Towards a Theory of Slavery.
Monsieur Martin A. Klein

Résumé
M. A. Klein — Vers une théorie de l'esclavage.
Compte rendu critique du livre de C. Meillassoux, Anthropologie de l'esclavage. Le ventre de fer et d'argent, avec réponse de l'auteur

Citer ce document / Cite this document:

Document généré le 02/06/2016
Towards a Theory of Slavery*

Meillassoux begins this study of slavery with the contradiction between the legal definition of slavery as property and the reality of slave social systems. He argues that the slave can never be completely reduced to a thing because in the work the slave does, 'il est fait appel à [sa] raison si peu que ce soit, et [sa] productivité ou [son] utilité s'accroît en proportion de ce recours à [son] intelligence' (p. 10). If there is any weakness in this often profound work, it is that Meillassoux does not extend his understanding of this initial paradox far enough, while he often goes too far in trying to develop a general theory.

The book is a summary, a development, and a refinement of twenty-five years of work on slavery and African economic anthropology, a culmination long awaited by those of us who have been shaped by Meillassoux. It makes slavery central to the processes by which subsistence societies transform themselves into socially and politically more complex structures. Slavery for Meillassoux was basically an economic relationship. Both slave-raiding and slave use developed in response to the demands of the market, a market which was both external and internal. Enslavement involved both capture, an initial act of violence, which pulled the person from the society in which he or she was nurtured, and the movement of the captive to another society, in which he or she was inserted as a slave. Thus crucial to the process was both the initial act of violence and purchase by a would-be user. The existence of prisoners does not automatically create slavery.

Equally important, and perhaps his most significant contribution to the literature, is Meillassoux's emphasis on reproduction. The more important slavery was in a society, the greater the problem of reproduction, in part because slaves rarely reproduced themselves, in part because slavery was marked by a 'flow-through' in which a certain number were always being freed or manumitted. This seems to have been almost universal in slave systems. This means that slave societies created slaving societies oriented to meeting their needs. In West Africa, slavers were supplying the Americas, the Mediterranean, and African slave users. Much of the book is an examination of two kinds of societies, those that lived off warfare and the 'production' of slaves and the merchant societies that traded them and increasingly put them to use within Africa.

---


1. The only population known to have reproduced its slave population by natural means was the southern US (CURTIN 1969). In the US case, high prices and the necessity of justifying slavery in a world becoming hostile to slavery produced better nutrition and care. The results were striking. If Curtin's data are correct, an import of 400,000 slaves produced a population of about 4 millions at the time of the American Civil War. Other accounts confirm similar rates of growth.

Most descriptions of precolonial slavery divide slaves into two groups, the *captifs de traite*, who were enslaved during their own lifetime and could be sold, and the *captifs de case*, who were born into the household and could not be sold. There is a certain irony that this use of the term *captif* results from 19th-century administrators trying to avoid the word 'slave'. Meillassoux correctly utilizes the term *captif* only for those captured and not yet integrated as slaves. He also recognizes that under certain conditions, the *captifs de case* were sold. Whatever the norms, slaves had few protections. He suggests instead that the more crucial distinction was between the *esclaves de peine*, who worked full-time for the master and were fed by him, the *esclaves manœuvres*, who worked on the master's land and had small plots of their own, the *esclaves casés*, who had their own plots and paid a fixed prestation and, finally, the *esclaves manumis*, essentially freedmen who remained in a clientship relationship. He argues, I think incorrectly, that the first group represented the vast majority of slaves. He cites no evidence, nor do I know where he could find evidence. The written sources give no data on the relative importance of these types of slavery. Furthermore, Meillassoux did field research sixty years after the institution was transformed by colonial rule. I am convinced that the two groups on the road to autonomy, the *esclaves manœuvres* and the *esclaves casés*, were more productive and probably more numerous except during peak periods of enslavement. To understand this, we must look at ideology.

Meillassoux develops the argument that the slave had no social identity, could establish no personal links, lacked a civil identity, and had no sexual being. In his words: *désocialisé, dépersonnalisé, décivilisé, et déssexualisé*. Most important in Meillassoux's analysis, the slave had no family ties. Slaves copulated and cohabited, but were not married. They produced children, but socially were not parents. All of this is absolutely true. Slaves had no control over their children. They belonged to the master's master and could be removed at any time. Slaves could neither bequeath to their offspring nor be sure that those offspring would be around to help in their old age. What Meillassoux does not do here is extend the insight with which he started the book that there is basic contradiction between ideology and reality. The ideology existed as an instrument of social control. That does not mean that it accurately reflected reality. Ideology was concerned to shape reality both by atomizing the slave community and by channeling slave aspirations. Slaves, however, were human. They cohabited in stable long-term relations. When slavery broke down in the early 20th century, those who fled did so in family units. Where there was conflict, it took place over control of children. Masters believed the children were theirs, but slave parents wanted their children and in some cases were willing to risk their lives to get them.

What this means is that the dehumanization and reification were never complete. Slaves had no civil identity, but they could and did act collectively. Francis Moore (1738: 33), for example, suggests that slaves born in the household could not be sold without permission of other slaves or the other slaves would flee. And Péroz (1889: 180-190) describes a group of slaves refusing to give their master more grain than was his due. The reason why this dehumanization was not complete was that slavery was an economic system. The productivity of the slave could only be maximized if his or her humanity was recognized. That is the explanation of the *esclaves manœuvres* and *esclaves casés*. By giving the slave some control over his or her productive activity and family life, the master motivated him or her to work harder. Obviously, such rights came only as a gift of the master. The Western Soudan, an area that Meillassoux and I have studied, is marked by a very low productivity. Slaves were used primarily to grow grain and produce cloth. The slave who worked full-time on the master's land had no reason to work hard if he had not the possibility of getting a piece of land of his own. The slave who got autonomy paid very dear for it.

