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Revisiting the Leading Role of the Roman Upper Classes in Slavery or Slavery Conditions

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Abstract

The ancient Roman society was not duplicitous about its socio-economic dependence upon slaves. This paper, while presenting the developments that brought about slavery or slave conditions during the late Republic and at the beginning of the Roman Empire, dwells on the role of the Roman upper classes in making slaves constant features of Roman agriculture, industry, domestic life, entertainment and virtually all other facets of Roman life. The paper illustrates the upper classes' taste for slavery and their principal part as the promoters of the institution with Plutarch's reference to the Roman statesman, Cato, in Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*. With the active and preponderant role of the wealthy and influential Romans' use of slaves to function and maintain their political, social, and economic life at this time, the paper notes that Rome's historical pre-eminence would be non-existent without slaves. Therefore, it is concluded that the record of the Roman upper classes in creating slavery conditions and in entrenching slavery suggests that a successful fight against slavery in any form could only mean a deliberate fight against the rich and the powerful or breaking free from the yoke of the oppressors whose desire for slaves is unending. A

study on Roman stories of manumission would be a good follow up to this work.

Key Words: Slavery, Slavery conditions, Roman Upper Classes, Dependence

A background to the Growth of Slaves at Rome

The picture of the socio-economic structure of the Romans is incomplete without slaves. Their presence was well known in agriculture and industry and they were so ubiquitous that their absence in domestic life, state affairs, entertainment world, intellectual activity, military campaigns as well as religious observances would mean none existence of the Roman civilisation (Scheidel, 2007) or, put differently, a story of Roman civilisation devoid of vital structures that propped its glory.

There were various sources of supply of slaves to meet the increasing demands of the Romans. However, from the early Roman period, slaves were notably largely war captives (Gibbon, 1980: 62). In addition to slaves who were war captives, inter-tribal wars 'often resulted in the selling of defeated and captured tribes to the Romans (Jones, 1966:298). Strabo (14.5.2), indicating kidnapping as another source of slaves, says: 'the exportation of slaves induced them most of all to engage in their evil business, since it proved most profitable; for not only were they easily captured, but the market, which was large and rich in property, was not extremely far away'. Piracy so much contributed to the Roman slave supply with 'a free market on the Aegean island of Delos in 166 BC that eventually came to turn over 'a myriad' (literally '10,000', de facto, 'very many')

slaves per day' (Scheidel, 2007:9).

The Romans' socio-economic need for slaves is also indicated by the fact that, throughout Rome's territory, supply of slaves was kept replenished through natural reproduction among slave families whose children were slaves when born in slavery (Gaius, *The Civil law* 1.93). Since breeding or reproduction could not meet the whole demand, complementing the source of slaves was also the practice of mothers' exposing unwanted babies or selling children (*The Code of Justinian*: 6. 332). Further meeting the need for slaves were convicted criminals who, as punishment, became slaves working in the mines while awaiting their execution or serving as gladiators in the arena (Buckland, 1908: 404). Roman law also allowed for debtors to become slaves. A creditor had the right to sell a debtor out as a slave if the latter could not pay his debt (*The Laws of the Twelve Tables*: 1. 63).

Legislation, such as the one above, was native to a society where the patrician classes, who enjoyed fabulous wealth, power and privilege, would do everything to secure their life of luxury, extravagance and indulgence. Hence, the socio-economic as well as political situation that accelerated the growth of slavery in ancient Rome and culminated in both the wealthy and the citizens of little means making use of slaves in practically every facet of life, is worthy of consideration. Particularly of interest are the developments of the late Republic. From the city's commencement, it is pertinent to note that agriculture constituted the foundation of the Roman state. However, the farmers who produced crops for themselves and for their cities

also defended the state as soldiers when called upon. The Punic wars, which were fought between 261 B.C. and 147 B.C., put a remarkable strain on the agricultural system and precluded a new socio-political course for the Romans. The extended period of war caused the citizens of Rome to be away from their farms frequently and for a very long time. The consequences of the lengthy campaigns began to manifest when Rome, led by the ambitions of her elite who were desirous of fame and glory, rather than rescuing the ailing Italian agrarian economy at this time, were emboldened by records of victories to levy more troops and fight more wars abroad. Since women and children could not manage farms when peasant farmers were constantly away at war, there began to be a dearth of farmers, a situation that the greedy rich politicians would exploit.

