VARIA

'There is a good deal of historiographical embarrassment about discussing values'

Rens Tacoma in gesprek met Ramsay MacMullen

Ramsay MacMullen (1928) is als hoogleraar Romeinse Geschiedenis verbonden aan Yale University en publiceert sinds de jaren zestig over de sociale geschiedenis van het Principaat en de Late Oudheid. Tot zijn belangrijkste werken behoren: *Roman social relations 50 B.C. to A.D. 284* (New Haven, Conn. 1974); *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (New Haven, Conn. 1981); *Christianizing the Roman Empire* (New Haven, Conn. 1984) en *Corruption and the decline of Rome* (New Haven, Conn. en Londen 1988). Een aantal van zijn essays is gebundeld onder de titel *Changes in the Roman Empire* (Princeton 1990). Op uitnodiging van het Interdisciplinair Vroegchristelijk Dispuut Agape nam MacMullen deel aan het Symposium 'Power and Possession. State, Society, and Church in the fourth century A.D.'.

You seem to have a liking for asking new and unexpected questions and refrain from joining conventional historiographical debates. With one exception (Part 2 of *Paganism*), you're not in the habit of citing works 'only to disagree'.

I do not like using my energy to wrestle with other scholars, I would much rather come to grips with long dead people, and understand them if I can. That means that those parts of history that have been studied again and again and again as for example the Peloponnesian War don't attract me because you cannot come to grips with them, except in the manner of my friend and colleague Donald Kagan who takes a very full account of the modern scholarship and works away with that.[1] Instead I go to those parts of Roman history where the questions you can reasonably ask are not quite so strongly fought over.

What strikes me is that you use much material from other disciplines, but when it comes to explanations, you end up saying 'I leave that to experts'. Isn't that an easy way out? For example, you have written much about the rise of Christianity, but not about the church.

I shied away from church history because that, like, for example, Roman law, is the preserve of fulltime experts, and you really shouldn't venture into their territory unless

you have a great deal of daring, or expertise. When I wrote the 'Christianizing' book I chose quite a narrow view to write about because I thought I could see a need to explain the subject. I must admit also to a considerable daring or rashness. I am not a church historian, and I really don't belong among the fulltime proper experts of that subject. I don't like to say things in print that I have no right to say, because of a lack of information. So I have avoided all or most of the most obvious questions that people rightly study in regard to the rise of Christianity: all the internal matters, how the church shaped itself, what its institutions were and that sort of thing. It's not because I don't think all of this is unimportant, but I can't find a place to make a contribution that might succeed.

Occasionally I have made my bow to the importance of the internal condition of the Christian community. In a piece that I wrote recently at the tail end of my book *Changes in the Roman Empire* I have gone into the processes by which the church made decisions by itself.[2] There I looked into internal church history a certain amount. I think there is a great deal more to be said on that subject, by people adequately trained, trying to look at the details of who is involved and how they behaved before looking at the outcome of the power-struggles or disagreements about the course-setting for the church: where it should go, what its dogma should be, what its practices should be.

You don't seem to like models or broad theories very much. Instead you rely on sources. Do you think models and theories stand in the way of a correct interpretation of the sources?

They don't interest me very much, because, when you have a model or theory, if you want to find out its value, you have to prove it by dropping down to reality. And then I suppose you check it out, and raise it back up to the theoretical level. Well, if you have to do that, it seems a sort of needless operation for the discovery of the truth. Why not begin and end with reality and have done with it?

Then what in your view is the function of historiography?

I suppose it will be an answer that no one will take seriously, or perhaps they'll take it seriously and be quite irritated by it, but I think the function of historiography is very much like the function of chamber music. It provides a delightful diversion of fairly well-trained, fairly well-educated human tastes and impulses and, like chamber music and some of the other liberal arts, it has its rules and its practitioners and therefore it is judged to be good or bad, whether it provides the diversion people are looking for. I don't think that historiography provides maps by which people can understand where to walk tomorrow. I don't believe any professional historian is under that illusion,

either. When I hear people say that history matters, of course I agree. That is, people today or at any given moment act in part because of what they think happened in the past. But the sense of the past is quite different from historiography. That sense is lodged in people's minds. It is important for them to talk about it and understand it, they act accordingly. Their perceptions have historical significance in themselves, but they are not historiography and whether historiography can correct those impressions and perceptions so as to become history itself, to make people act differently, I am quite sceptical.

Historiography is an entertainment, I have an idea that tastes and therefore the perception of truth will change from time to time, and that there is nothing I have written, no truth I think I have arrived at, which is going to be around unmodified terribly long. Other people will ask more intelligent and more insightful questions. If I end up as you find me in a sort of apologetic farewell to a reader, it is with that sense of the change of views that I say what I do.

