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The unknown slave

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Few ancient authors had a discourse on slavery. Even so, many spoke about it, often indirectly or between the lines, either to criticize or justify it.

Reviewed: Paulin Ismard, *Le Miroir d'Œdipe. Penser l'esclavage* (Oedipus' Mirror: Thinking Slavery), Paris, Seuil, 2023, 224 p., 23 €.

Following two previous studies (*La Démocratie contre les experts* [Democracy against the experts], 2015 and *La Cité et ses esclaves* [The city and its slaves], 2019), Paulin Ismard's new book seeks to identify the paradoxical place of slaves in ancient Greek cities, particularly Athens.

The paradox was as follows: in Athens, slavery was everywhere and nowhere. Archaeological and abundant literary sources prove that, since at least the end of the archaic period, slaves were ubiquitous in the Athenian production system. Agriculture, artisanry, and mining depended on them. Yet no ancient text survives that has slavery as its main theme.

Should one conclude that slaves simply cannot be found in ancient Greek discourse? Such a conclusion, Ismard contends, would be hasty. An ancient discourse on slavery does exist at the margins of major genres (philosophy, theater, and history). Ancient slaves require us to invert Heraclitus' famous saying (DK B34): absent, they are present. They are absent because interaction with free men was impossible. But they are present because their relegation to the margins of society is precisely what held ancient society together. "The impossibility of registering the presence [of slaves]

in the common world was the very form of their presence within it" (p. 18). Ismard devotes his book to studying this marginal presence.

An "anthropology of the implicit"

Ismard begins by considering the Marxist analysis proposed years ago by Moses Finley. If slaves were present at every level of the ancient city's base while being radically absent from its superstructure, this was because an ideological defense of slavery was unnecessary. Ancient slavery was based on violent domination. This is evident in the thought experiment proposed by Socrates in book 9 of Plato's *Republic,* in which a master who finds himself with his slaves in a desert and is thus deprived of the ability to use force must flatter his slaves to survive. In Athens and Greece more broadly, instituted violence rendered superfluous a justification of slavery that ensured the consent of the dominated.

Yet Finley's original argument was more cautious. In the Greek polis of the classical period, he wrote in *Democracy Ancient and Modern*, "there [was] little scope for ideology in the Marxist sense." Yet the wiggle room that Finley allows ("little") does in fact legitimate the quest for an ideological justification for slavery in ancient Greece--for instance, in Aristotle. Regrettably, Ismard does not mention the debate on this topic between Charles Kahn and Malcolm Schofield.[1] While the latter refused to consider the Aristotelian theory of slavery as ideological because it is based on rational argument, Kahn replied that the weakness of Aristotle's reasoning was an invitation to view it as ideological.

Aristotle notwithstanding, the scarcity of sources that take a "pro" or "con" position on slavery would appear to give credence to Finely. Ismard proposes going one step further than the British historian. Noting that ancient intellectuals offered little reflection *on* slavery, he examines what they thought *about* slavery. This thought "most often unfolded between the lines or on the margins of better-known texts, in what they left unthought or were unaware of" (p. 14).

[1] Malcolm Schofield, "Ideology and Philosophy in Aristotle's Theory of Slavery," in Günther Patzig, ed., *Aristoteles "Politik" Akten des XI. Symposium Aristotelicum*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1990, pp. 1-27 ; Charles Kahn, "Comments on M. Schofield", ibid., pp. 28-31. The debate was initiated several years earlier by Pierre Pellegrin in "La théorie aristotélicienne de l'esclavage: tendances actuelles de l'interprétation," *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger*, 1982, pp. 345-357.

With this approach, Ismard follows the lead of Nicole Loraux, who criticized the "anthropology of the explicit" and its predilection for the study of the ritualized practices through which ancient cities organized their self-image. This approach succumbs to the siren song of the beautiful forms that cities projected. An "anthropology of the implicit" (as Ismard calls it, p. 18), however, pays attention to what texts choose *not* to focus on.

Three aspects of the book are central and deserve consideration. First is the presence of slavery at the heart of the ancient city's foundational values, of which we moderns are the heirs. Next is Ismard's approach to making this implicit truth explicit, which he calls "interreadings" (*entrelectures*). Finally, Ismard proposes a very debatable psychoanalytic interpretation of slavery's relegation to the margins of Athenian discourse.

