

ANCIENT SLAVERY AND MODERN IDEOLOGY by M. I. Finley.
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Recent debates and differences among scholars of slavery in the American South suggest the difficulties of understanding the life of the slave and the role of the slave in the development of the Southern political economy. Such debates and analyses, though, are important, for to begin to understand America as once a slave society is to begin to understand the racial crises confronting America today. Much more difficult to ascertain is the position of the slave in ancient Greece and ancient Rome—and much more difficult to justify on the grounds of contemporary relevance is such a study. As suggested by the renowned social historian of ancient society M. I. Finley, the difficulties, especially with regard to the former question, derive in part from the highly limited and unsystematic data base on which classical historians are forced to rely, but more importantly from the “ideological” stance of those who have written on slavery in the last three centuries. (The quotation marks around ideological are intentional. Though the word appears in the title of both the book and the major essay within the book, Finley does not clarify what he means by this value-laden term. It appears to mean for him a particular point of view or perspective, as in the conflict he describes between a “moral or spiritual view and a sociological view of the historical process” [p. 11], rather than a set of interlocking attitudes that give expression to the dominant socio-economic structure at a certain point in time.) The first and by far the longest chapter in the book is devoted to how previous studies of ancient slavery have been enclosed in more general “ideological” debates about the standards by which slavery is to be judged. The other three chapters summarize most briefly Finley’s research into the rise, decline, and character of ancient slavery. Though he does offer some theories and some generalizations, the emphasis throughout is that such theories must be tentative, uncertain deductions from the few scraps of data left in the ancient record. Finley purposely sets his own tentativeness in contrast to the assertions made by those whose work he catalogues in the first chapter. He presumably wishes thereby to illustrate a “non-ideological” history of ancient slavery.

The first chapter is primarily a study in the sociology of knowledge. It is often a tedious and tortuous tour through centuries of writing on ancient slavery. We begin with “pre-Enlightenment” authors from as

early as 1608 and travel through a large number of works devoted either partially or wholly to ancient slavery up until the vitriolic conflicts between the Marxist and anti-Marxist analyses of the 1970s. That historians of the past (and indeed the present) write with a particular point of view, that the "facts" of history are in many ways expressions of their understandings of the world, ancient or modern, is hardly news. There is no reason to expect that historians of ancient slavery should be any more exempt from such predispositions than, say, historians of American slavery. Finley obviously wishes to encourage greater care in dealing with the limited data, and greater awareness of how these predispositions affect one's historical judgments, but the main thrust of the argument, while documented with abundant care, is not particularly surprising. This chapter, apart from teaching us who said what about ancient slavery with which ideological blinders on, also offers a brief summary of the Western world's response to the classical age—from its position as the period out of which Christianity emerged to remove the scourge of slavery (a point which Finley in his last chapter suggests was indeed not the case, since slavery continued in some forms well into the Christian era) to the overly romantic vision of the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome, both populated by saints who happened to have slaves. (Finley's third chapter debunks any such generalized view that humanitarian masters mitigated the evils of ancient slavery.)

Despite Finley's own critique of the economic-developmental (Marxist) approach to ancient slavery, his own perspective is one clearly bound by an economic matrix. "With slavery, not labor power as in capitalism, but the laborer himself is the commodity" (p. 68). That the slave is human has no relevance to the question of whether he is a slave or not (p. 73); it merely means that he is a peculiar form of property. He is one who has lost control over his person, a loss of control that extends for an infinity of time (p. 75). The slave for Finley is an economic being; he is understood through the language of property, of rights to property, and of rights against the access of others (including the slave) to that property—the labor of the slave.

Perhaps Finley's own "ideology" will become apparent if we briefly compare his definition of the slave with that of Aristotle (the only ancient to reflect seriously on the meaning of slavery, p. 120). At the beginning of his inquiry into politics, Aristotle raises the question of who is the slave. Does he exist by nature or by convention? Who is the master? These are not easy questions to answer, and Aristotle does not leave us with easy answers. He is unwilling to describe the slave accord-

ing to the socioeconomic structure he sees around him. The definitional answer given by Finley, a piece of property with a soul (quoted from Aristotle), is insufficient, for Aristotle sees slavery not only within the economic context, but within the set of relations which characterizes all of nature. These are relationships which deal with superior and inferior, higher and lower, hierarchies and inequalities. The slave exemplifies within the human race the greatest inequality. What can justify and what can explain that inequality? If the world is made up of unequals, who determines who rules over others? The natural slave, according to Aristotle, is not simply an inferior being. There must be some benefit in any natural hierarchical relationship to the lower as well as to the higher. How can slavery benefit the slave? Does slavery benefit the master or make him dependent on what is inferior? Aristotle's answers to these questions are not simple (nor free from much scholarly debate), but they cannot be disassociated from his vision of the whole. Aristotle's reflections on the nature of slavery move us beyond a particular slave and a particular master. Instead, the slave's subordination to the master reflects our own subordination to nature. Slavery is not only the degraded position of one without control over his or her labor. It is the condition of all humans vis-à-vis nature. The master and the slave is not a relationship limited to the five slave societies of the ancient and modern world to which Finley refers. The master and slave are perennial states which Aristotle exhorts us to understand so that we may understand our own place within society and within nature. Finley, the social historian, turns our attention to the specifics of a time and a place, and that is why, though he notes the importance of the study of American slavery to American society today, he does not explain the relevance of ancient slavery. For that we must turn to the ancient political philosopher.

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