparable degree of cohesion despite the absence of colonial dependent territories.

Intra-elite competition from the rest of the *curiales* does not seem to be the answer because the *principales* easily dominate the rest of the curial elite in economic terms – if not initially then surely by the end of the fourth century. Like in the case of Venice an answer can probably best be provided by examining city-external factors. In Venice the collective, exclusive

¹⁶ Weber (1985), p. 758.

dependence of the gentilitia elite on foreign trade enforces cooperation within. In the late Roman city the same type of dependence is created by relations between the imperial state and the *principales* elite.

The *principales* are the main point of contact between the city and the state. Their social status inside the city is enhanced by privileges granted by the state and their economic prosperity depends on the non-interference of the state in the internal affairs of the city. Cohesion within the group and the absence of violent and disruptive competition are the basis for this cooperative relationship between state and *principales* to continue. The imperial bureaucracy requires cooperative, not feuding *principales*. Once again the existence of an empire around the late Roman city can thus be identified as a factor which constrains the possibilities of development of the city (because, as we will see, intra-gentilitia competition in the medieval city is a dynamic factor of development for Weber).

The late Roman city and the non-emergence of tyranny

Another feature of Weber's south-European city ideal-type is the probable development of tyranny in the city, i.e. the illegitimate domination of the city by just one leading family. This type of rule develops through the competition among the original gentilitia families. In the Italian example it normally emerges only after a period of revolutionary rule by the *popolo*, an intermediate, broad, commercially active class. The process of the formation of a city tyranny, the *signoria*, has – it seems to me – no parallels in the late Roman city, even though Weber establishes parallels with the “ancient city” which for him is the archaic city. For him *plebs* or *demos* play the role of the *popolo*, setting up a quasi-autonomous community within the city community, disposing of its own magistrates, but eventually taken over by the nobility.

The *signoria*-feature of the *medieval* city type has however relevance for the late Roman city in so far as its effects on city development are concerned:

Der Hofstaat des Signore schuf beim Adel und Bürgertum wie überall so auch hier mit steigender Dauer zunehmende Schichten von Interessenten, soziale und ökonomische, an seinem Fortbestande. Die steigende Sublimierung der Bedürfnisse und die abnehmende ökonomische Expansion bei steigender Empfindlichkeit der ökonomischen Interessen der bürgerlichen Oberschichten gegen Störung des befriedeten Verkehrs, ferner das allgemeine mit zunehmender Konkurrenz und wachsender ökonomischer und sozialer Stabilität abnehmende Interesse der Gewerbetreibenden an politischer Aspiration und ihre dadurch erklärliche Hinwendung zu reinen Erwerbszwecken oder friedlichem Rentengenuß und die

allgemeine Politik der Fürsten, welche beide Entwicklungen im eigenen Vorteil förderten, führte zu einem rapiden Nachlassen des Interesse am politischen Schicksal der Stadt¹⁷.

A parallel model where the role of the *Signore* is played by the Empire can be used to explain the stability of the late imperial cities, despite the absence of a strong bureaucratic state¹⁸ and the existence of considerable differences in wealth within the city elites. The imperial court and the imperial bureaucracy attract ambitious curial families and remove them from the potentially violent competition within the city. The external stability provided by the Empire increases the economic prosperity of the city elites and leads to a – at least partial – refocussing of their interests on their estates rather than the political and agonistic competition in the city.

The fact that the imperial administration and court integrate members of the city elites ensures the absence of secessionist tendencies in late Roman cities despite the absence of a strong central administration. As in the Italian ideal-type, the leading families of the late Roman city consider the a priori tyrannical rule of the Empire a desirable institution.

During the *signoria* phase of development of Weber's medieval city type, the ruling family can control several cities, a type of rule which eventually can lead to the establishment of relatively rationally administered patrimonial states – the precursors of the modern states. It has to be noted however that the *signoria* phase itself does not produce a unified state with a rational administration, the superstructure above the cities remains limited to a shared administration of finances and military.

Again, replacing the institution of the *signoria* by the institution of the imperial state, we can observe a striking similarity with the situation of the later Roman empire which despite its administrative progress over the early empire can hardly be qualified as a rational bureaucratic state. Here as well only finances and the military are under the control of the imperial state and, as noted by Weber for the *signoria* phase of city development, this control is cooperative and shared with the city elites.

This may be less true for the late Roman army over which municipal elites exercise no significant degree of control¹⁹, but it is certainly the case for the financial administration of the Empire. Here the central imperial government decides only over the share of payable taxes attributed to each city, but it cannot control the effective redistribution on individual taxpayers

¹⁷ Weber (1985), p. 786.

¹⁸ The later Roman empire represents a stronger state than its predecessors (as we have pointed out above), but it hardly resembles a rational proto-modern state.

