

# *Slavery and the Historians\**

by M.I. FINLEY\*\*

... and all for nothing!  
For Hecuba!  
What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba  
That he should weep for her?

We historians sometimes "confound the ignorant" but we do not, we trust, "cleave the general ear with horrid speech, Make made the guilty and appal the free." Yet in 1975 there was published in book-form a review, nearly 200 pages long, of the two-volume work on the economics of American Negro slavery entitled *Time on the Cross*.<sup>1</sup> The review begins by saying that *Time on the Cross* "should be read as theater," that it is a "profoundly flawed work;" its closing words are, "It really tells us nothing of importance about the beliefs and behavior of enslaved Afro-Americans;" and the nearly 200 pages in between are peppered with comparable, and often stronger, language. Not so strong, however, as the language employed by some other reviewers: a lengthy critique in the *New York Review of Books*, for example, ended by asserting that the authors now have the "heavy burden" of proving that "their book merits further scholarly attention."

The authors of *Time on the Cross*, Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, happen to be two most distinguished economic historians. It must surely be without precedent that a scholarly work by men of this eminence should have evoked a chorus that cleaved the general ear with horrid speech. Why? What is there about the economics of American Negro slavery, which went out of existence more than a century ago, that has led to such a horrid, massive, and still continuing outburst?

The answer, of course, lies not in the first half of the nineteenth century, and surely not in the economics of slavery, but in the United States today. "The twin topics of race and slavery tend to make Americans uneasy," an Oxford Americanist wrote recently, reviewing a book about the *eighteenth* century, about slavery, race and the American Revolution.<sup>2</sup> Another expert referred to the "coercion of the time," as a result of which "each new interpretation of slavery has professed to be more antiracist

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<sup>1</sup> H.G. GUTMAN, *Slavery and the Numbers Game* (Urbana, 1975).

<sup>2</sup> D.J. MACLEOD, in the *Times Literary Supplement* (2 Jan. 1976), p. 819.

than the one it replaces.”<sup>3</sup> My 200-page review of *Time on the Cross* was written by a historian, Herbert Gutman, whose own antiracist credentials are impeccable; yet his parting shot against Fogel and Engerman is this: “What explains such uncritical enthusiasm?... is it evidence of a deep flaw in the national culture that finds comfort in learning ... that the great-grandfather of a ghetto Afro-American was neither an Uncle Tom nor a Nat Turner but a black Horatio Alger?”

I do not propose to enter into the complex question of the rights and wrongs of *Time on the Cross* and its critics. My concern is with the overtones, with the weeping for Hecuba. The terrible reality and urgency of contemporary black-white tensions in the United States need no extended demonstration, and it is not surprising that American slavery, because it was *black* slavery, should be caught up in those tensions even in a purely historical study. The subject has indeed never been free from those tensions, even in the decades when black-white relations did not occupy the centre of the scene. Thus, the scholar who completely dominated the subject in the first decades of the present century, Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, was himself a Southerner, whose lifetime of hard dedicated research gravitated round the theme that Southern planters were self-sacrificing Christian paternalists who fought a losing battle with an inefficient economic system they had inherited in order to control, insofar as it was not possible to civilize, a backward race. “Plantation slavery,” he once wrote, “was less a business than a life; it made fewer fortunes than it made men.”<sup>4</sup>

The past two decades, beginning with the publication in 1956 of Kenneth Stampp’s *The Peculiar Institution*, have witnessed an outpouring of books and articles on American slavery that can probably not be matched in any other historical field, not only for volume but also for the quality and sophistication of the analysis, the innovatory techniques of inquiry and the fewer-tone of the polemic. Few apologists for Southern planters will be found among these historians. Yet they differ as widely as possible in their conclusions about almost every aspect of the subject, on the efficiency and profitability of slave labour, on the slave personality, on slave reactions, on slave culture, on slave-master relations. The fury over *Time on the Cross* was preceded a few years ago by the fury over Stanley Elkins’ book, called simply *Slavery*, in which he drew a parallel with the Nazi concentration camps to argue — I oversimplify unavoidably — that the Sambo stereotype was not a racist fiction but a reality, the consequence not of race but of treatment.

Black historians, few though they have been in number until very recently, inevitably reacted in kind. At first they concentrated on a search for “genuine,” “native” black culture-traits, rooted in Africa, and some still do. Then came, early in the present century, a revealing twist, namely, a debate over the nature of the Negro family. The starting-point was not

<sup>3</sup> David Brion DAVIS, “Slavery and the Post-World War II Historians,” *Daedalus* (Spring 1974): 1-16, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> U.B. PHILLIPS, *American Negro Slavery* (New York, 1918), p. 401.

historical at all, but the high illegitimacy rate in the Negro ghettos. How much of that was the consequence of an ethos imposed on the black people of the United States by the long years of enslavement? I have not the time to discuss the alternative arguments, or the other byways one would like to explore. Further examples would not alter the main point, which is obvious enough.

