HIST101

Midterm Exam

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**Primary Source Response**

(Selection of source 4.5, Hesiod, Works and Days c. 700 b.c.e.)

This primary source was written by Hesiod, a poet of ancient Greece. In this, we can see that Hesiod was likely what could be considered a citizen at the time, where he owns land, oxen, and slaves. The descriptions are centered around the management of a parcel of land replete with workers, which would indicate someone of higher economic status. He frequently describes the management of slaves during farming, speaking disdainfully about the need for micromanagement. There is further low respect for women, seen in suggesting choosing having a slave woman over a wife. These factors combined could indicate an individual that is representative of the male-dominated, slave-owning culture of ancient Greece.

The systems in which the excerpt would best apply would be in land management, agriculture, and social oppression. Hesiod is describing practices that he believes are best suited for the task of operating and running a farm. He explains the times of the year and the signs to be aware of that signal when certain events need to happen, as well as advice on performing tasks such as ploughing a field. Suggestions and advice are presented as common sense or necessary, as though this is an attempt at creating a simple farmer’s almanac for others to follow in ensuing years. This runs the undertone of a need for slavery in order to manage the farmlands and for companionship, which includes closely managing and manipulating slaves and others they see as less than themselves.

**Midterm Essay**

**Societal Oppression in Prominent Ancient Cultures**

How did different forms of societal oppression affect the cultures that fostered them? There have been countless examples of different types of oppressive tactics employed by societies throughout history, such as the caste system of Vedic age India, the citizenship of ancient democratic Greece, and the philosophies of Confucianism. Each of these systems provided a different attempt at organizing the different economic levels of their cultures, and each of them survived in some form or another nearly into the modern age. These methods of organization varied from exclusionary and brutal, to relatively inclusive and accepting, though all of them paid strict adherence to economic class levels. It can be argued that their ideals often greatly appealed to the general masses of the populace, which were then used to the advantage of the ruling classes to better maintain their control.

Systemic oppression was far from a trait reserved for any one nation or region of the world. Throughout history and even into today, there is still widespread oppression of peoples that live differently from the others of their own cultures. In ancient India starting as early as 1500 B.C.E., an infamous example of a social structure written with systemic organization and oppression in mind was developed and put into words. The Vedic age saw the development and implementation of the varna system, which evolved over the centuries to become what was labeled by Europeans as the “caste system.”

Vedic Age India was a time of blood- and marriage-related families that allied with one another through affiliated clans. Families and clans alike were dominated by male patriarchal systems, and women were treated not unlike objects owned by the family. For the purpose of maintaining the status quo of the social hierarchy, the powerful elites of the ages enforced a tiered system of categorization for their people. This process, like others in history, put the rich and powerful at the top, closely related to the gods, with a separation of military power between them and those dictated as the lower echelons.

This system produced a level of stability that allowed it to endure for thousands of years of ancient Indian history. In the *Rig Vedas*, which documents and puts into words the hymns that describe the varna system, the different levels are described as being part of a singular divine entity.[1](#RigVedas) This is meant to give value to each part of the social hierarchy, while not actually allowing for a change in the status quo between them. There is a clear preference to put those with military might close to those with high economic status, a further means to protect the interests of those controlling the system.

The varnas evolved over time, though the overall structure of oppression remained in place for thousands of years. The *Laws of Manu* is a manuscript written in 100 B.C.E, and it records the place of women within the varna system, describing how the responsibility of the family is to ensure a woman is kept safe even from herself.[2](#LawsofManu) The control the male-driven families were expected to have over women was clear, and words such as the *Laws of Manu* were used as tools to enforce and maintain that social order. This practice of using written laws and a rigid social order to enforce the might of a ruling class has been seen frequently throughout history.

While the varna system was evolving in India, other cultures of the world caught on to different concepts that often had similar results. A frequently idealized culture in history is that of democratic ancient Greece, during the height of their power in the age before being conquered by Philip of Macedonia. During this time, the city-state of Athens was enjoying a time of great prosperity and economy security, provided for them by the wealth of farmlands surrounding them and their brutal reliance on slavery.

