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WAS GREEK CIVILISATION BASED ON SLAVE LABOUR?

I

Two generalisations may be made at the outset. First: at all times and in all places the Greek world relied on some form (or forms) of dependent labour to meet its needs, both public and private. By this I mean that dependent labour was essential, in a significant measure, if the requirements of agriculture, trade, manufacture, public works, and war production were to be fulfilled. And by dependent labour I mean work performed under compulsions other than those of kinship or communal obligations.[1] Second: with the rarest of exceptions, there were always substantial numbers of free men engaged in productive labour. By this I mean primarily not free hired labour but free men working on their own (or leased) land or in their shops or homes as craftsmen and shopkeepers. It is within the framework created by these two generalisations that the questions must be asked which seek to locate slavery in the society. And by slavery, finally, I mean the status in which a man is, in the eyes of the law and of public opinion and with respect to all parties, a possession, a chattel, of another man.[2]

How completely the Greeks always took slavery for granted as one of the facts of human existence is abundantly evident to anyone who has read their literature. In the Homeric poems it is assumed (correctly) that captive women will be taken home as slaves, and that occasional male slaves – the victims of Phoenician merchant-pirates – will also be on hand. In the early seventh century BC, when Hesiod, the Boeotian 'peasant' poet, gets down to practical advice in his *Works and Days*, he tells his brother how to use slaves properly; that they will be available is simply assumed. The same is true of Xenophon's manual for the gentleman farmer, the *Oeconomicus*, written about 375 BC. A few years earlier, an Athenian cripple who was appealing a decision dropping him from the dole, said to the Council: 'I have a trade which brings me in a little,

Originally published in *Historia* 8 (1959) 145–64. I have reduced the annotation considerably to eliminate now outdated debates.

but I can hardly work at it myself and I cannot afford to buy someone to replace myself in it' (Lysias 24.6). In the first book of the Pseudo-Aristotelian *Oeconomica*, a Peripatetic work probably of the late fourth or early third century BC, we find the following proposition about the organisation of the household, stated as baldly and flatly as it could possibly be done: 'Of property, the first and most necessary kind, the best and most manageable, is man. Therefore the first step is to procure good slaves. Of slaves there are two kinds, the overseer and the worker (1344a22). Polybius, discussing the strategic situation of Byzantium (4.38.4), speaks quite casually of 'the necessities of life – cattle and slaves' which come from the Black Sea region. And so on.

The Greek language had an astonishing range of vocabulary for slaves, unparalleled in my knowledge.[3] In the earliest texts, Homer and Hesiod, there were two basic words for slave, *dmos* and *doulos*, used without any discoverable distinction between them, and both with uncertain etymologies. *Dmos* died out quickly, surviving only in poetry, whereas *doulos* remained the basic word, so to speak, all through Greek history, and the root on which there were built such words as *douleia*, 'slavery'. But Homer already has, in one possibly interpolated passage (*Iliad* 7.475), the word (in the plural form) *andrapoda* ('man-footed' = human being) which became very common, having been constructed on the model of *tetrapoda* ('four-footed' = animal). These words were strictly servile, except in such metaphors as 'the Athenians enslaved the allies'. But there was still another group which could be used for both slaves and free men, depending on the context. Three of them are built on the household root, *oikos – oikeus, oiketes*, and *oikiatas* – and the pattern of usage is variegated and complicated. For example, these *oikos*-words sometimes meant merely 'servant' or 'slave' generally, and sometimes, though less often, they indicated narrower distinctions, such as house-born slave (as against purchased) or privately owned (as against royal in the Hellenistic context).[4]

If we think of ancient society as made up of a spectrum of statuses, with the free citizen at one end and the slave at the other, and with a considerable number of shades of dependence in between, we shall quickly discover different 'lines' on the spectrum: the Spartan helot (with such parallels as the *penestes* of Thessaly); the debt-bondsman, who was not a slave although under some conditions he could eventually be sold into slavery abroad; the conditionally manumitted slave; and, finally, the freedman. These categories rarely, if ever, appeared concurrently within the same community, nor were they equal in importance or equally

significant in all periods of Greek history. By and large, the slave proper was the decisive figure (to the virtual exclusion of the others) in the economically and politically advanced communities; whereas helotage and debt-bondage were to be found in the more archaic communities, whether in Crete or Sparta or Thessaly at an even late date, or in Athens in its pre-Solonian period. There is also some correlation, though by no means a perfect one, between the various categories of dependent labour and their function. Slavery was the most flexible of the forms, adaptable to all kinds and levels of activity, whereas helotage and the rest were best suited to agriculture, pasturage, and household service, much less so to manufacture and trade.

II

With little exception, there was no activity, productive or unproductive, public or private, pleasant or unpleasant, which was not performed by slaves at some times and in some places in the Greek world. The major exception was, of course, political: no slave held public office or sat on the deliberative and judicial bodies (though slaves were commonly employed in the 'civil service', as secretaries and clerks, and as policemen and prison attendants). Slaves did not fight as a rule, either, unless freed (although helots apparently did), and they were very rare in the liberal professions, including medicine. On the other side, there was no activity which was not performed by free men at some times and in some places. That is sometimes denied, but the denial rests on a gross error, namely, the failure to differentiate between a free man working for himself and one working for another, for hire. In the Greek scale of values, the crucial test was not so much the nature of the work (within limits, of course) as the condition or status under which it was carried on.[5] 'The condition of the free man', said Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 1367a32) 'is that he does not live under the constraint of another.' On this point, Aristotle was expressing a nearly universal Greek notion. Although we find free Greeks doing every kind of work, the free wage-earner, the free man who regularly works for another and therefore 'lives under the constraint of another' is a rare figure in the sources, and he surely was a minor factor in the picture.[6]

The basic economic activity was, of course, agriculture. Throughout Greek history, the overwhelming majority of the population had its main wealth in the land. And the majority were smallholders, depending on their own labour, the labour of other members of the family, and the

occasional assistance (as in time of harvest) of neighbours and casual hired hands. Some proportion of these smallholders owned a slave, or even two, but we cannot possibly determine what the proportion was, and in this sector the whole issue is clearly not of the greatest importance. But the large landholders, a minority though they were, constituted the political (and often the intellectual) elite of the Greek world; our evidence reveals remarkably few names of any consequence whose economic base was outside the land. This landholding elite tended to become more and more of an absentee group in the course of Greek history; but early or late, whether they sat on their estates or in the cities, dependent labour worked their land as a basic rule (even when allowance is made for tenancy). In some areas it took the form of helotage, and in the archaic period, of debt-bondage, but generally the form was outright slavery.