It would be a mistake to dismiss all this as one more instance of the chronic embarrassment, or even paranoia, of American intellectuals, whose proud faith in American exceptionalism is shaken by both the current black-white conflict and the centuries of slavery that laid the foundation. After all, current controversy in Latin America has been equally intense, if not comparable in volume. In Brazil, in particular, the myth of racial harmony had a long run, and historians were of course among its victims. The name that stands out is Gilberto Freyre, in a series of learned and influential works. In the preface to the English translation of his best known book, published in 1946 under the title, *The Masters and the Slaves*, he wrote: "The fact of the matter is" — the choice of words is significant — "The fact of the matter is that miscegenation and the interpenetration of cultures — chiefly European, Amerindian, and African cultures — together with the possibilities and opportunities for rising in the social scale that in the past have been open to slaves, individuals of the coloured races, and even heretics: the possibility and the opportunity of becoming free men and, in the official sense, white and Christian (if not theologically sound, at any rate sociologically valid ones) — the fact is" — there is that word "fact" again — "the fact is that all these things, from an early period, have tended to nullify the interclass and interracial antagonisms developed under an aristocratic economy." An American historian, Frank Tannenbaum, then promptly introduced a new factor into Freyre's distinction between North and South, namely, the distinction between Protestantism and Catholicism.<sup>5</sup>

Today, a generation later, few serious students accept Gilberto Freyre's "matter of fact" as fact. "Interracial antagonisms" may or may not be as openly sharp in Latin America as in North America, but few will agree that they have been as nullified as Freyre thought, or, more significantly, that "interclass antagonisms" have been in any way nullified. Here, then, is a second case-study of the way a controversy over the history of slavery starts from, and maintains a continuous interplay with, disagreements over present-day, post-slavery problems. I might have said with contemporary *political* issues. When, for example, Dr Eric Williams concluded, in a book called *Capitalism and Slavery*, that "slavery was not born of racism, rather racism was a consequence of slavery," he was making a historical judgment in appearance, which was a political judgment in reality. He was then a young professor of social and political science in Howard University, in Washington, D.C., still a long way from the premiership of Trinidad and Tobago, and in his youth a professed Marxist, but that is not especially relevant. The same conclusion, that slavery

<sup>5</sup> F. TANNENBAUM, *Slavery and Citizen* (New York, 1947).

created race prejudice, can be found in de Tocqueville, in the 1820s, or in conservative American historians such as the Handlins.<sup>6</sup> It is a comforting doctrine, but it is too incompatible with the evidence to survive dispassionate examination.

It was inevitable that the controversy would sooner or later return to Africa, to the continent from which the American slaves, north and south, were forcibly uprooted. What were the demographic, economic, social and political effects of more than two hundred years of the slave trade on Africa itself? on the Africans who remained behind, as distinct from those who were transported to the Americas?

One school of historians argues that the slave trade is the key to the underdevelopment of Africa, to that continent's lack of "pre-modern growth." They see the effects of the slave trade in three ways, in particular:

1. In certain thinly populated regions, the further depopulation created by slave raiding reduced the number to the point that they were unable to hold back the spread of bush vegetation, the natural habitat of the tsetse-fly, thereby introducing the incurably vicious circle of depopulation.

2. The economy was distorted by the slave trade into "a monoculture of human beings."

3. "The European connexion repeatedly confirmed the conservative element in African feudalism and, at the same time, distorted the influence and power which this element could wield. Generally, the connexion tended to petrify African institutions within traditional forms that grew ever more brittle and inflexible."<sup>7</sup>

It is argued not that these factors were operative in the whole of the continent, but that they were decisive in the main slave-catching regions of West Africa, above all in Angola, the one district in which Europeans themselves, the Portuguese, made military incursions for the purpose of seizing and exporting slaves.