You rely very much on your sources. But aren't they 'polluted' by ideology? Should not first the discourse be subjected to analysis, as Averil Cameron (among others) pleads?[3]

I am as naïve on that question as you could ask, so I can't give you an impressive answer. I listen to what people say in public, which is of course virtually all of our surviving sources, in words anyway. I discount some because of the possibility of striking postures, assuming poses of a conventional sort which we do today on tombstones or in commencement-addresses and so forth; and if that kind of posturing is the point of your question, that people in making such public statements have to be discounted heavily because they are using traditional forms of speech, I think that's true. On the other hand, it has to be said that public speech is almost always designed to make people like you and should therefore be generally taken as the reflection of the views that could be expressed because they were common and liked and representative of prevailing norms.

But you dismiss the literature of the Roman elite, because it shows values that aren't necessarily the values of the masses. Does the ideology of the elite not provide a model for the masses?

Yes, that's perfectly fair, and the degree of its fairness is a thing which I am sure should be checked out, and I would really like to see, and can easily see, a lot of work being done to determine how much the elite were listened to and how little they were distorted when they were heard. The question of what happened to the views and opinions and

values of the well-to-do who were in charge of society, who funded, who occupied high offices, who were looked to for examples - the relation of that stratum of society with the rest of the community - surely isn't something similar to a carbon-copy or a xerox. There is surely distortion of what gets down to be imitated and that process I think needs to be studied so as to evaluate the important question you are asking, that is, how much the leadership are an effectual model as well as one simply present to be imitated if anyone wanted to imitate them.

And do you think your work provides the beginning of the answers to that question?

The only time I looked at the matter of the relationship between the response of the community at large and the declarations of the elite is in a little study I did of the fourth-century preachers, both Greek and Latin, and the kind of audience they addressed for their sermons; and it occurred to me that that audience could be described socio-economically to some degree and therefore you began to have some sense of who was listening to the elite.[4] But I have never investigated whether after listening they went out and did what they were told, if they went out and imitated their models. Whether there is work of that sort done by other people, I am not sure. There might be some, for example, comparing Cicero's speeches with subsequent political action, where you have a fairly good control of what is said and then subsequently what is done. It is a very difficult question, though.

In much of your work the notion is discernible that the Romanization left many in the provinces untouched. When Roman power receded, much provincial feeling, most notably detectable in the rise of provincial languages, came to the foreground. Do you regard this as a process of both democratization and the falling apart of some centrally shared notions?[5] In *Paganism* you write (in reply to the objections of Peter Brown): '... for the moment, we must be content with conventionally documented interpretations'.[6] Do you still hold this view?

This takes us to the heart of the matter you raised earlier. That is, how much did the upper part of civilization communicate itself to the mass of civilization. I have always been interested in the degree to which people do not do what they're supposed to do, since I have a sentimental attachment to freedom, and the powerless can only express their freedom by a kind of passive disobedience, going their own way rather than confronting authority. Well, that sentimental attachment made me look with special interest at the degree to which the non-elite remained themselves, and had their own way of life. I am struck by that whole broad phenomenon that carries through the

Middle Ages and to at least the nineteenth century: for example the degree to which pagan alternatives to canonical Christian religion maintained themselves and asserted themselves. I am interested in the unwillingness of a lot of people who had no power to conform in language, in the motives in their art et cetera. I think since elite civilization is so much easier to approach, and has so much more stylish attractiveness, it tends to get all the news, while the other part is for that very same reason attractive, because there is not so much written about it and there are opportunities there.

But would you still describe this rise of provincial feeling as a form of 'democratization'?

Well, that implies a sort of consciousness of it. I certainly don't think that if you could attend some meeting of farmers after harvest, getting drunk on the threshing-floor, when all their work was done, you would hear them talking revolution, certainly not. So they weren't aiming at democratization. Their non-compliance with elite civilization might in a theoretical way be seen as a force defending the difference of the demos, yes, but that's a little theoretical I think.

The same applies to the notion of nationalism, I suppose?

Yes, well in the conventional sense of that word it implies what modern historians anyway would call a nineteenth-century invention of the West. Nationalism is such a complicated word, and brings with it so much history, it is probably best left out. In the conventional sense, I don't think you can find nationalism in Antiquity.

So by now you wouldn't apply the word nationalism to Egypt in Late Antiquity, as you once did in the sixties?[7]

Correct, I wouldn't use the word for Egypt. There was an assertion, or at least a stubborn retention, of cultural differences inside Egypt, but the Copts, the mass of the Egyptian people in the Nile-valley, didn't arm themselves, and go out and beat up other people; so that half, the political half of what usually is meant by nationalism, was absent. A long time ago, I was really caught by William Frend's book on the Donatist Church, which attracted a lot of interest, had a great style, and I thought was very stimulating.[8] So it may have been under the spell of that book, which I ended up disagreeing with, that I began looking around elsewhere in the Roman Empire to pick up the same phenomena that he was looking for. Perhaps I thought I might find better instances. It is a terrible fate to have written things that you've forgotten about.

