



Professor Matthew Fox

Roman Materialism – my current research project, funded by a Major Research Fellowship from the Leverhulme Trust

Manifesto

It is a commonplace of Roman historical thinking that the growth of personal wealth and influx of luxury goods following Rome's conquest of the Eastern Mediterranean contributed to the decline of the Republic. This cliché is usually regarded as an expression of a moralistic, and hypocritical, conservatism: whilst enjoying the economic benefits of world-rule, Rome's luxury-loving élite revelled in literature that extolled the virtues of their thrifty ancestors, and enjoyed the sensationalist condemnation of excess. This mind-set presupposes a mechanistic structure: political events, or the cultural climate, determined by economic trends. Because they were grounded in ideas about how the real world operated, what to us seem moralizing commonplaces could lead to concrete political action. The state regularly took legislative measures to curb luxury and influence morality, and the change from Republic to Empire itself was accompanied by the promise of a return to ancestral frugality. It is clear that in the Roman mind, morality was closely connected to economic activity, and measured in accordance with it.

There is also a metaphorical element: luxury was a historical force, infecting the characters both of individual Romans, and society as a whole, as if a kind of disease; reversing moral decline was spoken of as a cure. The ubiquitous connection of moral and political health to economic factors is compelling evidence of a broader network of ideas about the economic basis of culture. It cannot be called an economic theory, but it does have elements of a materialist view of history – the idea familiar in the Marxist tradition that political events are determined by economic conditions. The aim of this project is to examine how this view of history operated at Rome; to explore its antecedents in Greek thought, and to use it as an interpretative tool for understanding Roman literature, particularly of the late republic and Augustan periods, when both literary and political culture were developing rapidly. Further, it will look at the legacy of Roman thought in modern theories of historical materialism, and their contribution to understanding Roman history.

The research will produce a substantial monograph, *Roman Materialism*. It will consider materialism as part of a wider system, one that connects thinking about objects, possessions, and economic transactions, with story telling and self-representation. In doing so it will generate a new approach to Latin literature: one that overcomes existing disciplinary boundaries between historical and literary, and enables literary evidence to be understood more closely as part of the historical culture that produced it. Materialism concerns the relationship between thoughts,

words and things. It will provide a fertile frame of reference for a new look at the preoccupations of the major Latin authors and their thinking about Rome's past.

The main work will be on the authors of the Republican and Augustan periods, but the study will also take into account monumental and artistic survivals. They are themselves closely connected to the writing of the period, and express ideas about the organization of space, and the relationships between individual, environment, and object, that mirror the concerns of the literature. The book will thus move away from the current dominance of literary genre in Latin studies, to explore how a materialist mind-set works in poetry and in prose, and in fictional, historical, and visual representation. The Romans were obsessed by the concrete world that their society had produced, its impact upon their continuing history, and upon the imaginary histories that fill their poetry and bring their mythology to life. With its strong but flexible thematic focus, *Roman Materialism* will take the understanding of Roman historical thought in a new direction, and demonstrate the centrality of materialist ideas to Roman literature of all kinds.