In reply to all this, other historians argue that the slave trade had its positive consequences, such as the introduction of European credits into a stagnant economy, prising open many local market exchanges. I need not dwell on the details, for, in essence, the debate is the same as the debate over the effects of imperialism. Once again, therefore, a historical argument is intertwined with, and takes its start from, a view of the present. It is the case that the spokesmen for the negative judgment are mostly younger, and politically more militant, historians in Africa itself. However, too much stress should not be laid on that, for they do not monopolize the point of view. My third point, about the effect of the slave trade in fortifying the most conservative political elements in Africa, was in fact a

<sup>6</sup> Alexis DE TOCQUEVILLE, *Journey to America*, trans. G. LAWRENCE, ed. J.P. MAYER (London, 1959); Oscar & Mary F. HANDLIN, "Origins of the Southern Labor System," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd. seri., VII (1959): 199-222.

<sup>7</sup> Basil DAVIDSON, *Black Mother* (London, 1961), p. 243.

quotation from Basil Davidson, and the most influential critic of Gilberto Freyre's myth of Portuguese racial tolerance has been Professor Charles Boxer.

This matter of the historian and his attitudes — of what is Hecuba to him — is more complicated, as is dramatically revealed by a survey of the historiography of ancient slavery. In no meaningful sense are there contemporary social or political issues that can be blamed on slavery among the ancient Greeks and Romans. Nor is there the slightest shame or embarrassment among Greeks, Italians or 'Gauls' today because of their slaveowning "ancestors" two thousand years ago. Yet ancient historians take their stand; emotions are aroused; the language becomes prickly and contentious.

An interest in ancient slavery was never lacking in modern times, from the earliest centuries. Much of it was antiquarian in the narrow sense: monographs on Roman slavery by the Frisian Titus Popma and the Paduan cleric Laurencio Pignoria, originally published in 1608 and 1613, respectively, went through at least three printings in the course of a century; in 1703 Joachim Potgiesser produced an account of Germanic slaves and freedmen from the time of Caesar to the end of the Middle Ages that ran to 985 pages in the 1736 reissue; a series of articles appeared in the memoirs of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres in the later eighteenth century, especially on the size of ancient slave populations, stimulated by a pre-Malthusian interest (in which David Hume played a central role) in the impact of slavery on the growth of population and the consequent growth in national prosperity. The catalogue of antiquarian writing on the subject could be continued down to our own day, but there is no point in further enumeration, for there was little of the heat in it that concerns me now. Nor, barring an occasional exception such as Jean Bodin, was there among the theoretical writers, Montesquieu for instance, who used ancient material paradigmatically. Nearly all these writers were anti-slavery, but in a low key emotionally.

The first full-scale, sustained attack on ancient slavery was published in 1847 in three volumes, 1,500 pages, a work still unrivalled in its scale and its deployment of the literary sources. By the time the second edition appeared in 1879, its author, Henri Wallon, had become permanent secretary of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres and dean of the Faculté des Lettres in Paris. He was a pious Catholic; the driving force behind his massive effort was his complete sympathy with the abolitionist movement. Slavery was un-Christian, and that was all there was to it: slavery denigrated and corrupted the slaves and the masters alike. To leave no doubt of his contemporary purpose, he introduced the three volumes with a 164-page chapter on "l'esclavage dans les colonies." He reprinted that introduction in the 1879 edition with a brief preface, from which I quote a few sentences:

Ce livre a été fait en un temps où la question de l'esclavage était encore (sauf en Angleterre) partout à résoudre. Je me proposais d'apporter dans le débat l'enseignement de l'Antiquité. "L'introduction sur l'esclavage moderne" s'applique à une chose qui n'existe plus chez nous, et qui, grâce à Dieu, est à la veille

d'avoir entièrement disparu du monde civilisé... Je reproduis toutefois cette introduction, parce qu'elle peut donner une idée du régime colonial et de l'état de l'opinion chez nous au moment précis où le débat fut tranché, beaucoup plus tôt qu'on ne l'aurait pu croire.

But by 1879 there was not much interest any longer in the slave past among Europeans in general and among European academics in particular. Besides, there were more powerful pressures, at least among students of classical antiquity, which pointed in the opposite direction from Wallon, who was dismissed as sentimental. So successful were these pressures that ancient slavery virtually dropped from sight to the end of the second World War, with some exceptions that I shall notice in a moment. Large histories of Greece, and even, more improbably, of Rome were written with virtually no mention of the existence of slavery. The young Theodor Mommsen, in his great *Roman History*, was almost the sole exception.

The first of these pressures arose from the normative complex that came to be known as classical humanism. In the long period in which the classics dominated liberal education, it was unseemly to sour the cream with slavery. For those who could not bring themselves to pretend that slavery did not exist, the solution, first formulated in a lecture in 1898 by the man who was universally acknowledged to be the leading ancient historian of the early twentieth century, Eduard Meyer, was to insist that the Greeks and Romans had a "mild" form of slavery, in no way to be compared with modern Negro slavery, with relatively small numbers of slaves who, "like the modern industrial worker, had the possibility of achieving prosperity and wealth."<sup>8</sup> This astonishing, essentially absurd lecture was immediately hailed as the fundamental introduction to an understanding of ancient slavery, and that is widely repeated even today.