The free man, the slave's other

The book's first contribution appears in chapter one, devoted to a discussion of freedom in Plato and Aristotle. For these philosophers, the free man is defined as the slave's opposite. He does what the slave does not (contemplate, for Plato; contemplate and participate in the life of the polis, for Aristotle). He does not do what the slave does (work). Moreover, the free man depends on the slave when engaging in his most liberal activities. Hence for Aristotle, both contemplation and politics make it justifiable for the owner of an estate to entrust the administration of his property to a steward. In these ways, the slave is both the free man's boundary and condition of possibility.

Yet Ismard does not dwell on a major difference between Plato and Aristotle: for the former (in *Theaetetus*, in any case), political activity is service, while, for the latter, it is not. Nor does Ismard mention a key feature of Athenian slavery: the rejection of subordination in all forms as a badge of servitude, which is noted by Plato and Aristotle in their analyses of democracy (*Rep*. 8.563d7-e1; *Pol*. 5.9 and 6.2).

Slavery's presence at the heart of the definition of a free man requires us, according to Ismard, to step back from our "relationship with classical antiquity" and the "relationships of domination that we have inherited from it, given our tendency to spontaneously imagine the ancient city, almost despite ourselves, from the standpoint

of citizens and masters" (p. 163). We read ancient texts with what one might call an instinctive "*despo-centrism*." But there is also a risk, as Ismard shows in his study of Athenian freedom, that we might blind ourselves to the relationship between the Greek idea of freedom--which in many ways we have inherited--and slavery. In Plato and Aristotle, freedom is sometimes defined as whatever the slave is denied, sometimes as whatever makes servile labor possible. In Athenian democratic discourse as reported by the philosophers, any form of subjection is deemed shameful. By directing our attention to slavery's presence at the heart of Athenian freedom and democracy, Ismard asks that we make ourselves the object of an "anthropology of the implicit."

"Interreadings" of slavery

Though slavery's presence in ancient (and particularly Athenian) discourse is marginal, Ismard seeks to shed light on it through other texts in which it occupies a similarly liminal position. Where slavery is not showcased, analogy will do. Consequently, Ismard engages in a series of "interreadings," based on the idea that "two fictional texts separated by time and space can *interread* one another--in other words, mutually interpret one another, often without knowing it, regardless of the order of succession" (p. 47).

Thus in chapter two--which gives its title to the whole book--Ismard uses William Faulkner's novel *Absalom, Absalom!* to shine new light on Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. The author shows how, in Faulkner as well as Sophocles, "slaves are placed in a specular position. They make possible the existence of a world that has become unreadable and incomprehensible to those who inhabit it, and are, in a sense, the trustees of its enigma" (p. 50).

Sometimes the practice of interreadings is less illuminating. This can be seen in chapter four, devoted to Diodorus' account of the Sicilian slave revolt of 135 BCE. In these fascinating and stimulating pages, Ismard draws analogies between the reenactment that King Eunus, a Syrian and former slave, hosted in his capital, Enna, to represent the slaves' revolt against their masters, and the "documentary theater" invented in the 1920s by Erwin Piscator, which sought to "show the reality of social relations" (p. 106). Yet Ismard is unclear about the connection he finds between Diodorus' narrative and Piscator's theater. In Diodorus, "a moment of hesitation" (p.

98) is introduced into the revolt to heighten consciousness and facilitate understanding of it. Piscator, however, sought "active intervention in the course of events" (p. 106). These purposes--as well their contexts--seem different. More explanation of the analogy would have clarified this interreading.

Slavery as ancient society's "repressed"

Not only was the city held together, according to Ismard, by people excluded from its explicit discourse; it also organized this relegation "consciously" (p. 20). This interpretation seems detachable, however, from the book's main thesis. It is possible to claim, on the one hand, that the ancient city was held together by its margins even though it only spoke of its center without maintaining, on the other, that its psychic economy made this relegation necessary. Yet Ismard doubles down on this psychological interpretation in several chapters, as well as the conclusion.

The gap between the thesis and its psychoanalytic interpretation is evident in the first chapter. To justify this reading, Ismard draws on a digression in *Theaetetus*, in which Socrates demands for philosophers the same fate as Thales, who fell into a well while contemplating the stars, much to the amusement of a Thracian slave with a better grip on concrete reality (174a). For Socrates, the philosopher had no choice but to turn away from the social and political world, which interfered with the contemplative life. Indeed, so great is this need that the philosopher is not even aware of his ignorance: "he does not even know that he does not know about these matters" (173e).