¹⁹ One could note that with the fiscalisation of recruitment city elites exercise a limited *de facto* influence over the late Roman army.

or much influence the actual collection by city-controlled authorities dominated by the leading families²⁰.

The originality of the late Roman city

A final point which needs to be discussed with reference to Weber's medieval ideal-type is the ultimately divergent development of the late Roman and the medieval city. The problem with Weber's own discussion of the differences – dominating the chapter *Antike und mittelalterliche Demokratie* – is again the fact that for Weber the ideal-type of the ancient city is the archaic city. Weber refers for example to class oppositions at the time of Catiline, i.e. in the first century BCE, as belonging to the “Spätzeit” of the the ancient city type²¹.

In order to explain the divergent development of the late Roman and the medieval city, it is therefore necessary for our purposes to rather concentrate on Weber's relevant specifications of different medieval city types. The divergent, and hence original development of the late Roman city should not be analysed with reference to the ancient city type, as Weber does, but rather through a comparison with the quasi-south European medieval city type which so far has emerged as the most appropriate for describing the late antique city.

For Weber the medieval city type is crucial for enabling the development of capitalism, something his ancient city, or indeed our late antique city do not:

Und doch ist weder der moderne Kapitalismus noch der moderne Staat auf dem Boden der antiken Städte gewachsen, während die mittelalterliche Stadtentwicklung für beide zwar keineswegs die allein ausschlaggebende Vorstufe und gar nicht ihr Träger war, aber als ein höchst entscheidender Faktor ihrer Entstehung allerdings nicht wegzudenken ist. Trotz aller äußerlichen Ähnlichkeiten der Entwicklung müssen danach doch auch tiefgreifende Unterschiede festzustellen sein²².

Again, Weber here is talking about the medieval and the ancient, i.e. rather the archaic, city types, but what is relevant also for our discussion is the idea that external similarities between two city ideal-types – as between Weber's south-European medieval and our late Roman type – do not exclude the existence of important qualitative differences.

²⁰ For the influence of the city elites on actual tax collection see for example Lepelley, C.: *Quot curiales, tot tyranni. L'image du décurion oppresseur au Bas-Empire*; in: Frézouls, E. (ed.): *Crise et redressement dans les provinces européennes de l'Empire*, Strasbourg 1993.

²¹ Weber (1985), p. 797.

²² Weber (1985), p. 788.

One of the characteristic aspects of the Weberian medieval city type is the fact that its citizens are mainly motivated by commercial interests. This dominant motivation applies to the whole of city society, because even the poor are qualified by Weber as unemployed artisans. This specific quality of the medieval city is made possible by the marginal role of slavery or generally dependent labour which does not prevent and indeed encourages the formation of professional unions of nominally equal citizen-artisans and traders.

The opposition to Weber's archaic, ancient city which extensively uses slave labour is clear²³. However it is much less obvious whether the status of the urban workforce can be used to distinguish the actual late Roman from the Weberian medieval city. It would be difficult to describe the overall quality of late Roman urban labour as being determined by an important slave element. Indeed, in one of the few references to the late empire even Weber acknowledges the existence of associations of free artisans in the late Roman city²⁴.

In the logic of his comparison of the ancient, archaic and the medieval city Weber further considers the stability of landholding patterns as an important divergent factor. Property ownership in the medieval city being more stable – despite some wars or revolutionary transformations – a rational economy is more likely to emerge.

However for the late Roman city this seems to be even more true, because here the stability of landownership is reinforced by imperial factors, i.e. by the integration of the city elites into imperial structures and their necessity for the Roman state. Certainly, the late empire allows the accumulation of property by the existing elites, and even the creation of important new property holdings by for example imperial bureaucrats, but there is a priori no reason to see the development of ownership patterns under the late empire as more dynamic and disruptive as in the cities of the Italian Middle Ages.

Conversely, one of the factors which Weber considers to be constraining the development of his ancient city no longer applies to the late Roman city: the city as a military community. Citizen status in late antiquity is in fact no longer dependent on military service. And neither the majority of citizens nor the city elites of the late antique city depend on conquest or the

²³ Whether in actual fact ancient cities ever used significant amounts of slave labour is a completely different question. The point here is simply that in Weber's conception the amount of unfree, dependant labour distinguishes the ancient from the medieval city.

²⁴ Weber (1985), p. 800 f.

influx of tribute. It can be said, in fact, that even the limited citizen militias of the medieval city constitute more of a militarised community than is the case for the late Roman city which is largely free of recruitment for the professional imperial army.