The second pressure was the development of Marxism. Given the Marxist evolutionary scheme, most sharply formulated in Engel's *Origin of the Family* — primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, socialism — it became effectively axiomatic among Marxists, whether historians by profession or not, that Graeco-Roman society (and for most of them, the ancient Oriental world as well) rested on a slave basis. Two consequences followed. Marxist historians showed little interest in pursuing that proposition in any detail. The sole exception of any importance was a book, *The Decline of Ancient Slavery*, by Ettore Ciccotti, then professor in Milan, published in 1899. Although this book went through two editions in Italian, was translated into French, Spanish and German, and received a few favourable reviews, not only by Karl Kautsky in *Die neue Zeit* but also by reputable classical scholars, it was effectively a failure, without lasting impact on either historians or others.

For their part, non-Marxists (or anti-Marxists, which amounted to the same thing) proceeded to exemplify Newton's third law of motion: if Marxists believe slavery to have been basic in the ancient world, then Marxism itself is destroyed if one simply follows Eduard Meyer and holds

<sup>8</sup> E. MEYER, *Die Sklaverei im Altertum*, reprinted in his *Kleine Schriften*, 2nd ed. (Halle, 1924), I, pp. 169-212.

slavery to be a minor institution, neither basic nor especially horrible. There were exceptions, as I have already said, but chiefly they were scholars engaged in one or another technical piece of research, on slave names, for example, or on the Roman law of slavery, rather than in a fundamental or systematic appraisal of ancient slavery within the total context of ancient society and its history. I have schematized the picture of more than half a century of study, but I am prepared to defend this schema, of two opposing stances, with continuing antiquarian research on the side, as a sufficiently fair appraisal.

The second World War produced a sharp break. There are, to be sure, enough classical humanists among us who still go their merry way among the uncontaminated higher values of antiquity, enough Marxists who remain content with a reaffirmation of hard Engelsian doctrine, enough positivists who cling to the vain hope that facts somehow organize themselves into a coherent pattern. But there has been a qualitative change in the international historiography of ancient slavery, reflected in the quantitative leap in research and publication: the quantity has of course not approached that of American slavery, but it is itself not far from unmanageable at the moment.

Marxism remains pivotal in the debate (for there is now a genuine debate, or rather several debates, in the strict sense of that word). One of the fiercer polemicists, Wilhelm Backhaus of the University of Bochum, complained in closing a largish book on the subject, that "virtually the only historians who make an effort to achieve an integrated approach to the subject are those who tread the path marked out by Marx and Engels."<sup>9</sup> Some of the debate cleaves the general ear with horrid speech, but a substantial portion is serious and sophisticated, involving important issues in the study of history. I must be extremely selective and restrict myself to a brief consideration of two case-studies chosen because of their significance, not from a claim that they are typical (whatever that label might mean).

On the one hand, among Marxist ancient historians, whose numbers have increased vastly, there is a swing away from the mere repetition of formal doctrine to proper, concrete and differentiated analysis. Given the paucity and poverty of such analysis previously, which I have already noted, it is not surprising that the new trend is marked by serious debate not only with non-Marxist historians but also internally. The abandonment of hard Engelsian doctrine requires its replacement by new concepts and by a new set of models. This internal debate is international: much more tentative, hesitant and often reluctant in eastern Europe, most open and vigorous at the moment in Italy. It will be evident that these national differences have their source in the larger political world, outside the academy, and that helps confirm my initial point, made in the first instance with respect to American slavery, that the heat of the debates can be explained only by problems of the present, not of the past. One should not underestimate the size of the stake for a Marxist. A global theory of social

<sup>9</sup> W. BACKHAUS, *Marx, Engels und die Sklaverei* (Düsseldorf, 1974), p. 248.

behaviour and development cannot simply shed one of its tenets, without reexamination and adjustment of basic concepts. If it is the case, for example — and I believe it is — that fewer and fewer Marxists any longer accept that the label “slave society” is applicable to much of the Roman empire, outside Italy, Sicily and the old classical Greek areas; if more and more acknowledge that even within the slave areas, other modes of production co-existed with slavery, then the empirical research must be accompanied by hard theoretical re-thinking; hard re-thinking, I need not remind you, of a theory that applies to politics and political action, not only to scholarly study and the ivory tower.