You seem to aim at broad statements about the feelings that govern peoples' lives. So, much of your work is descriptive and offers no special thesis. Do you think that a description of the 'histoire de la longue durée' gives a sufficient explanation in itself?

I am not quite sure of the question because you would have to say, 'Sufficient explanation of what?' I think when you want to satisfy yourself, when you want to understand why a group of people in the past did what they did - they went to war, or they changed the manner of building their houses, or whatever it may be - you encounter those people in the grip of a number of different impulses, which are very much like radio waves depending on whether they have a short 'durée' or a long. That is, for instance, in the building of a house, the short 'durée', has to do with economic matters, whether individuals have money or not, and the long 'durée' has to do with whether they want to imitate classical models or do something more adventuresome or more of the time; and in order to understand the event you're studying you have to look at it, dropping your gaze from one layer to another to another. I think the reason people look at the long 'durée' in recent times is because in the nature of things it is the most difficult to get at. It has been the longest disregarded, because of its difficulty and therefore it has the kind of novelty and adventure about it that history writers like. I like it because of its intellectual challenge. It involves you in very difficult and intriguing and very powerful questions about motive. Finally, it gets to a level of affective history, history of how people feel about things, which seems to me the bedrock of explanation. When you get there, and know feelings not thoughts, you are coming close to a grip on people.

So we have to move on to psychological explanations?

Yes. I did a piece for *Past and Present* in 1980,[9] which I was really pleased with, trying to present the case for the importance of bringing one's own human empathy to bear on the problem of historical understanding. What I was suggesting there, is that historians don't want to do a lot of their understanding with their emotions, rather than with their logical capacities, because in the transmission of their material to them the emotive tends to have dropped out of the written record - it is not so easily explained by one generation to another or even by one participant in history to his contemporaries. Therefore historical explanation is constantly overwhelmed by logical descriptions particularly those offering material benefit as the explanatory motive, where in fact people, as I see it, are very emotional creatures: they go to war because they're angry or they buy a house because they're jealous of someone who has a bigger one. They spent money in San Gimignano for example, building ridiculous architectural

monstrosities for reasons of passion, a rather petty passion too. If you could ask them why did they do that, they would give a logical answer, but it would not be the truth. So when you come to examine the landscape of San Gimignano, or the French Revolution, or whatever it be, I think your understanding to be correct must bring the whole of you to bear, meaning all your feelings.

You wrote several times that *change* is what history should be about. The title of your collection of essays is *Changes in the Roman Empire*. But in much of your own work you're not much concerned with change. When I read your book on curruption it strikes me that in its two main chapters (two and three) you describe two stationary situations, one in which the system works, and another one in which it no longer works. The change in between is left out.

It is true. It may be a little bit because the easy part of history, the part that first attracts interest and is what children for example enjoy about history, is the story, which ventures into political history, which then may get into military history, history of public institutions and so on, and all of that has been done so much. If you want to avoid competing with past historians who probably know a lot more than you do (as I am sure is what is true of Mommsen and half a hundred of modern historians), you're better off avoiding that level of combat and making your escape to something beneath the political and the economic to other parts that haven't been explored quite so much. Who would have the courage to write about the public life of Cicero now? - Which would involve you in warfare with half a hundred of ghosts, not to mention all the living people who make their profession out of that? So, it is better to go elsewhere.

You wrote a book on corruption and the decline of Rome. The conclusion of the survey was that there was great regional variety in Late Antique conditions, which made it impossible to speak of an overall 'decline'. Yet, in the end you do assume a decline in the West; the Western Roman Empire did fall, after all. The explanation you offer is corruption. Now should we conclude that there was less corruption in, let's say North Africa, or, in the East?

I never bothered, and when I look back it was rather silly, to use that 'Corruption' book as a way of explaining 'the decline of Rome'. What I was aiming to do was to add to the discussion an element that hadn't been looked at carefully. If I had wanted to be more ambitious, I would have involved myself in explaining the difference in fate between the Eastern and the Western Empire. That would have drawn me into a long discussion which I think is quite easy to do, but long, regarding the territorial threats on the East and the West. Of course the empire in North Africa is not going to collapse,

because its external enemies have no power-base to the south, so that is no problem. They are only semi-nomads. Of course in the West, likewise, there is no collapse in Spain for example, because there are no enemies out there. It is a little paradoxical to say that there were no serious enemies on the east, but, I think you could make a convincing case for the Eastern Empire enjoying a necessary stand-off without decisive victory either way between the Empire of the Romans and the Empire of the Sassanids, the Persians, because of the logistical problems involved in the territory between them. And if one looks at the whole very long history of Roman and Eastern relations, one can see that the Eastern powers for reasons of supply and massing of military thrust simply cannot get into the Empire and stay there for a length of time. That leaves the fourth frontier which is to the north; and the attack there which happened to come along the Rhine and Upper-Danube explains the differences between the ultimate fate over centuries of the Eastern and Western Empire. If by accident there had been a similar massing of raiders, big raiding tribes in the Caucasus for example, things would have been different, but that is not the way it happened.