I am aware, of course, that this view of slavery in Greek agriculture is contested. Nevertheless, I accept the evidence of the line of authors whom I have already cited, from Hesiod to the pseudo-Aristotelian *Oeconomica*. These are all matter-of-fact writings, not utopias or speculative statements of what ought to be. If slavery was not the customary labour form on the larger holdings, then I cannot imagine what Hesiod or Xenophon or the Peripatetic were doing, or why any Greek bothered to read their works.[7] One similar piece of evidence is worth adding. There was a Greek harvest festival called the Kronia, which was celebrated in Athens and other places (especially among the Ionians). One feature, says the Athenian chronicler Philochorus, was that 'the heads of families ate the crops and fruits at the same table with their slaves, with whom they had shared the labours of cultivation. For the god is pleased with this honour from the slaves in contemplation of their labours.'[8] Neither the practice nor Philochorus' explanation of it makes any sense whatever if slavery was as unimportant in agriculture as some modern writers pretend.

I had better be perfectly clear here: I am not saying that slaves outnumbered free men in agriculture, or that the bulk of farming was done by slaves, but that slavery dominated agriculture in so far as it was on a scale that transcended the labour of the householder and his sons. Nor am I suggesting that there was no hired free labour; rather that there was little of any significance. Among the slaves, furthermore, were the overseers, invariably so if the property was large enough or if the owner was an absentee. 'Of slaves,' said the author of the *Oeconomica*, 'there are two kinds, the overseer and the worker.'

In mining and quarrying the situation was decisively one-sided. There were free men, in Athens for example, who leased such small mining concessions that they were able to work them alone. The moment, however, additional labour was introduced (and that was by far the more common case), it seems always to have been slave. The largest individual holdings of slaves in Athens were workers in the mines, topped by the one thousand reported to have been leased out for this purpose by the fifth-century general Nicias.[9] It has been suggested, indeed, that at one point there may have been as many as thirty thousand slaves at work in the Athenian silver mines and processing mills.[10]

Manufacture was like agriculture in that the choice was (even more exclusively) between the independent craftsman working alone or with members of his family and the owner of slaves. The link with slavery was so close (and the absence of free hired labour so complete), that Demosthenes, for example, could say 'they caused the *ergasterion* (workshop) to disappear' and then he could follow, as an exact synonym and with no possible misunderstanding, by saying that 'they caused the slaves to disappear'.[11] On the other hand, the proportion of operations employing slaves, as against the independent self-employed craftsmen, was probably greater than in agriculture, and in this respect more like mining. In commerce and banking, subordinates were invariably slaves, even in such posts as 'bank manager'. However the numbers were small.

In the domestic field, finally, we can take it as a rule that any free man who possibly could afford one, owned a slave attendant who accompanied him when he walked abroad in the town or when he travelled (including his military service), and also a slave woman for the household chores. There is no conceivable way of estimating how many such free men there were, or how many owned numbers of domestics, but the fact is taken for granted so completely and so often in the literature that I strongly believe that many owned slaves even when they could not afford them. (Modern parallels will come to mind readily.) I stress this for two reasons. First, the need for domestic slaves, often an unproductive element, should serve as a cautionary sign when one examines such questions as efficiency and cost of slave labour. Secondly, domestic slavery was by no means entirely unproductive. In the countryside in particular, but also in the towns, two important industries would often be in their hands in the larger households, on a straight production for household consumption basis. I refer to baking and textile making, and every medievalist, at least, will at once grasp the

significance of the withdrawal of the latter from market production, even if the withdrawal was far from complete.

It would be very helpful if we had some idea how many slaves there were in any given Greek community to carry on all this work, and how they were divided among the branches of the economy. Unfortunately we have no reliable figures, and none at all for most of the *poleis*. What I consider to be the best computations for Athens suggest that the total of slaves reached 60–80,000 in peak periods in the fifth and fourth centuries BC.[12] Athens had the largest population in the classical Greek world and the largest number of slaves. Thucydides (8.40.2) said that there were more slaves in his day on the island of Chios than in any other Greek community except Sparta, but I suggest that he was thinking of the density of the slave population measured against the free, not of absolute totals (and in Sparta he meant the helots, not chattel slaves). Other places, such as Aegina or Corinth, may at one time or another also have had a higher ratio of slaves than Athens. And there were surely communities in which the slaves were less dense.

More than that we can scarcely say about the numbers, but I think that is really enough. There is too much tendentious discussion of numbers in the literature already, as if a mere count of heads is the answer to all the complicated questions which flow from the existence of slavery. The Athenian figures I mentioned amount to an average of no less than three or four slaves to each free household (including all free men in the calculation, whether citizen or not). But even the smallest figure anyone has suggested, 20,000 slaves in Demosthenes' time[13] – altogether too low in my opinion – would be roughly equivalent to one slave for each adult citizen, no negligible ratio. Within very broad limits, the numbers are irrelevant to the question of significance. When Starr, for example, objects to 'exaggerated guesses' and replies that 'the most careful estimates . . . reduce the proportion of slaves to far less than half the population, probably one third or one quarter at most',[14] he is proving far less than he thinks. No one seriously believes that slaves did all the work in Athens (or anywhere else in Greece except for Sparta with its helots), and one merely confuses the issues when one pretends that somehow a reduction of the estimates to only a third or a quarter of the population is crucial. In 1860, according to official census figures, slightly less than one-third of the total population of the American slave states were slaves. Furthermore, 'nearly three-fourths of all free Southerners had no connection with slavery through either family ties or direct ownership. The "typical" Southerner was not only a small farmer but also a non-slaveholder.'[15] Yet no one would think of denying that slavery was a decisive element in southern society. The analogy seems obvious for ancient Greece, where, it can be shown, ownership of slaves was even more widely spread among the free men and the use of slaves much more diversified, and where the estimates do not give a ratio significantly below the American one. Simply stated, there can be no denial that there were enough slaves about for them to be, of necessity, an integral factor in the society.