Following military glories from successful foreign campaigns, a period of disconcerting moral decadence among the Roman upper classes began. Although a Roman law had set the upper limit of the land a farmer could own at five hundred acres (Plutarch, Tiberius 2: 391), by the second century B.C. avaricious rich families ignored the land law, and, with impunity, began to encroach on large parcels of state-owned land in Italy. As more and more land became illegally available to the upper crust of the Roman society, cultivation of large farming estates known as latifundia, displaced subsistence farming. The resultant plight of the common Roman citizens turned out to be a precursor to a society that thrived on slavery, which only began with the subjection of fellow Romans to conditions of slavery as expressed in the words that follow: 'but the men who fight and

die for Italy enjoy the common air and light, indeed, but nothing else; houseless and homeless they wander about with their wives and children. And it is with lying lips that their imperators exhort the soldiers in their battles to defend sepulchres and shrines from the enemy; for not a man of them has an hereditary altar, not one of all these many Romans an ancestral tomb, but they fight and die to support others in wealth and luxury, and though they are styled masters of the world, they have not a single clod of earth that is their own'. (Plutarch, Tiberius 9.5).

The foregoing was the state of servitude of the common people for which the Roman upper classes were culpable. However, there was more to the story of slavery in the Roman society. In a step that would not alter the course of Roman subsequent dependence upon slavery to function and maintain her political, social, and economic stronghold in the ancient world, Tiberius Gracchus, when elected tribune in 133 B.C., sought to redistribute lands and restore all citizen farmers to their land (Grant, 1978:169). Tiberius succeeded neither in pushing through his legislation nor in extending his power beyond the legal limit. Although from an aristocratic family, little did he realise he could not do much about changing the lots of the downtrodden by fighting a strongly entrenched discriminatory system of the rich and influential ruling class. His bill met with a stiff opposition from the elite class and consequently, at the instigation of rival political officers, he was mobbed in 132 BC. (Plutarch, Tiberius 2: 401). With comparable communist zeal, his brother, Gaius, while pursuing a similar course ten years later, had a partial success when he secured the tribunate and pushed through the redistribution of land (Grant, 1978:172). Yet, in,

Gaius' legislation and popularity, powerful members of the senate saw threats to their privilege and authority. Hence, Gaius lost his life to the turbulent atmosphere of hostility that was sponsored by men of the Roman Senate.

While the radical approach of the Gracchi at constitutional reforms may account for their brutal murder, it must be noted that the political and social environment of Rome at the time was an obvious symbol of the divide between the rich and the poor, which remained after historic struggles and reforms that failed to obliterate it. The Senate's resistant to the agrarian reform was no surprise since its members owned most of the land and it was the foundation of their wealth. Furthermore, the Roman socio-political sphere was characterised by an inequitable societal value that was reflected by the ruling class calling themselves Optimates (the best men) while the lower classes and their sympathizers were reckoned as the Populares (the people). In a setting of apparent discrimination against and oppression of the lowly by the pleasure seeking upper classes, Plutarch notes that the rich and powerful subjected the poor to slavery conditions: 'the neighbouring rich men, by means of fictitious personages, transferred [rented land] to themselves, and finally held most of the land openly in their own names. Then the poor, who had been ejected from their land, no longer showed themselves eager for military service, and neglected the bringing up of children, so that soon all Italy was conscious of a dearth of freemen, and was filled with gangs of foreign slaves, by whose aid the rich cultivated their estates, from which they had driven away the free citizens'(Plutarch, Tiberius 8.3)