In his discussion of Rome as a city, Weber heavily insists on the existence of quasi-feudal social structures which lead to an especially stable type of gentilitial control:

In Rom war in ungleich stärkerem Maße als in irgendeiner antiken Polis eine Honoratiorenschicht stark feudalen Gepräges Träger der Herrschaft geblieben und nach nur zeitweiliger Erschütterung stets erneuert worden. Dies tritt auch in den Institutionen deutlich zutage. [...] Dazu tritt nun die ausserordentlich starke Bedeutung feudaler und halbfeudaler Abhängigkeitsverhältnisse. In Rom hat die Klientel als Institution, wenn auch ihres alten militärischen Charakters zunehmend entkleidet, bis in die spätesten Zeiten ihre Rolle gespielt²⁵.

Despite its attribution by Weber to Republican Rome, this is probably an accurate description also of the city of Rome in the fourth century CE. However here we also have to take into account the fact that the same types of social relationships and resulting interests are reproduced in all cities of the Empire.

The imperial context of Weber's patrimonial constructions is significant, the Empire as a state cannot allow the quasi-feudal relationships between elite members and their economic dependents to become exclusive: even private economic dependents of the city elites remain tax payers of the Empire. It can therefore be argued that the interference of imperial interests in the cities weakens the economic, patrimonial control of the late Roman elites. Given that the development of Weber's medieval city type takes place in an environment with much less state interference, the late Roman city should in fact have at least as much dynamic potential and social fluidity as the south-European city type.

Finally, the most promising distinguishing feature of the late Roman city is perhaps the persistence of the inclusion of a rural territory in the city. The absence of a rural territory in the medieval city is seen by Weber as one of the motivating factors for the formation of powerful professional associations.

The persistent inclusion of rural territory in the late Roman city is conditioned by the imperial superstructure which attributes the administration of taxation also of rural territories to the cities – indeed this is one of their primary functions inside the imperial formation. This implies that despite

²⁵ Weber (1985), p. 812.

similar socioeconomic and sociopolitical structures in the late Roman and the south-European medieval city, there is a profound difference to the extent that the late Roman city is primarily a political construction embedded in the imperial superstructure.

Also Weber's medieval city is an economic *and* political formation, but here the political character concerns almost exclusively social structures within the city. There are no external constraints by an Empire which reinforce political structures for purposes which do not concern the city directly.

Back to the consumer city

In all this the role of the *consumer city* concept is relatively marginal. In Weber's typology both the medieval city and his early ancient city are *consumer cities*, the difference being perhaps that the medieval city has *also* features of the *producer city*:

Wenn so die antike Stadtpolitik in erster Linie städtische Konsumenteninteressen verfolgt, so gilt dies gewiß auch für die mittelalterliche Stadt. Aber die Drastik der Maßregeln war in der Antike weit größer, offenbar weil es unmöglich schien, für eine Stadt wie Athen und Rom die Getreideversorgung lediglich dem privaten Handel zu überlassen²⁶.

This shows on the one hand that for Weber the difference between the medieval and ancient city was merely quantitative – at least as far as their socioeconomic features are concerned. For our discussion of the late Roman city the value of a categoric *consumer city* versus *producer city* distinction is further reduced, by the necessity of dealing with a wide variety of different imperial cities, not just Rome, Constantinople or imperial capitals as a special case.

Consumer interests may dominate also in other cities, but the average cities of the Empire do not have more political power than medieval cities. Something which would allow them to take “drastic” measures – Weber probably thinks of a state-administered *annona* system which satisfies consumption needs by the import of quasi-tribute from subject territories – to guarantee consumer interests beyond the capacity of the urban market. Average late-imperial cities can be *consumer cities*, but only to the same extent as the medieval city, i.e. *consumer cities* in the sense that their market is stimulated by the consumption of resident economic elites.

²⁶ Weber (1985), p. 803.

IV) Conclusion

In conclusion we should perhaps again ask the question why fitting the late Roman city into Weber's scheme of basic or developmental ideal-types is a useful exercise. There are in fact two answers to this question. On the one hand it seems important to me to realise that typologically speaking the late Roman city is more a medieval than an ancient city. This implies that also late Roman urban elites are more modern in an economic and political sense than the early imperial elites which are still much more dominated by family ties and ritual restrictions on their activities – including economic activities.

Identifying the late Roman city as a medieval city type, i.e. a type of dynamic development, also has the merit of breaking with the endless debate on the decline of the ancient city in our period. If the late Roman city is indeed constituting itself as a proto-medieval city during the late antique period, we can ask the more innovative question of how this city develops subsequently into different and more modern forms.

The second attraction of an analysis of the late Roman city in terms of Weberian ideal-types is perhaps more modest. The problems encountered when we try to identify the ideal-type which best characterises an actual late city and which dominates its socioeconomic formations demonstrate very clearly the diversity of late Roman urban development. Late Roman city culture is characterised by a wide variety of types.

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