There were two main sources of supply. One was captives, the victims of war and sometimes piracy. One of the few generalisations about the ancient world to which there is no exception is this, that the victorious power had absolute right over the persons and the property of the vanquished.[16] This right was not exercised to its full extent every time, but it was exercised often enough, and on a large enough scale, to throw a continuous and numerous supply of men, women, and children on to the slave market. Alongside the captives we must place the so-called barbarians who came into the Greek world in a steady stream – Thracians, Scythians, Cappadocians, etc. – through the activity of full-time traders, much like the process by which African slaves reached the new world in more modern times. Many were victims of wars among the barbarians themselves. Others came peacefully, so to speak: Herodotus (5.6) says that the Thracians sold their children for export. The first steps all took place outside the Greek orbit, and our sources tell us virtually nothing about them, but there can be no doubt that large numbers and a steady supply were involved, for there is no other way to explain such facts as the high proportion of Paphlagonians and Thracians among the slaves in the Attic silver mines, many of them specialists, or the corps of Scythian archers (slaves owned by the state) who constituted the Athenian police force.

Merely to complete the picture, we must list penal servitude and the exposure of unwanted children. Beyond mere mention, however, they can be ignored because they were negligible in their importance. There then remains one more source, breeding, and that is a puzzle. One reads in the modern literature that there was very little breeding of slaves (as distinct from helots and the like) among the Greeks because, under their conditions, it was cheaper to buy slaves than to raise them. I am not altogether satisfied with the evidence for this view, and I am altogether dissatisfied with the economics which is supposed to justify it. There were conditions under which breeding was certainly rare, but for reasons which have nothing to do with economics. In the mines, for

example, nearly all the slaves were men, and that is the explanation, simply enough. But what about domestics, among whom the proportion of women was surely high? I must leave the question unanswered, except to remove one fallacy. It is sometimes said that there is a demographic law that no slave population ever reproduces itself, that they must always be replenished from outside. Such a law is a myth: that can be said categorically on the evidence of the southern states, evidence which is statistical and reliable.

III

The impression one gets is clearly that the majority of the slaves were foreigners. That is to say, it was the rule (apart from debt-bondage) that Athenians were never kept as slaves in Athens, or Corinthians in Corinth. However, I am referring to the more basic sense, that the majority were not Greeks at all, but men and women from the races living outside the Greek world. It is idle to speculate about the proportions here, but there cannot be any reasonable doubt about the majority. In some places, such as the Laurium silver mines in Attica, this meant relatively large concentrations in a small area. The number of Thracian slaves in Laurium in Xenophon's time, for example, was greater than the total population of some of the smaller Greek city-states.

No wonder some Greeks came to identify slaves and barbarians (a synonym for all non-Greeks). The most serious effort, so far as we know, to justify this view as part of the natural arrangement of things, will be found in the first book of Aristotle's *Politics*. It was not a successful effort for several reasons, of which the most obvious is the fact, as Aristotle himself conceded, that too many were slaves 'by accident', by the chance of warfare or shipwreck or kidnapping. In the end, natural slavery was abandoned as a formal concept, defeated by the pragmatic view that slavery was a fact of life, a conventional institution universally practised. As the Roman jurist Florentinus phrased it, 'Slavery is an institution of the *ius gentium* (law of all nations) whereby someone is subject to the *dominium* of another, contrary to nature.'[17] That view (and even sharper formulations) can be traced back to the sophistic literature of the fifth century BC, and, in a less formal way, to Greek tragedy. I chose Florentinus to quote instead because his definition appears in the *Digest*, in which slavery is so prominent that the Roman law of slavery has been called 'the most characteristic part of the most characteristic intellectual product of Rome'.[18] Nothing illustrates more perfectly the inability of the

ancient world to imagine that there could be a civilised society without slaves.

The Greek world was one of endless debate and challenge. Among the intellectuals, no belief or idea was self-evident: every conception and every institution sooner or later came under attack – religious beliefs, ethical values, political systems, aspects of the economy, even such bedrock institutions as the family and private property. Slavery, too, up to a point, but that point was invariably a good distance short of abolitionist proposals. Plato, who criticised society more radically than any other thinker, did not concern himself much with the question in the *Republic*, but even there he assumed the continuance of slavery. And in the *Laws*, 'the number of passages . . . that deal with slavery is surprisingly large' and the tenor of the legislation is generally more severe than the actual law of Athens at that time. 'Their effect, on the one hand, is to give greater authority to masters in the exercise of rule over slaves, and on the other hand to accentuate the distinction between slave and free man.' Paradoxically, neither were the believers in the brotherhood of man (whether Cynic, Stoic, or early Christian) opponents of slavery. In their eyes, all material concerns, including status, were a matter of essential indifference. Diogenes, it is said, was once seized by pirates and taken to Crete to be sold. At the auction, he pointed to a certain Corinthian among the buyers and said: 'Sell me to him; he needs a master.'[20]

The question must then be faced, how much relevance has all this for the majority of Greeks, for those who were neither philosophers nor wealthy men of leisure? What did the little man think about slavery? It is no answer to argue that we must not take 'the political theorists of the philosophical schools too seriously as having established "the main line of Greek thought concerning slavery"'.[21] No one pretends that Plato and Aristotle speak for all Greeks. But, equally, no one should pretend that lower-class Greeks necessarily rejected everything which we read in Greek literature and philosophy, simply because, with virtually no exceptions, the poets and philosophers were men of the leisure class. The history of ideology and belief is not so simple. It is a commonplace that the little man shares the ideals and aspirations of his betters – in his dreams if not in the hard reality of his daily life. By and large, the vast majority in all periods of history have always taken the basic institutions of society for granted. Men do not, as a rule, ask themselves whether monogamous marriage or a police force or machine production is necessary to their way of life. They accept them as facts, as self-evident. Only

when there is a challenge from one source or another – from outside or from catastrophic famine or plague – do such facts become questions.