Displacing the lowly from their ancestral land and subjecting them economic hardship was a clear form of enslavement. But after the common Roman people became impoverished by the actions of the upper classes, the state of servitude of the ex-soldiers became worsened when 'a massive influx of slaves, many captured and imported as war prisoners, replaced the free labourers, forcing them to join the urban poor' (Hopkins, 1978: 9). Rich landowners found it more profitable to use slaves who could not take the place of propertied citizens in the military service and were by and large far more economical to maintain. As noted earlier, children born by slaves added to the work force and, besides, slaves could be forced to work longer hours at the convenience of the master who had purchased him with his skills. The appetite of the Roman upper classes for slaves persisted as 'those who tilled its soil or tended its flocks there were imported barbarian slaves' (Plutarch, Tiberius 8.7). Therefore, as Rome grew in power and prestige, so did the effects of corruption, greed and the concomitant over-reliance on foreign slave labour. The lifestyle of ambition, greed and license of the rich Romans, having led to the displacement of the peasants from their land, gave rise to gangs of unemployed Romans drifting from countryside to the city where they were hired as thugs to do the political bid dings of wealthy senators. It was unmistakably a socio-economic imbalance and a state of servitude among the lower classes.

Although without any change in the values of the upper classes, after the failure of the Gracchi to solve the land problems, subsequent developments at Rome somehow addressed the

economic plight of the lower classes. Amidst the struggle between the optimates and the populares who sought power and personal glories that persisted, Gaius Marius (consul, 106, 104-100 BC) introduced a military reform that allowed for recruiting landless poor citizens for war. With the elimination of property requirements for those who would serve in the army, the state came to have the obligation of supplying weapons and armour to the legions. The arrangement included regular payment of wages to the soldiers for their service and militia army thereby gave way to professional army. This reform marked the beginning of progressive transference of soldiers' allegiances from the laws of the state to commanding officers who were seen as their champions. Marius unwittingly set in motion the practice of giving land to troops to get their support for political ambitions of generals. Ultimately, the interest of the upper classes prevailed.

The Need for More Slaves

Although the unemployment tension was reduced in the meantime by Marius' army reform (Plutarch, Marius 9.1), the upper classes were only making another use of the service of the common Romans in advancing their political interest while outright slavery was entrenched. The "settlement" of the unemployed Romans enabled the upper classes to have more use of slaves on their latifundia, the massive landed agricultural estates, which were more freely managed by slave workers. The rich had channelled a better way of realising their desires since the Romans' renewed conquests and profit-making from wars in the late Republic required more troops. The Roman senators had

found a new role for the lower classes as they looked beyond Italy to establish colonies in North Africa, subsequently in Egypt and later around the Mediterranean.

The approach was taking the hands of peasant population off the tilling of fields to make them serve on incessant foreign campaigns; earnestly replacing them with foreign slaves and then sourcing for agricultural production to sustain the state across the Mediterranean. Consequently, agriculture, which had always been the mainstay of the Roman economy, in the last century of the Roman Republic, largely depended on slave workers and, by the early Roman Empire, a labour market that was undermined by ubiquitous presence of slaves flourished (Temin, 2006:136) in the Roman society. Despite the practice of manumission that generally made slaves to work hard in the hope of regaining their freedom, slavery became 'the most common formal, legally enforceable long-term labour contract in the early Roman Empire. Roman slaves worked in all kinds of activities; rural slave jobs were as varied as the known range of urban or household free jobs' (Temin, 2006:142). This situation was never awkward to the Roman aristocracy. After all, as seen in the cases of the Gracchi mentioned above, it was typical of the Roman senators to resist reforms or bills that threatened their authority or undermined their influence while they naturally gave legal endorsement to any process that kept alive their greed and ambition.

Understandably, the need for slaves only increased with the Roman territorial expansion and the corresponding constant inflow of money and taxes from the provinces into Rome. For

instance, Pompey's conquests increased the revenues of Rome so much that, at his death in the first century B.C.; he personally had 175 million denarii (Jones, 1974:121). The Romans' wealth increased concomitantly with the upper classes' taste for luxury and this way of life raised the demand for slaves for production and entertainment.

Even when Roman slaves could be categorised as skilled and unskilled, often, their works required a lot of exertion. They were found at harbours loading and unloading boats and similarly at warehouses moving products (Barrow, 1928:108). At canals and rivers, slaves worked strenuously as they used all manly strength to pull ships and barges upstream by ropes (Cowell, 1980:115). Slaves played dominant roles in pottery factories, making stamps and molds (Frank, 1962: 326). To meet their utmost needs, some masters would train unskilled slaves in occupations the masters desired. Such was the case with the first century Marcus Licinius Crassus who made a fortune from buying houses cheap after they were engulfed by fire and rebuilt them with some five hundred slaves who were specially trained for this purpose (Westermann, 1942:154-155). Just as there were different equipment and tools to perform various tasks, the Roman upper classes' view of a fulfilling life was having slaves with appropriate skills to meet all possible needs, including gratifying their sensual desires. The case of a Roman states man, which is soon discussed below, illustrates this fact.