So corruption is not the explanation for the decline, and we should return to military history?

Corruption is an explanation for the weakness of the military forces and the weakness of the supporting economy in the cities; and in those regards corruption is a big thing. It counts for a lot and can be found throughout the empire. But the challenge to the military and economic structures of the empire happened to come from certain geographical directions and not from others and therein lies the link between corruption and ultimately the shape of changes in the fifth-sixth centuries.

I guess the best thing is to leave it to the argument case by case which I tried to present in the last chapter of that Corruption-book. It is a free country. Either readers will believe those cases or they won't. I have had my chance to persuade them.

Some other critics point to the similarity between your thesis about corruption and the old thesis about the decadence of the aristocracy. Is there indeed a relation between them? They think it is an old-fashioned explanation of course.

Yes, of course, the word decadence reeks of a kind of nineteenth-century dismissive moralising stupidity, and it is not scientific. Therefore, we cannot talk about that. There is a good deal of historiographical embarrassment about discussing values, and therefore a good deal of conscious invention of sociological terms to make them all appear tidier, more up to date and intellectually respectable. Who, for instance, would be willing to write a book called *The history of morals*, as Lecky did a long time ago?[10]

It would excite sneers and disbelief. But the fact is, when you get away from the old-fashioned terminology toward more neutral terms, people do have codes of behaviour which are determined by the culture around them. They do modify their daily actions to some degree, more or less, in terms of those codes, those norms, and therefore to study those norms, whether you call them morals or whatever, helps a historian very much.[11]

At the end of the book you make some remarks about contemporary corruption in your own country. Some people think the significance you attach to corruption is too much influenced by your own worries about the contemporary state of affairs in the US.

Well, it is true that I was passionately at odds with the Republican party in my country, and still am. But on the other hand, if one looks at India in the last ten years - if one reads the *New Delhi Times* as I have done very seriously as a matter to inform myself - one sees good observers of their own country attaching a lot of historical significance to habits in the tenure of public office, and, more recently, if one looks to Italy, one can see serious Italians saying seriously that the reason for their country's falling behind other countries, in the post-War world, economically, is most easily explained by the quantum of Gross National Product subtracted from useful effort by the habits of public and private corruption. So, the question that you ask, if I understand it, is the matter of historical significance: Can corruption be worth looking at? I think the answer is yes; one can look around in the modern world, and find a certain amount in the US and various other examples which are quite clear.

Noten

1. Donald Kagan (1932) is als hoogleraar Griekse geschiedenis aan Yale University verbonden. Het verloop van de Peloponnesische Oorlog beschreef hij in vier delen: *The outbreak of the Peloponnesian War* (Ithaca, N.Y. etc. 1969); *The Archidamian War* (Ithaca, N.Y. en Londen 1974); *The peace of Nicias and the Sicilian expedition* (Ithaca, N.Y. en Londen 1981) en *The fall of the Athenian Empire* (Ithaca, N.Y. etc. 1987). In 1991 voegde hij daar nog *Pericles of Athens and the birth of democracy* (New York 1991) aan toe.
2. 'The historical role of the masses in Late Antiquity' in: *Changes in the Roman Empire,* 250-276, aldaar 268-276.
3. A. Cameron, *Christianity and the rhetoric of empire. The development of Christian discourse* (Berkeley, Los Angeles en Oxford 1991), met name 1-14.
4. 'The preacher's audience (A.D. 350-400)', *The Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 40 (1989) 503-511.

5. Zie bijvoorbeeld 'Provincial languages in the Roman Empire', *American Joural of Philology* 87 (1966) 1-17, herdrukt in: *Changes in the Roman Empire,* 32-40.
6. *Paganism in the Roman Empire,* 70 noot 35.
7. 'Nationalism in Roman Egypt', *Aegyptus* 44 (1964) 179-199.
8. W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist church. A movement of protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford 1952).
9. 'Roman elite motivation', *Past and Present* 88 (1980) 3-16, herdrukt in: *Changes in the Roman Empire,* 13-24.
10. W.E.H. Lecky, *History of European morals from Augustus to Charlemagne* (tweede druk: Londen 1869).
11. Zie ook 'Tracking value changes', te verschijnen in de akten van het Symposium Power and Possession, verzorgd door H.W. Pleket.