A large section of the Greek population was always on the edge of marginal subsistence. They worked hard for their livelihood and could not look forward to economic advancement as a reward for their labours; on the contrary, if they moved at all, it was likely to be downward. Famines, plagues, wars, political struggles, all were a threat, and social crisis was a common enough phenomenon in Greek history. Yet through the centuries no ideology of labour appeared, nothing that can in any sense be counterpoised to the negative judgments with which the writings of the leisure class are filled. There was neither a word in the Greek language with which to express the general notion of labour, nor the concept of labour 'as a general social function'.[22] There was plenty of grumbling, of course, and there was pride of craftsmanship. Men could not survive psychologically without them. But neither developed into a belief: grumbling was not turned into a punishment for sin – 'In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread' – nor pride of craftsmanship into the virtue of labour, into the doctrine of the calling or anything comparable. The nearest to either will be found in Hesiod's *Works and Days*, and in this context the decisive fact about Hesiod is his unquestioning assumption that the farmer will have proper slave labour.

That was all there was to the poor man's counter-ideology: we live in the iron age when 'men never rest from toil and sorrow by day, and from perishing by night'; therefore it is better to toil than to idle and perish – but if we can we too will turn to the labour of slaves. Hesiod may not have been able, even in his imagination, to think beyond slavery as *supplementary* to his own labour, but that was the seventh century, still the early days of slavery. About 400 BC, however, Lysias' crippled client could make the serious argument (24.6) in the Athenian Council that he required a dole because he could not afford a slave as a *replacement*. And half a century later Xenophon put forth a scheme whereby every citizen could be maintained by the state, chiefly from revenues to be derived from publicly owned slaves working in the mines.[23]

When talk turned to action, even when crisis turned into civil war and revolution, slavery remained unchallenged. With absolute regularity, all through Greek history, the demand was 'Cancel debts and redistribute the land.' Never, to my knowledge, do we hear a protest from the free poor, not even in the deepest crises, against slave competition. There are no complaints – as there might well have been – that slaves deprive free man of a livelihood, or compel free men to work for lower wages and

longer hours.[24] There is nothing remotely resembling a workers' programme, no wage demands, no talk of working conditions or government employment measures or the like. In a city like Athens there was ample opportunity. The *demos* had power, enough of them were poor, and they had leaders. But economic assistance took the form of pay for public office and for rowing in the fleet, free admission to the theatre (the so-called theoric fund), and various minor doles; while economic legislation was restricted to imports and exports, weights and measures, price controls. Not even the wildest of the accusations against the demagogues – and they were wholly unrestrained as every reader of Aristophanes or Plato knows – ever suggested anything which would hint at a working-class interest, or an anti-slavery bias.

Nor did the free poor take the other possible tack of joining with the slaves in a common struggle on a principled basis. The Solonic revolution in Athens at the beginning of the sixth century BC, for example, brought an end to debt-bondage and the return of Athenians who had been sold into slavery abroad, but not the emancipation of others, non-Athenians, who were in slavery in Athens. Centuries later, when the great wave of slave revolts came after 140 BC, starting in the Roman west and spreading to the Greek east, the free poor on the whole simply stood apart. It was no issue of theirs, they seem to have thought; correctly so, for the outcome of the revolts promised them nothing one way or the other. Numbers of free men may have taken advantage of the chaos to enrich themselves personally, by looting or otherwise. Essentially that is what they did, when the opportunity arose, in a military campaign, nothing more. The slaves were, in a basic sense, irrelevant to their behaviour at that moment.[25]

In 464 BC a great helot revolt broke out, and in 462 Athens dispatched a hoplite force under Cimon to help the Spartans suppress it. When the revolt ended, after nearly five years, a group of the rebels were permitted to escape, and it was Athens which provided them refuge, settling them in Naupactus. A comparable shift took place in the first phase of the Peloponnesian War. In 425 the Athenians seized Pylos, a harbour on the west coast of the Peloponnese. The garrison was a small one and Pylos was by no means an important port. Nevertheless, Sparta was so frightened that she soon sued for peace, because the Athenian foothold was a dangerous centre of infection, inviting desertion and eventual revolt among the Messenian helots. Athens finally agreed to peace in 421, and immediately afterwards concluded an alliance with Sparta, one of the terms of which was: 'Should the slave-class rise in rebellion, the

Athenians will assist the Spartans with all their might, according to their power.'[26]

Obviously the attitude of one city to the slaves of another lies largely outside our problem. Athens agreed to help suppress helots when she and Sparta were allies; she encouraged helot revolts when they were at war. That reflects elementary tactics, not a judgment about slavery. Much the same kind of distinction must be made in the instances, recurring in Spartan history, when helots were freed as pawns in an internal power struggle. So, too, of the instances which were apparently not uncommon in fourth-century Greece, but about which nothing concrete is known other than the clause in the agreement between Alexander and the Hellenic League, binding the members to guarantee that 'there shall be no killing or banishment contrary to the laws of each city, no confiscation of property, no redistribution of land, no cancellation of debts, no freeing of slaves for purposes of revolution'.[27] These were mere tactics again. Slaves were resources, and they could be useful in a particular situation. But only a number of specific slaves, those who were available at the precise moment; not slaves in general, or all slaves, and surely not slaves in the future. Some slaves were freed, but slavery remained untouched. Exactly the same behaviour can be found in the reverse case, when a state (or ruling class) called upon its slaves to help protect it. Often enough in a military crisis, slaves were freed, conscripted into the army or navy, and called upon to fight.[28] And again the result was that some slaves were freed while the institution continued exactly as before.