On the other side, there is still much work characterized, as Backhaus regretted, by no approach at all. My concern, however, is with those who are trying to meet the Marxist challenge, and it happens that they are currently concentrated in West Germany, and that their centre, speaking metaphorically, is a major research project, under the auspices of the Mainz Academy and the direction of the new octogenarian Professor Joseph Vogt. The Mainz contributors do not all follow a single line, and I do not for a moment underestimate, though I do not discuss, the high quality of scholarship in the best of the dozen or so monographs that have been published thus far. My interest is in the two closely related undercurrents flowing through the series, the coupling of anti-Marxism with a cultural value-system and its consequent educational objective. This is best seen in Vogt himself, precisely because he retains a lower profile, a quieter tone, than some of his more embattled colleagues. Vogt is a staunch adherent of the old tradition of classical humanism, explicitly of *German* classical humanism: its fundamental article of faith, in his own words, is that “contact with the Greeks would bring about the development of a free individuality, and so the universal aim of mankind.” Today “it has been left to the Classics to uphold the existence of intellectual standards in all areas of knowledge and skill.” Why all this interest in ancient slavery then? The explanation, though it may not represent a fully conscious and deliberate thought-process, seems to me to be the following. Once the old monopoly of classical humanism had been broken in the schools and universities, its supporters can no longer rest on such defences as the one provided by Eduard Meyer. One must be a hard-headed realist and concede that all was not perfect even in that “miraculous creation” antique civilization. One must study and know about the flaws. Then the phenomena can be saved, for the leitmotif in Vogt’s own work on ancient slavery is that “Slavery and its attendant loss of humanity were part of the sacrifice which had to be paid for the achievement.” The retention of that achievement today presumably requires analogous sacrifices, but Vogt does not specify them and we may leave that facet of the judgment aside.<sup>10</sup>

That completes my rapid tour of the historiography of slavery as a persistent manifestation, and often manifesto, of contemporary social and political views. I have taken you on that tour not so much in order to

<sup>10</sup> The quotation will be found in VOGT’s *Ancient Slavery and the Ideal of Man*, trans. T. WIEDEMANN (Oxford, 1974), pp. 188, 208, 25 respectively.



deplore what we have witnessed as, up to a point, to welcome it. History which does not excite more than mere curiosity is antiquarianism, or, as one cynic called it, just one damn thing after another. The work of the antiquarians is certainly useful, but only because it provides the raw materials for the historian. It is a red herring to bring accuracy and non-partisanship into the picture. A.E. Housman once made the crushing general reply: Accuracy is a duty, not a virtue. The historians of slavery we have been considering, have all made mistakes — who has not? — but it has not been a mistake to argue vigorously for their interpretations, and for the contemporary implications. Furthermore, it is remarkably perverse to dismiss Wallon as sentimental and partisan for his passionate abolitionism, while giving the highest accolade to those who appear to have no point of view at all, for example to Martin Nilsson, the most reputed student of ancient religion of our time, who managed to produce a bloodless 1,500-page synthesis of Greek religion in which the word “slave” is absent from the index, though the author of the best of the Mainz series has since found enough documentation for a four-volume monograph on slaves in ancient religion.<sup>11</sup>

In the end, the historian’s function is to explain, whether he does so more overtly, in an institutional analysis, or more indirectly and allusively, in a narrative. That is what finally distinguishes him from the antiquarian. Explain what? In the case of slavery, what requires explanation is not only its existence or non-existence, though that is a big and legitimate question: why in all history have there been only five genuine slave societies as distinct from the many in which there were slaves: classical Greece, Italy and Sicily between, in round numbers, 250 B.C. and A.D. 250, Brazil, the Caribbean states, and the southern states of the United States? But then we go on to a long list of hardly less interesting questions (which I do not propose to enumerate, but which I shall briefly exemplify). Why, in the modern world, were the slaves exclusively blacks, originating in Africa? What was the impact on the economy? on morality and moral values? on sexual mores? on the status and attitudes of the free poor? Why were slave revolts so rare in history — there have been only four large-scale ones in more than two thousand years — whereas revolts among other oppressed groups have been not only more frequent but also sometimes successful?