Pertinent to this discussion is the socio-political environment or a cultural institution at Rome that was most conducive to the increased need for slaves. Patronage, known as *clientela*,

established a relationship of both obligation and dependence between the patronus (patron) and his cliens (client) in the ancient Roman society. Although, the arrangement was mutual, it was characteristic of the culture where moral obligations in the relationship between the weak and the strong were reciprocal. Granted, 'the patron was obliged to protect [the client] in emergencies' (Burckhardt, 1990: 79), the institution favoured the political interest of wealthy patrons more since the clients' 'obligation meant primarily political assistance, which became manifest naturally as support in the elections' (Burckhardt, 1990: 79). However, the Roman aristocracy wanted more. While in their clients, who were generally from the lower classes, the Roman upper classes particularly got the support needed to secure the greatest number of votes in elections (also in the military), "full-time" slaves must work in their homes and large farm estates to ensure more abundant means of enjoying their luxuries and maintaining their socio-economic status.

A Roman Statesman and his Treatment of Slaves

Roman dependence on slavery was far-reaching. Indeed, by the sweat of slaves, the Roman industry was oiled. Although the slavery could be seen as systematically emerging from the people's military superiority, it is difficult to imagine a Rome that would allow any Moses to liberate her slaves. Without slaves, Roman factories would close down and many shops would not open and her world of entertainment would be dealt a death blow. The massive importation of products as well as transportation of items to the Roman markets would but fail in a Rome without the slave population. However, a picture of the use or treatment of

slaves by a Roman noble that follows, does not only show how members of the upper classes spearheaded slavery in ancient Rome, but it also provides examples of human values or motivations behind the practice of slavery throughout the ages. The case of the Roman statesman, Cato, is hereby examined.

Marcus Cato, also known as Cato the Elder(234-149 BC), was a Roman statesman who was reputed for bravery in military service. From a humble plebeian background, Cato rose to prominence and distinguished himself in Roman politics, becoming highly famed for 'great abilities'(Plutarch, Cato 1.2) that were demonstrably seen in his commitment and passion for the Roman republic. In his lifetime, Cato would see only three instances of regret: 'once when he entrusted a secret to his wife; once when he paid ship's fare to a place instead of walking thither; and once when he remained intestate 'a whole day' (Plutarch, Cato 9.6). However, the states man's dealings with slaves represent the ancient undesirable record of human abuse, which should also be on a list of regrets.

It is suggested that Cato, who was into slave trade, was very frugal in spending money on purchase of slaves as'he never paid more than fifteen hundred drachmas for a slave' (Plutarch, Cato4.4). He was also choosy in his purchase of slaves since this would mean wise investment, so that, 'rather than having considerations for effeminate or attractive looks, he sought after 'sturdy workers, such as grooms and herdsman' (Plutarch, Cato4.4).The statesman needed men with good physiques, who would do hard work and give him value for the money he spent on buying and feeding them. However, in this instance, Cato was

more than a shrewd business man; his treatment of slaves was no better than the handling of household tools or equipment. This is evidenced by what he did to slaves: 'when they got oldish, instead of feeding them when they were useless' (Plutarch, Cato4.4), he offered them up for sale. To Cato, the old weak frames were assets of little worth, lacking in real economic benefit to the buyer. However, old slaves' serving as household helps could not be ruled out in a society where even a poor plebeian family owned a slave or two and being a slave may be tantamount to survival. Of course, during the imperial Rome, it would be easier to think of use of old slaves working 'in low status jobs like cleaning the sewers and repairing roads' (Wiedemann, 1996: 286). Meanwhile, Cato here clearly provides an instance of treatment of slaves as chattels; 'beasts of burden...the mark of a very mean nature, which recognizes no tie between man and man but that of necessity' (Plutarch, Cato5.1).