In sum under certain conditions of crisis and tension the society (or a sector of it) was faced with a conflict within its system of values and beliefs. It was sometimes necessary, in the interest of national safety or of a political programme, to surrender the normal use of, and approach to, slaves. When this happened, the institution itself survived without any noticeable weakening. The fact that it happened is not without significance; it suggests that among the Greeks, even in Sparta, there was not that deep-rooted and often neurotic horror of the slaves known in other societies, which would have made the freeing and arming of slaves *en masse*, for whatever purpose, a virtual impossibility. It suggests, further, something about the slaves themselves. Some did fight for their masters, and that is not unimportant.

Nothing is more elusive than the psychology of the slave. Even when, as in the American South, there seems to be a lot of material – autobiographies of ex-slaves, impressions of travellers from non-slaveholding

societies, and the like – no unambiguous picture emerges. For antiquity there is scarcely any evidence at all, and the bits are indirect and tangential, and far from easy to interpret. Thus, a favourite apology is to invoke the fact that, apart from very special instances as in Sparta, the record shows neither revolts of slaves nor a fear of uprisings. Even if the facts are granted, the rosy conclusion does not follow. Slaves have scarcely ever revolted, even in the southern states.[29] A large-scale rebellion is impossible to organise and carry through except under very unusual circumstances. The right combination appeared but once in ancient history, during two generations of the late Roman Republic, when there were great concentrations of slaves in Italy and Sicily, many of them almost completely unattended and unguarded, many others professional fighters (gladiators), and when the whole society was in turmoil, with a very marked breakdown of social and moral values.[30]

At this point it is necessary to recall that helots differed in certain key respects from chattel slaves. First, they had the necessary ties of solidarity that come from kinship and nationhood, intensified by the fact, not to be underestimated, that they were not foreigners but a subject people working their own lands in a state of servitude. This complex was lacking among the slaves of the Greek world. The Peripatetic author of the *Oeconomica* made the sensible recommendation that neither an individual nor a city should have many slaves of the same nationality.[31] Secondly, the helots had property rights of a kind: the law, at least, permitted them to retain everything they produced beyond the fixed deliveries to their masters. Third, they outnumbered the free population on a scale without parallel in other Greek communities. These are the peculiar factors, in my opinion, which explain the revolts of the helots and the persistent Spartan concern with the question, more than Spartan cruelty.[32] It is a fallacy to think that the threat of rebellion increases automatically with an increase in misery and oppression. Hunger and torture destroy the spirit; at most they stimulate efforts at flight or other forms of purely individual behaviour (including betrayal of fellow-victims), whereas revolt requires organisation and courage and persistence. Frederick Douglass, who in 1855 wrote the most penetrating analysis to come from an ex-slave, summed up the psychology in these words: '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 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.'[33]

There are many ways, other than revolt, in which slaves can protest.[34] In particular they can flee, and though we have no figures whatsoever, it seems safe to say that the fugitive slave was a chronic and sufficiently numerous phenomenon in the Greek cities. Thucydides estimated that more than 20,000 Athenian slaves fled in the final decade of the Peloponnesian War. In this they were openly encouraged by the Spartan garrison established in Decelea, and Thucydides makes quite a point of the operation. Obviously he thought the harm to Athens was serious, intensified by the fact that many were skilled workers.[35] My immediate concern is with the slaves themselves, not with Athens, and I should stress very heavily that so many skilled slaves (who must be presumed to have been, on the average, among the best treated) took the risk and tried to flee. The risk was no light one, at least for the barbarians among them: no Thracian or Carian wandering about the Greek countryside without credentials could be sure of what lay ahead in Boeotia or Thessaly. Indeed, there is a hint that these particular 20,000 and more may have been very badly treated after escaping under Spartan promise. A reliable fourth-century BC historian attributed the great Theban prosperity at the end of the fifth century to their having purchased very cheaply the slaves and other booty seized from the Athenians during the Spartan occupation of Decelea.[36] Although there is no way to determine whether this is a reference to the 20,000, the suspicion is obvious. Ethics aside, there was no power, within or without the law, which could have prevented the re-enslavement of fugitive slaves even if they had been promised their freedom.

The *Oeconomica* (1344a35) sums up the life of the slave as consisting of three elements: work, punishment, and food. And there are more than enough floggings, and even tortures, in Greek literature, from one end to the other. Apart from psychological quirks (sadism and the like), flogging means simply that the slave, as slave, must be goaded into performing the function assigned to him. So, too, do the various incentive plans which were frequently adopted. The efficient, skilled, reliable slave could look forward to managerial status. In the cities, in particular, he could often achieve a curious sort of quasi-independence, living and working on his own, paying a kind of rental to his owner, and accumulating earnings with which, ultimately, to purchase his freedom. Manumission was, of course, the greatest incentive of all. Again we are baffled by the absence of numbers, but it is undisputed that manumission was a common phenomenon in most of the Greek world. This is an important difference between the Greek slave on the one hand, and the helot or

American slave on the other. It is also important evidence about the degree of the slave's alleged 'acceptance' of his status.[37]

IV

It is now time to try to add all this up and form some judgment about the institution. This would be difficult enough to do under ordinary circumstances; it has become almost impossible because of two extraneous factors imposed by modern society. The first is the confusion of the historical study with moral judgments about slavery. We condemn slavery, and we are embarrassed for the Greeks, whom we admire so much; therefore we tend either to underestimate its role in their life, or we ignore it altogether, hoping that somehow it will quietly go away. The second factor is more political, and it goes back at least to 1848, when the *Communist Manifesto* declared that 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Free man and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another. . . .' Ever since, ancient slavery has been a battleground between Marxists and non-Marxists, a political issue rather than a historical phenomenon.

Now we observe that a sizable fraction of the population of the Greek world consisted of slaves, or other kinds of dependent labour, many of them barbarians; that by and large the elite in each city-state were men of leisure, completely free from any preoccupation with economic matters, thanks to a labour force which they bought and sold, over whom they had extensive property rights, and, equally important, what we may call physical rights; that the condition of servitude was one which no man, woman, or child, regardless of status or wealth, could be sure to escape in case of war or some other unpredictable and uncontrollable emergency. It seems to me that, seeing all this, if we could emancipate ourselves from the despotism of extraneous moral, intellectual, and political pressures, we would conclude, without hesitation, that slavery was a basic element in Greek civilisation.