Behind all these questions about slavery, there is, I believe, a larger and prior issue, one with greater implications. In the context of universal history, free labour, wage labour, not slavery, is *the* peculiar institution. For most of the millennia of human history in most parts of the world, labour power was not a commodity which could be bought and sold apart from, abstracted from, the person of the labourer. Labour for the profit of others has normally been performed under compulsion in the strict sense, because of superior force or of status or of such conditions as debt. To be sure, no man takes employment on an assembly line except under *economic*

<sup>11</sup> F. BÖMER, *Untersuchungen über die Religion der Sklaven in Griechenland und Rom* (Akad. d. Wiss. u. d. Lit., Mainz, *Abhandlungen der geistes- u. sozialwiss. Kl.*, 1957 no. 7, 1960 no. 1, 1961 no. 4, 1963 no. 10).

compulsion, and he surrenders some of his independence when he does so. Nevertheless, it would be sheer sophistry to deny that such compulsion is of a different order from all the other forms. For one thing, it is a major corollary of the wage-labour system that a man is free not to enter the system, free to withdraw his labour. That freedom is not shared, even as an illusion, by any other form of labour for others, whether serf, debt bondsman, peon, convict labour or chattel slave.

Two qualities set the slave apart from the other forms of compulsory labour. One is the totality of his subjection: the slave is powerless and rightless in all respects, forever (unless he is freed by his master as a personal act of indulgence). The other is his being an outsider. Societies have never been reluctant to reduce substantial sections of their own people to debt bondage, serfdom and the rest, but I know of no society that has tolerated the enslavement, at home, of its own people, not even when it tolerated the sale abroad of its own people, as was the case, for example, among the ancient Scythians and Thracians and among the Africans in early modern times. (Tolerated is in fact too weak a word. Apart from the Portuguese military raids in Angola and a fair amount of kidnapping, the Africans who ended in slavery in America were *purchased* from other Africans, and the same was true in antiquity.) Once slavery was recognized as a solution to the labour problem in the New World, the only issue was whether to enslave Red Indians or to import Africans. Not for one moment were the white indentured servants considered as possible slaves, harsh though their condition may have been for the limited period of their servitude.

These two qualities are enough to set the slaves apart from the other forms of compulsory labour. That should be said forcefully, and I suggest that these two qualities also explain, or help explain, the rarity of slave societies. But it should be said with equal force that the fact that serfs and the rest were not slaves, provide no warrant for ignoring the deep abyss that separates them, too, from free wage-labour. I have always been mystified by the positive, friendly attitude to feudalism that is still so common, among historians as among novelists and romancers. Only a few days' browsing in any good library would produce an anthology of contemporary documents about serfs that would not be easily distinguishable from a comparable anthology about slaves. Permit me to quote two passages from Radishchev's *Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow*, published in 1790.

... for who does not know the impudence, the crude, unchaste and offensive jests with which the audacious gentry assail the village maidens? In the eyes of old and young nobles alike, they are simply creatures for their lordly pleasures. And they treat them accordingly, especially those unfortunate ones subject to their commands.

When debtors fail to pay, "the same story is published in the newspapers. It runs like this: 'At 10 o'clock this morning, by order of the County Court ... there will be sold at public auction the real estate of X, viz., a house located in Y Ward, No. Z, and with it six souls, male and female....'"

It is no good dismissing such texts because they come from barbarous Russia. Don Giovanni, in the civilized west, was not a figment of the imagination of Lorenzo da Ponte. Even if it should be true that the later feudalism of eastern Europe was somewhat harsher than the earlier feudalism in the west, there is no warrant for romanticizing the lot of the serfs of England, France or Spain.

We now take the free-labour system so much for granted that we tend to forget how rare and recent a phenomenon it is as a system (old though it has been for many individuals). It is therefore a sharp and important reminder that, even in the contemporary world, those with the power have been neither slow nor reluctant to return to a compulsory system when circumstances require and permit it, and that they have at their disposal a variety of devices — peonage, mobilization into the army, penal camps and so on. A book published in Leiden in 1960 under the title, *Involuntary Labour after the Abolition of Slavery*, by Willemina Kloosterboer presents no fewer than thirteen case-studies, from various parts of the globe. In these situations, the outside world often refers to “slave labour” or “slave camps.” But within they are regularly given some other name, some form of euphemism. The employment of a euphemism is defensible only to the very limited extent that these new forms of involuntary labour are not identical with chattel slavery. But that is not a matter of much importance, certainly not when measured against the reality of compulsion, and perhaps — though I am reluctant to be a Cassandra — what is most significant is the suggestion that the tremendous step forward represented by the voluntary labour system rests on fragile foundations. Perhaps it is a more or less conscious fear that this may be the case which has stimulated the virulence of the modern debate over past slavery.