Ismard concludes that "to fully be a philosopher, it is not enough to be ignorant of how civic life works; one must be ignorant of this ignorance" (p. 28). For Ismard, this imperative is what Freud called "denial" (*Verleugnung*), a mechanism by which "subjects protect themselves by disavowing what threatens them" (ibid.). In this instance, the threat is politics as such. Political activity, like any work done for others, was, in Athens, suspected of being tainted by slavery.

Is this interpretation justified by textual evidence? This is far from certain. In the Schofield-Kahn debate, it was the very weakness of Aristotle's argument that made it possible to claim that it was ideological. It is according to the same standard that Socrates' arguments must be evaluated to determine if they can be understood

primarily as the expression of a psychological imperative. Yet Socrates' argument does not need this psychological reduction to be understood. If the purpose of life is to "resemble a god as much as possible" (176a), then the philosopher is well advised to keep his distance from the courtroom and its constraints.[2]

Similar doubts about Ismard's psychoanalytic interpretation resurface when one reads chapter three, devoted to Athenian accounts of the origins of slavery and the place assigned to slaves. For Athenians, the slave is not a person with whom one exchanges goods or who is eligible for exogamy. Rather, "slavery is the negation of any form of bond. Its institution defines a faceless and nameless otherness" (p. 84). Ismard compares this otherness to the outcome of what Lacan calls "foreclosure,"[3] which is an interpretive translation of Freud's term *Verwerfung*: "the existence of the other is refused so radically that it is impossible for it to assume narrative form" (p. 85).

The strength of Ismard's interpretation rests on his reading of two passages from Herodotus that mention slaves, of course, but without ever making them major or even active characters. In book 6 (6.137), Herodotus explains how the Athenians first reduced men to slavery when their daughters were raped by Pelasgians while seeking water from a source. Once this task became dangerous, it was assigned to populations reduced to servitude for this purpose. But we learn in book 8 (8.44) that the Pelasgians were the Athenians' ancestors. "The Pelasgians," Ismard observes, "are operators of temporal otherness. Through them, the Greeks reflected on the otherness of their own past, [and] the way that they arose and tore themselves from it" (p. 80).

In these two passages, what exactly justifies the "foreclosure" interpretation? It might have been necessary, for example, had the Pelasgians been enslaved, and the Athenians refused to admit that they descended from slaves. But Herodotus is clear: the Athenians' first slaves were *not* Pelasgians. There was no reason for the Athenians to repress slavery's origin.

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[2] It is worth noting that the Theaetetus is not all of Plato's œuvre: the *Republic* recognizes that philosophers can govern, though often contrary to their preference.

[3] In Lacan, foreclosure refers to the "primordial rejection of a fundamental *'signifier'* (for example, the phallus qua signifier of the *castration complex*) beyond the *subject's* symbolic universe). Jean Laplanche et J.-B. Pontalis, *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, 1984, pp. 163-164).

An alternative explanation: Aristotle

The doubts elicited by the psychanalytic chapter are rekindled in the conclusion. For Ismard, the ancient city was built by relegating slaves to the realm of the "unknown." This relegation had two purposes. First, it deprived slaves of their "power to subvert the community's traditional institutions" (p. 160), a power that would have been unleashed if slavery had been explicitly thematized. Second, it mitigated the "anxiety" that resulted from the "reciprocal incorporation" and indistinction between master and slave (p. 161).

Both functions could, however, have been achieved without repression. The former could have been achieved through ideology, the latter by a definition of the free man shorn of any reference to slavery. Aristotle showed the way, proposing both a justification of slavery (in book 1 of *Politics*) and a definition of the free individual as one who lives for themselves, not another (*Rhet*. 1367a33, *Met*. 982b4-26).

Aristotle thus moderates the book's three conclusions. It is possible to define the free man on his own terms, without conceiving of him as first and foremost a non-slave. Of course, the conditions of possibility of a completely free life, consisting of contemplation and political activity, include slavery; but it is a matter of degrees, not nature. Slaves contribute to a free life. They do not define it.

Furthermore, the Aristotelian justification of slavery--whether ideological or not--shows that slavery was not confined to society's margins: it was present in debates that preceded Aristotle, as he acknowledged.

These observations lead to a third: Aristotle shows that that the ancient city did not need to repress slavery.

Does Aristotle undercut the book's conclusions? Of course not. In addition to its rich interpretations, the book advances important arguments, which apply to the trends that Ismard identifies. One exception is not enough to call these trends into question. That said, a more direct engagement with the Aristotelian alternative would have made it possible to evaluate more precisely the conclusions of a book that will benefit specialized and non-specialized readers alike.

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