Such a conclusion, however, should be the starting point of analysis, not the end of an argument, as it is so often at present. Perhaps it would be best to avoid the word 'basic' altogether, because it has been preempted as a technical term by the Marxist theory of history. Anyone else who used it in such a question as the one which is the title of this chapter, is compelled, by the intellectual (and political) situation in which we work,

to qualify the term at once, to distinguish between *a* basic institution and *the* basic institution. In effect what has happened is that, in the guise of a discussion of ancient slavery, there has been a desultory discussion of Marxist theory, none of it, on either side, particularly illuminating about either Marxism or slavery.[38] Neither our understanding of the historical process nor our knowledge of ancient society is significantly advanced by these repeated statements and counter-statements, affirmations and denials of the proposition, 'Ancient society was based on slave labour.' Nor have we gained much from the persistent debate about causes. Was slavery the cause of the decline of Greek science? or of loose sexual morality? or of the widespread contempt for gainful employment? These are essentially false questions, imposed by a naive kind of pseudo-scientific thinking.

The most fruitful approach, I suggest, is to think in terms of purpose, in Immanuel Kant's sense, or of function, as the social anthropologists use that concept. The question which is most promising for systematic investigation is not whether slavery was the basic element, or whether it caused this or that, but how it functioned. This eliminates the sterile attempts to decide which was historically prior, slavery or something else; it avoids imposing moral judgments on, and prior to, the historical analysis; and it should avoid the trap which I shall call the free-will error. There is a maxim of Emile Durkheim's that 'The voluntary character of a practice or an institution should never be assumed beforehand.'[39] Given the existence of slavery – and it is given, for our sources do not permit us to go back to a stage in Greek history when it did not exist – the choice facing individual Greeks was socially and psychologically imposed. In the *Memorabilia* Xenophon says that 'those who can do so buy slaves so that they may have fellow workers'. That sentence is often quoted to prove that some Greeks owned no slaves, which needs no proof. It is much better cited to prove that *those who can*, buy slaves – Xenophon clearly places this whole phenomenon squarely in the realm of necessity.

The question of function permits no single answer. There are as many answers as there are contexts: function in relation to what? And when? And where? Buckland begins his work on the Roman law of slavery by noting that there 'is scarcely a problem which can present itself, in any branch of law, the solution of which may not be affected by the fact that one of the parties to the transaction is a slave'.[40] That sums up the situation in its simplest, most naked form, and it is as correct a statement for Greek law as for Roman. Beyond that, I would argue, there is no

problem or practice in any branch of Greek life which was not affected, in some fashion, by the fact that many people in that society, even if not in the specific situation under consideration, were (or had been or might be) slaves. The connection was not always simple or direct, nor was the impact necessarily 'bad' (or 'good'). The historian's problem is precisely to uncover what the connections were, in all their concreteness and complexity, their goodness or badness or moral neutrality.

I think we will find that, more often than not, the institution of slavery turned out to be ambiguous in its function. Certainly the Greek attitudes to it were shot through with ambiguity, and not rarely with tension. To the Greeks, Nietzsche said, both labour and slavery were 'a necessary disgrace, of which one feels *ashamed*, as a disgrace and as a necessity at the same time'.[41] There was a lot of discussion: that is clear from the literature which has survived, and it was neither easy nor unequivocally one-sided, even though it did not end in abolitionism. In Roman law 'slavery is the only case in which, in the extant sources . . . , a conflict is declared to exist between the *Ius Gentium* and the *Ius Naturale*'.[42] In a sense, that was an academic conflict, since slavery went right on; but no society can carry such a conflict within it, around so important a set of beliefs and institutions, without the stresses erupting in some fashion no matter how remote and extended the lines and connections may be from the original stimulus. Perhaps the most interesting sign among the Greeks can be found in the proposals, and to an extent the practice in the fourth century BC, to give up the enslavement of Greeks.[43] They all came to nought in the Hellenistic world, and I suggest that this one fact reveals much about Greek civilisation after Alexander.[44].

It is worth calling attention to two examples pregnant with ambiguity, neither of which has received the attention it deserves. The first comes from Locris, the Greek colony in southern Italy, where descent was said to be matrilineal, an anomaly which Aristotle explained historically. The reason, he said, was that the colony was originally founded by slaves and their children by free women. Timaeus wrote a violent protest against this insulting account, and Polybius, in turn, defended Aristotle in a long digression (12.6a), of which unfortunately only fragments survive. One of his remarks is particularly worth quoting: 'To suppose, with Timaeus, that it was unlikely that men, who had been the slaves of the allies of the Spartans, would continue the kindly feelings and adopt the friendships of their late masters is foolish. For when they have had the good fortune to recover their freedom, and a certain time has elapsed, men, who had been slaves, not only endeavour to adopt the

friendships of their late masters, but also their ties of hospitality and blood; in fact, their aim is to keep them up even more than the ties of nature, for the express purpose of thereby wiping out the remembrance of their former degradation and humble position, because they wish to pose as the descendants of their masters rather than as their freedmen.'

In the course of his polemic Timaeus had said that 'it was not customary for the Greeks of early times to be served by bought slaves'.[45] This distinction, between slaves who were bought and slaves who were captured (or bred from captives), had severe moral overtones. Inevitably, as was their habit, the Greeks found a historical origin for the practice of buying slaves – in the island of Chios. The historian Theopompus, a native of the island, phrased it this way: 'The Chians were the first of the Greeks, after the Thessalians and Lacedaemonians, who used slaves. But they did not acquire them in the same manner as the latter; for the Lacedaemonians and Thessalians will be found to have derived their slaves from the Greeks who formerly inhabited the territory which they now possess, . . . calling them helots and *penestae*, respectively. But the Chians possessed barbarian slaves, for whom they paid a price.'[46] This quotation is preserved by Athenaeus, who was writing about 200 AD and who went on to comment that the Chians ultimately received divine punishment for their innovation. The stories he then tells, as evidence, are curious and interesting, but I cannot take time for them.

