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Landlords and Peasants, Masters and Slaves: Class Relations in Greek and Roman Antiquity

Few historians would hesitate to single out slavery as an essential and distinctive feature of the social order in ancient Greece and Rome. Many might even be prepared to accept that slavery is in some sense the distinctive and essential characteristic, so that Greece and Rome can be meaningfully and informatively described as ‘slave societies’, ‘slave economies’, or instances of the ‘slave mode of production’. There is little agreement, however, about what precisely it means so to characterise them and how – or even whether – such characterisations are intended to shed light on historical processes.

At least two separate questions must be raised in assessing the usefulness of describing Greece and Rome as slave societies. The first concerns the extent and location of slavery in the Greek and Roman

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1 This article, written in 1983, has been sitting in my drawer ever since, no doubt in the hope that I would get back to it. Some of the arguments concerning ancient Greece were later developed in Wood 1988. But, since I am now unlikely to return to systematic work on the ancient world, I have agreed to let this piece be published as is, even though I would do some things differently if I were writing it now. The text here remains as it was when I left it in 1983, with the exception of footnotes which refer to publications that have appeared since then, a few places where a misleading word has been replaced, and the deletion of one especially confusing passage.
economies, and, in particular, the degree to which production rested on slave labour. The second concerns the sense in which slavery, whatever its location and extent, can be said to account for historical movement, economic development, social change, political and cultural processes. One way of formulating the latter question might be to ask whether slavery should be looked upon as a kind of prime mover, the ‘distinctive characteristic’ in reference to which other features of Greco-Roman antiquity can be explained; or whether it is more fruitful to treat Greek and Roman slavery as effect rather than cause, the ‘distinctive characteristic’ which itself most demands explanation, by reference to other, prior, historical factors.

In what follows, it will be argued that the focus on slavery as the primary or dominant characteristic of Greco-Roman antiquity may obscure more than it explains, and that historical processes in ancient Greece and Rome would be more clearly illuminated by the proposition that their ‘distinctive feature’ is a particular and unique relationship between free producers and appropriators and, more specifically, between landlords and peasants. This is true only partly because the extent of slave production, especially in Greece, is itself open to question. Even in Rome, where the evidence for widespread slavery in basic production is far less ambiguous (though, even here, there has been some exaggeration), the relations between landlord and peasant are the framework within which historical processes – including the rise and decline of slavery – can most fruitfully be understood.

**Master and slave vs. landlord and peasant**

The proposition that Greece (meaning, for the most part, specifically Athens) and Rome were ‘slave societies’, ‘slave economies’ or instances of the ‘slave mode of production’ is problematic, first, because there is little agreement not only about the explanatory value of these formulae but even about what facts they are meant to represent. These designations were relatively unproblematic for those who believed – as many Marxists, but not only Marxists, have traditionally done – that the bulk of production in Greece and Rome was performed by slaves and that class divisions were reasonably clear and transparent, opposing a legally defined community of free men – and especially citizens – to a subjected producing class of slaves. Since it is now more commonly accepted that production throughout Greek and Roman