The one thing which sets all the various forms of compulsory labour apart from free labour, whether self-employment or hired labour, is the nakedness of the exploitation. The extremity of the slave’s rightlessness does not in any way weaken the general statement that serfs, peons, debt bondsmen also worked without compensation for a part of their time, that their exploitation was open, undisguised by any notion of sharing the fruits of mutual cooperation, for example. That capital fact — and I cannot say often enough that it has been a fact in the lives of most men in most of human history — raises with urgency the question of ideology and psychology. For it is also a fact that for most of history the exploited have done little to change their condition. Neither slavery nor serfdom, for instance, was ever abolished through the action of slaves and serfs. The few great slave revolts and jacqueries were moving and dramatic. Their tale has been told so often, in histories and novels and even films, that an illusion is created, throwing a veil over the double fact that they were always failures and that they were anyway rare occurrences. There have been efforts to deny the rarity. When, after years of combing every conceivable source of information, Herbert Aptheker succeeded in enumerating 250 rebellions in the United States before the Civil War, he still failed to make the point he thought he was making. In the first place, he could not explain why most of these rebellions occurred before 1812,

whereas American slavery reached its peak both in numbers and in harshness in the relatively rebellion-free half-century after 1812. In the second place, the greatest of the revolts, which has become legendary, Nat Turner's Rebellion of 1831, was a purely local affair of some months, involving only a few hundred men and a mere three days of actual fighting. It requires a remarkable will to believe to convert Aptheker's data into a continuous state of open class war between masters and slaves over a period of two and a half centuries.

A slave revolt is no doubt extremely difficult to plan and carry out — only professors in their study find it easy. Yet certain exploited groups have revolted, persistently and not without success, under no less difficult conditions: I am thinking of Spartan helots and of colonial peoples in our own day. I have suggested elsewhere (and cannot develop the point here) that the social structures of the helot and the modern colonial communities explain the exceptions, not, as is sometimes argued, relative harshness or mildness of treatment. The slaves in the Spanish silver mines under Roman rule were treated even more harshly than Spartan helots, but they did not revolt. The slaves in the city of Rome were treated less harshly than Spartan helots, but they did not revolt. Frederick Douglass, whose book, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, published in 1855, is the most penetrating analysis ever to have come from an ex-slave, wrote as follows:

Beat and cuff your slave, keep him hungry and spiritless, and he will follow the chain of his master like a dog; but feed and clothe him well, — work him moderately, — surround him with physical comfort, — and dreams of freedom intrude. Give him a *bad* master, and he aspires to a *good* master; give him a good master, and he wishes to become his *own* master.

That is too neat to be wholly accurate, but it points clearly to the complexity of slave psychology. Nor is the choice solely between obedience and rebelliousness. Oscar Wilde put his finger on the deeper strata of the problem when he wrote in his essay, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, "To the thinker, the most tragic fact in the whole of the French Revolution is not that Marie Antoinette was killed for being a queen, but that the starved peasants of the Vendée voluntarily went out to die for the hideous cause of feudalism." Nor was that a unique instance: slaves have helped defend cities in a siege, rebellious Spartan helots also fought in Spartan armies at times, even in expeditionary forces abroad — examples can be multiplied. Force and terror have never been sufficient by themselves to maintain an autocracy or a slave system or any other form of open authority and exploitation over large numbers of people for an extended period. Force and terror require the buttress of ideology.

It is precisely the serious investigation of the complex ideology of the slaves — I shall confine myself to slaves henceforth — which distinguishes the new historiography of slavery from the old. For antiquity, unfortunately, there is virtually no evidence (with the exception of religion, to which I shall return briefly). There were no Greek or Roman Frederick Douglasses. It is notorious that the few writers of antiquity who had a personal background of enslavement show no trace of that experience in their surviving works, not a scrap to distinguish them from the over-

whelming majority of writers, whose background was in the slaveowning classes. That is as true of the plays of Terence or of the *Moral Discourses* of Epictetus, the one probably, the other certainly, an ex-slave, as of the poems of Horace, himself born a free man but of a father who had been a slave. Perhaps that great character of fiction, Trimalchio in the *Satyricon* of Petronius, might be thought an exception. Trimalchio is the *reductio ad absurdum* of the successful freedman; he looks back from time to time on his period of enslavement, only to reminisce about the ways in which an ambitious Figaro-kind of slave could make his way in the world; and he now treats his own slaves exactly as his master and mistress had once treated *him*. That no doubt reflects one kind of slave, but a very rare kind.