This is not very good history, but that does not make it any less important. By a remarkable coincidence Chios provides us with the earliest contemporary evidence of democratic institutions in the Greek world. In a Chian inscription dated, most probably, to the years 575–550 BC, there is unmistakable reference to a popular council and to the 'laws (or ordinances) of the *demos*'.[47] I do not wish to assign any significance other than symbolic to this coincidence, but it is a symbol with enormous implications. I have already made the point that, the more advanced the Greek city-state, the more it will be found to have had true slavery rather than the 'hybrid' types like helotage. More bluntly put, the cities in which individual freedom reached its highest expression – most obviously Athens – were cities in which chattel slavery flourished. The Greeks, it is well known, discovered both the idea of individual freedom and the institutional framework in which it could be realised.[48] The pre-Greek world – the world of the Sumerians, Babylonians, Egyptians, and Assyrians; and I cannot refrain from adding the Mycenaeans – was, in a very profound sense, a world without free men, in the sense in

which the west has come to understand that concept. It was equally a world in which chattel slavery played no role of any consequence. That, too, was a Greek discovery. One aspect of Greek history, in short, is the advance, hand in hand, of freedom *and* slavery.

25 – See e.g. Finley, *Studies in Land and Credit*, 113–17.
26 – See now Gauthier (1974) 207–15.
27 – See Humphreys (1974).
28 – See Garlan (1972); (1974).
29 – Perhaps I should say once again that tyrannies are excluded from this discussion.
30 – The fullest account is Pritchett (1971) chs. 1–2.
31 – Much is obscure on this subject. The fullest account will be found in Amit (1965); see also above, ch. 3.
32 – That it was not always possible is obvious, and it may be that the smaller, inland agricultural *poleis* were compelled to levy direct taxes regularly, as suggested by Pleket (1972) 252. However, I must protest the sporadic attempts to elevate a tiny handful of sources, as many Hellenistic and Roman as classical, into a falsification of the generalisation in my text.
33 – Although the *metoikion* was only a drachma a month (and half that for a woman), not a great financial burden, the psychological implication is none the less for that. Cf. the comment of Lord Hailey about modern Africa under European rule: 'It might almost be said that the African begins to be recognized as a member of civilized society when he becomes subject to the payment of income tax instead of poll tax.' *An African Survey*, Oxford University Press (1957) 643.
34 – Admittedly, such narratives as we have of the struggle against, and the overthrow of, tyrants have little or nothing to say about tax grievances. I suggest that they were nevertheless an important element because, in Athens, a point is specifically made of the Pisistratid tithe (Thucydides 6.54.5; Aristotle, *Constitution of Athens*, 16.4), which we know to have been abolished as soon as the tyranny was eliminated, and because of the direct taxes among the fiscal devices in Pseudo-Aristotle, *Oeconomica*, book 2.
35 – See Adkins (1972) ch. 5.
36 – Stroud (1971).
37 – See Latte (1920).
38 – See Stroud (1974).

6 – CIVILISATION AND SLAVE LABOUR

1 – I also exclude the 'economic compulsion' of the wage-labour system.
2 – It is not a valid objection to this working definition to point out either that a slave is biologically a man none the less, or that there were usually some pressures to give him a little recognition of his humanity, such as the privilege of asylum or the *de facto* privilege of marriage.
3 – I am not considering the local helotage words here, although the Greeks themselves customarily called such people 'slaves': see the two following chapters.
4 – I have given only some examples. On the regional and dialectal variations see Kretschmer (1930). On the interchangeability of the terms in classical Athenian usage see Lauffer (1955–6), I, 1104–8; cf. Kazakevich (1956).
5 – See Aymard (1948).
6 – This statement is not invalidated by the occasional sally which a smallholder or petty craftsman might make into the labour market to do three days' harvesting

or a week's work on temple construction; or by the presence in cities like Athens of an indeterminable number of men, almost all of them unskilled, who lived on odd jobs (when they were not rowing in the fleet, or otherwise occupied by the state), those, for example, who congregated daily at *Kolonos Misthios* (on which see Fuks (1951) 171–3). Nowhere in the sources do we hear of private establishments employing a staff of hired workers as their normal operation.
7 – Scholars who argue that slavery was unimportant in agriculture systematically ignore the *Hausvaterliteratur* (traditional literature on estate and household management) and similar evidence, while trying to prove their case partly by weak arguments from silence, partly by reference to the papyri. One cannot protest strongly enough against the latter procedure, since the agricultural regime in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt was not Greek; see Rostovtzeff (1953) I, 272–7. On Athens, see now Jameson (1977–8).
8 – Philochorus 328 F 97, quoted in Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, 1.10.22.
9 – Xenophon, *Poroi*, 4.14.
10 – Lauffer (1955–6) II, 904–16.
11 – Demosthenes 27.19; 28.12; see Finley, *Studies in Land and Credit*, 67. For another decisive text, see Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, 2.7.6.
12 – Lauffer (1955–6) II, 904–16.
13 – Jones (1957) 76–9.
14 – Starr (1958) 21–2.
15 – Stampp (1956) 29–30.
16 – See Aymard (1957).
17 – *Digest* 1.5.4.1.
18 – Buckland (1908) v.
19 – Morrow (1939) 11 and 127. Morrow effectively disproves the view that 'Plato at heart disapproved of slavery and in introducing it into the *Laws* was simply accommodating himself to his age' (pp. 129–30). Cf. Vlastos (1941) 293: 'There is not the slightest indication, either in the *Republic*, or anywhere else, that Plato means to obliterate or relax in any way' the distinction between slave and free labour.
20 – Diogenes Laertius 6.74. On the Cynics, Stoics, and Christians see Westermann (1955) 24–5, 39–40, 116–17, and 149–59.
21 – Westermann (1955) 14 n. 48.
22 – See Vernant (1965), part 4.
23 – Xenophon, *Poroi*, 4.33; cf. 6.1. The best examples of Utopian dreaming in this direction are, of course, provided by Aristophanes in *Ecclesiazusae*, 651–61 and *Plutus*, 510–26, but I refrain from discussing them because I wish to avoid the long argument about slavery in Attic comedy.
24 – This generalisation stands despite an isolated passage about the animosity aroused by Aristotle's friend Mnason (Timaeus 556 F 11 cited in Athenaeus 6.264D, 272B) which, whatever it means, cannot possibly refer to chattel slavery.
25 – See Vogt (1974) 53–7.
26 – The relevant passages in Thucydides are 4.41, 55, 80; 5.23.3; 7.26.2. The 'slave class' (*he douleia*) here meant the helots, of course. In my text, in the pages which follow immediately (on slaves in war), I also say 'slaves' to include helots, ignoring for the moment the distinction between them.
27 – Pseudo-Demosthenes 17.15. For earlier periods, cf. Herodotus 7.155 on