Forming the inspiration for modern day democratic governments, Athenians touted their ideals as being a heightened form of social understanding. Their politicians, such as Pericles, the famous leader of Athens immortalized by ancient Greek proto-historians, would use their claims of superiority as a means to inspire trust and reliance by the people within the system. Pericles spoke highly of their governmental institutions that they considered superior to their rivals thanks to embracing the many voices within a meritocracy that rewarded the best of them with public office, emphasizing how the strength of the many was superior to that of the few.[3](#Thucydides) This was used as justification for a system that objectively enforced stark inequality for people living within the city-state that didn’t qualify for citizenship in the eyes of those that held economic and military power.

Slaves were relied upon for working fields and producing goods, and only the free males of the Greek population who had served in the military were given the right to vote. This excluded the many people who were then utilized to keep their society otherwise functional and further created a contradiction in the idea that the many were being represented. While the Athenians democracy was a system that managed to conceptualize giving representation to everyone living under their government, they nonetheless saw it a reason of necessity to create social boundaries that maintained their rigid social order. As time went, this saw a rise and fall of equal representation within Athenian democracy as powerful personalities took over politics to suit their own ends, until the city-state fell to Sparta in the Peloponnesian War.

In another part of the world, a few centuries before Athen’s peak of prosperity, a different process of systemic control and social organization was being developed in ancient China. Living during the chaotic period towards the end of the Zhou dynasty entering into the Warring States period, Confucius had a unique perspective on the conduct of a citizen and of nobility alike that helped produce a system that was more philosophy and etiquette than government. Nonetheless, Confucianism advocated a strict hierarchal order of society that kept the elites maintained in their positions through coordinating the status quo.

Though Confucius’s words were only written down much later in works such as *Analects*, they nonetheless formed the backbone for many cultural and philosophical ideals that followed through history. Presented often as common sense and wise guidance, many of Confucius’s teachings propose that the best way for life to be obedient to authority and respectful to your parents and elders.[4](#Confucius) Guidance is provided as to how the nobles should conduct themselves so as to not incur the wrath of their lesser, but this is presented as further means to enforce and strengthen the position of those that hold social and economic power.

Throughout history, in nearly every society that has endured beyond the initial hardships that sculpted it to produce a more enlightened time of easier living and richer culture, system control that favors the wealthy has arisen. Numerous examples can be found of times that the ruling classes were able to utilize their advantages to control the populace, often using philosophical means that helped guide the level of injustices faced by ordinary citizens. There is a common thread that those that pursued equality and empowered their citizens created greater ages of prosperity, but it is most common to see that those who gain significant social and economic advantages then used those advantages to retain power through systemic control, often to the detriment of those living within that society.

**References and Sources:**

1. Hymns from *The Rig Vedas (c. 100 B.C.E.–200 B.C.E)* Bonnie G. Smith et al., World in the Making: Volume One to 1500, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2022), Chapter 3 Settlers and Migrants: The Creation of States in Asia 5000–500 B.C.E, Source 3.2.
2. *The Laws of Manu (c. 100 B.C.E.–200 B.C.E)* Bonnie G. Smith et al., World in the Making: Volume One to 1500, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2022), Chapter 3 Settlers and Migrants: The Creation of States in Asia 5000–500 B.C.E, Source 3.3.
3. *Thucydides, the Peloponnesian War (431 B.C.E),* Bonnie G. Smith et al., World in the Making: Volume One to 1500, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2022), Chapter 4 Empire and Resistance in the Mediterranean 1550–330 B.C.E. Source 4.6.
4. Confucius, *Analects* (c. 479–100 B.C.E.) Bonnie G. Smith et al., World in the Making: Volume One to 1500, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2022), Chapter 5 Thinkers and World Empires of Eurasia 500 B.C.E.–500 C.E., Source 5.5.