The historian of antiquity is therefore reduced to comparative study, to such comfort as he can obtain from analogies in modern slavery. In the New World, historians in the last two decades have unearthed a mass of evidence and have applied varied, sophisticated techniques of analysis. Yet the disagreement is wide, the debate virulent. There is no agreement even on so apparently simple a question, To what extent, how systematically and how ideologically (so to speak) did slaves pilfer? Nothing is more difficult than ideology to translate into quantitative or otherwise agreed answers to propositions. What is agreed, by and large, is that the slaves as a class somehow accommodated themselves to their mode of existence: as a class, that is to say that the open rebels, the fugitives, the psychotic withdrawers, and so on, were never more than a small minority, who may have frightened the slaveowners but did not disturb the system. How they achieved this accommodation is still an open question, with answers ranging, in crude terms, from the Sambo stereotype to the Horatio Alger stereotype. On any answer, however, the centrality of religion is generally acknowledged: it is symbolized in the very title of Genovese's book, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. As I indicated earlier, we now know that religion was also a most important, though hitherto unrecognized, factor among the slaves of antiquity.

The ideology of the masters appears to be much more easily comprehended, but I am not certain that this is not an illusion. A popular defence among the Portuguese for their leading part in the African slave trade was that by enslaving Africans they saved them body and soul: they saved them from being ate by cannibals and they saved their souls by baptizing them. One inevitably laughs at such crudities, but is it any cruder than the ideology justifying the Nazi death camps? To the proverbial man from Mars, large-scale reduction of human beings to chattels must seem an incredible kind of behaviour. Yet not only millions of men and women, in very different societies, owned, bought and sold, beaten and exploited human chattels, but many more millions, though not themselves directly involved, tolerated that behaviour in others and often profited from it. "Some armchair revolutionaries," Robert Fogel has said, "will persist in finding fault with U.S. slaves for not having duplicated the feat of the Haitian slaves. If scapegoats must be found, they would be better sought among those ruling circles of the North whose collaboration with the slaveholders helped stave off the crisis that eventually erupted in the Civil

War.”<sup>12</sup> Northern abolitionists were always a small minority, and even among the Quakers, who gave the lead, more than a century of hawing preceded their final commitment to abolitionism. Yet the ruling circles of the North were not born sadists, any more than were the Liverpool merchants who built their fortunes on the slave trade.

There is a suggestive tale by Herodotus (4.1-4) which is paradigmatic. The Scythians — so goes the tale — had invaded the land of the Medes in the course of the sixth century B.C., and remained there for twenty-eight years. The inevitable followed: a new generation of men grew up in Scythia, the progeny of the Scythian women who had been left behind and of their male slaves. When the Scythians finally returned from Media, the new generation, only too conscious of their dubious origin, resisted them with arms. Continual fighting, concentrated in the northeastern corner of the Crimea, produced no results, until one day a Scythian realised that they were employing the wrong tactics. We are merely getting ourselves killed, he said, and at the same time we are killing our own slaves. Let us abandon our arms and each take a whip in his hand. “So long as they see us with arms, they think themselves our equals and of equal birth. But once they see us with whips instead of arms, they will understand that they are our slaves, and, appreciating that, they will not resist.” And so it came to pass. At sight of the massed Scythians with their whips, the slaves promptly gave up and fled.

We are not obligated to believe the story. But we are obligated, I think, to believe that it reflects a common viewpoint, a frame of mind. Whatever a few philosophers may have said to the contrary, most Greeks and Romans agreed with Herodotus that slaves as a class were inferior beings, inferior by their nature. So did most of the free inhabitants of Brazil, Jamaica or the southern states of the United States. I suggest that such a belief was psychologically necessary to the slaveholder class (among whom I include the many who were too poor to possess slaves themselves), as it was implicit in the rule that the slave must be an outsider. Skin colour of course added a further dimension, but racism does not require that stigma, as contemporary history has demonstrated. And from that ideological foundation, a chain reaction of attitudes inevitably follows. It was the law in Rome, for example, that if a master was killed by one of his household slaves, they must all be put to death, on the argument that they had been at least passively cooperating. Even so humane a man as the younger Pliny came to its defence: “There,” he wrote to a friend (*Letters* 3.14), “you see the dangers, outrages and insults to which we are exposed. No master can feel safe just because he is kind and considerate.”

<sup>12</sup> R.W. FOGEL, “Cliometrics and Culture: Some Recent Developments in the Historiography of Slavery,” *Journal of Social History*, 11 (1977): 34-51, p. 40. The Haitian revolt was anyway unique; it was headed by free blacks and mulattoes and it was in effect a by-product of the French Revolution. See C.L.R. JAMES, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1963).

That is the area — the psychology and ideology of slavery — which seems to me most urgently in need of continued inquiry, more than the economics of slavery. The economics belongs to the dead past, the psychology to the living present. That is my answer to “What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba that he should weep for her?”