Morley has written a clear and thoughtful overview of the various theoretical approaches available to the aspiring historian, which succeeds in its aim of providing an ‘accessible guide for students to how theories, models and concepts have been applied to ancient history’. Previously, Morley has written other books with a theoretical bent, such as Writing Ancient History (London, 1999) and, as editor, Ancient History: Key Themes and Approaches (London, 2000). He is clearly carving out for himself something of a niche role as a theory expert, which is good in that Ancient History needs to keep up with modern best-practice but depressing in that theory is still seen as something to be largely consigned to the niche category.

Ch. 1, ‘Approaches’, looks at the two sides of the theory debate and discusses the differences in approach towards the treatment of evidence and the creation of generalisations. Morley uses M.I. Finley’s application of the idea of the ‘consumer city’ to the ancient world as a means of highlighting the problems involved in using this kind of theoretical model. He then goes on to discuss the status of knowledge obtained from such modelling, pointing out that all academic discussion involves applying models and assumptions of some kind. I disagree with Morley’s treatment of definitions (14), where he argues that we need to agree on general, transhistorical definitions if we are to make use of broad generalisations about the ancient world. This seems at odds with his generally more laissez-faire approach and he himself seems to contradict this when he states later (27) that all vocabularies are ‘equally time-bound and laden with anachronistic baggage’. I prefer the practical approach of ‘family resemblance’, which is to say that we know what defines
a concept such as a ‘city’ even if we can’t pinpoint it exactly as a precise list of terms.

In Ch. 2, ‘Ancient and modern: The invention of the ancient economy’, Morley describes the development of the use of modern economic theory. This seemed to me the most authoritative chapter since it relates theoretical approaches neatly back to the ancient world. This may simply reflect Morley’s status as an economic historian or my lack of it. Ch.3 describes the old debate about idealism and materialism and the factors that determine the course of human history. Ch. 4 covers class and status, Ch.5 sex, gender and ethnicity. Ch.6 deals with the input from anthropology. All of these are clearly written and will serve as useful introductions for ancient history students, although they could have benefited from being more firmly applied to the ancient world. Without that grounding it was hard to see what was being added that could not be found in standard anthropology textbooks or introductions to social history such as those written by Peter Burke.

In a way, it is surprising that this book still needs to be written. Many of the theories being presented here were developments from decades ago. Feminism, for example, has been at the forefront of most arts and social science subjects for close to half a century. There is a part of me that feels that Morley’s book is a description of prescriptions that have long-since gone out of date. And yet Morley is right when he refers (1) to the ‘anger’, ‘anxiety’ and ‘fervent enthusiasm’ that the debate about theory can still generate in Ancient History. I know from responses to my own work how strongly many in the subject react to any overtly theoretical approach. I would go further than Morley and say that one of the problems unique to Classics is that it has tended to attract a higher percentage of the more socially conservative, who instinctively react against anything smacking of change, preferring to cling to the certainties of positivism. A vote for theory is seen as an attempt to upset the old order completely when in reality it is merely an
attempt to understand the ancient world in different and perhaps more relevant ways.

Morley argues that most of these different theoretical approaches ‘insist that their theory offers a true picture of reality, whereas all others are partial and ideological’ (133). Morley clearly wants to move on from such a stand-off but is unclear about what can replace it: ‘I am not proposing the sort of theoretical multiculturalism that implies that everyone could get along if they only talked to one another’ (133). In the wider academic world, however, I believe the debate has moved on. I don’t sense the same level of introspection in the more general field of modern history although that could simply be grass-is-greener syndrome. It seems to me that a broad pragmatism has settled over the theory debate, which is multicultural in the sense that it is accepting of a broad range of approaches so long as they are rationally defensible. In the same way that people no longer generally believe that communism, monetarism or unfettered capitalism will solve all our problems, historians seem to be adopting a pick-and-choose approach to theory. If a historian is studying an area which lends itself to statistical analysis then great, use it. It comes down to a question of getting results, which for a historian is, as Morley states, about creating ‘a new way of thinking about the world’ (30). He adds that, ‘In the end, it is a matter of choosing between plausible interpretations on the basis of our own assumptions’ (31). That theory can make it easier to provide these new interpretations seems to me indisputable.

The media has had a significant impact on this new pragmatism. More modern academics want access to media exposure, partly because it can pay the lucky few phenomenally well when compared with academic salaries but also because media coverage has come to be seen by many as an important measure of success. The media, however, demands a more Herodotean approach to the writing of history: it wants wit, entertainment, and strong views colourfully expressed in order to generate interest. One of the problems with
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much theory and most of the writing about theory is that it has been dull. Morley’s book comfortably escapes that charge but it would be good to see him have a go at writing a book which makes theory come alive more.

One final note is that £12.99 is quite expensive for what is a relatively short textbook aimed at the student market, but that is sadly typical of the aggressive pricing policy of any Taylor & Francis owned publisher.

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