The autonomous status had another attraction to the master. The vast
majority of captives in Africa were women. Furthermore, the price of women was in almost all parts of Africa higher than the price of men of the same age. The price differential was greatest for the young and pretty, but it existed at all ages. Most writers have assumed that women were desired because of their child-bearing potential. Meillassoux argues that this is not true, pointing out correctly that slaves tend not to reproduce themselves. Once again, I think he takes a good argument too far. He maintains that women were preferred because they could perform a greater variety of tasks. The only evidence we have of the value placed on women's work, however, is the obligation of those women permitted to work with their mates. They were generally expected to pay half of what men paid. A more likely explanation for the higher price is that women were easier to integrate and easier to control. They could also be used to integrate men. The most attractive of them became concubines. Many became wives, and probably did the bulk of the labour on the farms of slave warriors. Finally, some were married off to male slaves, who thus were motivated to work harder. Within this structure, children were a free good. If the slave menage had children, those children could be taken from it, but this was not done until after the child's adult teeth came in. Thus, the slave couple supported the infant until he was old enough to work. The most important factor limiting slave reproduction, as Meillassoux points out in a careful analysis of the potential productivity of slave households, was the difficulty of supporting unproductive persons.*

This all suggests a continuum. Meillassoux differentiates between slavery and serfdom largely in terms of means of reproduction. Under serfdom, the servile population is reproduced by natural means. If this is true, I doubt if we can speak of serfs anywhere in precolonial West Africa. Nor can this distinction be extended to all slave systems. In the United States, a slave population reproduced itself by natural means without the masters in any way diminishing their control or yielding the right to sell their slaves. Thus, the analysis that is very persuasive for Africa cannot necessarily be extended to all parts of the world. Furthermore, this suggests that any such analysis must be conditioned by a careful examination of the specific conditions of historical evolution of the society in question.

Meillassoux seems not to have read Orlando Patterson's recent Slavery and Social Death (1982), certainly the most important recent general work on slavery, though he has arrived independently at some of Patterson's key ideas, for example, the notion of slavery as a substitute for death and the notion of the eunuch as the quintessential slave. The two works bear some comparison. Patterson's is a work of tremendous learning, the first effort to do a serious cross-cultural analysis of slavery since H. I. Nieboer's Slavery as an Industrial System (1910). Meillassoux is not as ambitious as Patterson. In a modest disclaimer, he suggests that his book 'n'est pas une théorie générale de l'esclavage, mais un essai théorique sur cette institution à partir de mes connaissances sur une parcelle d'Afrique' (p. 21). The difference is that Patterson's key ideas, the idea of social death and the emphasis on power, do not explain much. Meillassoux has presented us with a dynamic picture of how slavery itself evolves, but also how it fits into the broader picture of how slave-using societies evolve.

The problem of slavery is a central one for historical scholarship. Slavery existed in almost all complex pre-industrial societies. Whether labelled 'slave

---

2. I have developed this argument more fully in KLEIN 1983. At my suggestion, C. Robertson and I had invited Meillassoux to contribute a theoretical introduction to this book. When his article, 'Female Slavery' came in, we were both persuaded by his general argument, but I found myself in disagreement with some of his ideas and re-wrote my article to clarify these differences.
societies' or 'slave modes of production', a significant number of these societies had economic systems based on slavery. Meillassoux excels in describing not only the evolution of slavery, but the way in which slavery becomes central to other processes of change. For Africa, the tragedy was not only the pain and suffering of those who were the victims, but the way in which an emphasis on slave trading and slave-based production led much of Africa into an evolutionary cul-de-sac. Islam offered some of these societies a way out, and yet, even the great Muslim State-builders were in a sense trapped by the fact that only the sale of slaves could provide the revenues needed to buy arms. Meillassoux makes little distinction between Umar, Samori and the cruder slaving States of the 18th century.

In the process, Meillassoux copes with a number of debates. If he ignores Patterson, he has a solid critique of Miers and Kopytoff (1977), and he cuts the ground out from under Curtin's notion (1975) that slaves were little different from other items of commerce. His own work needs to be tested against more detailed historical research, and perhaps refined, but for the moment, it is the most perceptive analysis we have of African slave systems. Slavery has been the subject of a number of brilliant monographs in recent years, but few of these works transcend the particular, the exceptions being Patterson and the man who most influenced him, the late Moses Finley.3 Meillassoux's book is the most successful attempt I know of to examine slavery as an institution and develop lines of analysis that can be tested elsewhere.

University of Toronto, Department of History, Toronto, March 1987.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Curtin, P. D.

Finley, M. I.

Klein, M. A.

Miers, S. & Kopytoff, I., eds.

3. Finley left us with several perceptive essays. His books dealt only with classical Antiquity (see esp. Finley 1980).
TOWARDS A THEORY OF SLAVERY

Moore, F.
1738  *Travels into the Inland Parts of Africa...* (London: E. Cave).

Nieboer, H. J.

Patterson, O.

Péroz, M. É.