Syracuse and Thucydides 3.73 on Corcyra (and note that Thucydides does not return to the point or generalise about it in his final peroration on *stasis* and its evils).

28 – See Garlan (1972), (1974). Xenophon, *Poroi*, 4.42, uses the potential value of slaves as military and naval manpower as an argument in favour of his proposal to have the state buy thousands of slaves to be hired out in the mines.

29 – Stampp (1956) 132–40.

30 – Vogt (1974), ch. 3.

31 – Pseudo-Aristotle, *Oeconomica* 1344b18; cf. Plato, *Laws*, 6.777C–D; Aristotle, *Politics*, 1330a25–28.

32 – Note that Thucydides 8.40.2 makes the disproportionately large number of Chian slaves the key to their ill-treatment and their readiness to desert to the Athenians.

33 – Douglass (1855) 263–4, quoted from Stampp (1956) 89.

34 – Stampp (1956) ch. 3, 'A Troublesome Property', should be required reading on the subject.

35 – Note how Thucydides stressed the loss in anticipation (1.142.4; 6.91.7) before actually reporting it in 7.27.5.

36 – *Hellenica Oxyrhynchia* 12.4.

37 – The technical and aesthetic excellence of much work performed by slaves is, of course, visible in innumerable museums and archaeological sites. This is part of the complexity and ambiguity of the institution (discussed in section IV), which extended to the slaves themselves as well as to their masters.

38 – In the two decades since this essay was first published, some of the debate has become illuminating; see Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*, ch. 1.

39 – Durkheim (1950) 28.

40 – Buckland (1908) V.

41 – 'The Greek State: Preface to an Unwritten Book', in *Early Greek Philosophy and Other Essays*, ed. M. A. Mügge, London and Edinburgh (1911) 6.

42 – Buckland (1908) 1.

43 – See Kiechle (1958) for a useful collection of materials, often vitiated by a confusion between a fact and a moralising statement, and even more by special pleading.

44 – See Rostovtzeff (1953) I, 201–8.

45 – Timaeus 566 F 11, cited in Athenaeus 6.264C; cf. 272A–B.

46 – Theopompus 115 F 122, cited in Athenaeus 6.265B–C.

47 – R. Meiggs and D. Lewis, ed., *Greek Historical Inscriptions to the End of the Fifth Century B.C.*, no. 8.

48 – It is hardly necessary to add that 'freedom' is a term which, in the Greek context, was restricted to the members of the citizen-community, always a fraction, and sometimes a minor fraction of the total male population.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ADDENDUM

For additional bibliography see the works cited by M. I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (1980).

7 – BETWEEN SLAVERY AND FREEDOM

1 – The most important sources are Sophocles, *Trachiniae*, 68–72, 248–54, 274–6 (with *scholia*); Apollodorus, 2.6.2–3; Diodorus 4.31.5–8. See further the beginning of ch. 9 below.

2 – Daube (1947) 45; cf. the important monograph of Urbach (1963).

3 – Quoted by Aristotle, *Constitution of Athens*, 12.4.

4 – Vogt (1974), ch. 3.

5 – See Thompson (1952b).

6 – Pulleyblank (1958) 204–5.

7 – See, e.g., Stevenson (1943) 175–80.

8 – Scheil (1915) 1–13; cf. Petschow (1956) 63–5.

9 – See Lotze (1959), Pippidi (1973).

10 – See Lotze (1959), (1962), and ch. 8 below.

11 – Rostovtzeff (1953) I, 320.

12 – Frankfort et al. (1948) 250.

13 – Weber (1924) 99–107.

14 – This is substantially the scheme I have formulated in ch. 8 in this volume.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ADDENDUM

For additional bibliography see the works cited by M. I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (1980).

8 – SERVILE STATUSES

1 – See Kazakevich (1958).

2 – Collinet (1937).

3 – *Inscriptiones Creticae* IV 72, together with the so-called 'second code', ibid., IV 41, cited hereafter only by number, followed by column number in Roman numerals and line number in Arabic numerals.

4 – E.g. Willetts (1955) ch. 5–6. Lotze (1959) provides the best treatment which the subject has yet received. We are in substantial agreement on the points I make at the beginning of this section (though not on others, notably with regard to the status of the helots).

5 – Lipsius (1909) 397–9.

6 – There is an apparent exception in the provision about rape of a domestic (no. 72 II 11–16), on which see Gernet (1955) 57–9; Lotze (1959) 18–19. But the exception here, I believe, was created by the desire to give special legislative protection to female domestics – a common enough problem – and not by an essential juristic status distinction.

7 – No. 41 IV 6–14; no. 72 VII 10–15, III 52, IV 23, II 2–45, respectively.

8 – No. 72 IV 31–6.

9 – On this phrasing, which is used for both free women (no. 72 II 46–7, III 18–29, 25) and unfree (III 42–3) and which should not be confused with dowry, see Wolff (1957) 166–7.

10 – For a correct interpretation of no. 72 V 25–8, see Lotze (1959) 12–14; Lipsius (1909) 394–7. The possibility remains, of course, that manumission could alter the