Harsh treatments were experienced by all slaves in the ancient time. Yet, Cato's treatment of slaves, who were not only weak and worn out but also knew no other place of dwelling and could do little or nothing to care for themselves in their old age, is clearly bereft of compassion and just inhumane. A balance is required, however, between not being quick to dismiss Cato's action as mere social behaviour and passing a severe judgment on an ancient practice by using modern parameters.

Nevertheless, no attempt at being impartial should make anyone try to obscure the fact that Cato saw nothing odd about the use of slaves as "living tools". With his seemingly astute business deals, it is hardly difficult to get a picture of a capitalist, considering what is said next concerning him: 'he applied

himself more strenuously to money-getting ... and invested his capital in business that was safe and sure. He bought ponds, hot springs ... all of which brought him in large profits' (Plutarch, Cato 21.5). The statesman's 'business acumen' led to his taking steps, supposedly to secure his business, to engage in what a modern would define as human trafficking when he lent' money also to those of his slaves who wished it and they would buy boys with it, and after training and teaching them for a year, at Cato's expense, would sell them again. (Plutarch, Cato 21.6). Cato's action offers a good definition of human trafficking.

A major source of such boys that Cato would buy and sell after training in the Roman society was known as natural reproduction (Scheidel, 2007). Regarding this chief means of replenishing slaves, Cato's act was neither illegal nor socially wrong since 'under Roman law, the offspring of slave women assumed the status of their mothers, except when the mother had been free and married at the time of conception' (Scheidel, 2007: 15). With the legal endorsement of child propagation which made the child of a slave woman a slave for life, Cato, as he desired, could treat humans as merchandise. Still, this should not lead to the conclusion that he could not have done otherwise; in fact, he used to be known as more humane in his treatment of the lowly. Cato 'at the outset, when he was still poor and in military service, he found no fault at all with what was served up to him, declaring that it was shameful for a man to quarrel with a domestic over food and drink' (Plutarch, Cato 21.4). Representative of how some people of ordinary birth would behave when they become rich, Cato's demeanour was clearly associated with his changed status: 'when his

circumstances were improved and he used to entertain his friends and colleagues at table, no sooner was the dinner over than he would flog those slaves who had been remiss at all in preparing or serving it' (Plutarch, Cato21.4). The noble, Cato, would not only display the traits of a dominus (lord or master) whose pleasure was generally met with the cares of his slaves, but he became so domineering that he was also gratified by thrashing slaves for minor mistakes.

More picture of meanness, or better still, sadistic pleasure enjoyed by slave owners in the treatment of fellow humans in servitude, comes from Cato who 'was always contriving that his slaves should have feuds and dissensions among themselves; harmony among them made him suspicious and fearful of them'(Plutarch, Cato21.4). Strangely, peace among slaves was seen by Cato as threat to his authority and, in what appears to be a case of graver moral generation, the statesman 'had [slaves] suspected of some capital offence brought to trial before all their fellow servants, and, if convicted, put to [them to] death(Plutarch, Cato21.4).

Cato also exemplified the use of slaves to satisfy sexual pleasure. Although the term, sexual slavery, tends to have a modern connotation, use of slaves to fulfil sexual desire was a common social behaviour among Roman men of highest social profile that no one frowned at(Dillon and Garland, 2005:382). Ironically, while slave prostitutes spent their entire lives in sexual servitude gratifying sensual pleasures of such men, their "profession" was considered shameful and demeaning (Edwards, 1997:66).The ambivalent view of prostitution related

to situations where only the upper classes determined what was or what was not socially acceptable. Even when at some time popular moral thoughts would militate against a questionable practice among men of power and influence, Cato represents the undeniable secret pleasure of a Roman noble thus:

'He himself was well confirmed in bodily health and vigour, and long withstood the assaults of age. Even when an old man he was prone to indulge his sexual appetite, and at last married a wife when he was long past the marrying age. This was the way it came about. After the death of his wife, he married his son to the daughter of Aemilius Paulus, the sister of Scipio, but he himself, in his widowhood, took solace with a slave girl who secretly visited his bed' (Plut. Cato 21.1).

Cato, who in his old age still enjoyed 'bodily health and vigour', 'was prone to indulge his sexual appetite' and he got a ready outlet for his undying passion in a 'slave girl'. There may be no need here to discuss how old the girl was or whether Cato was satisfying his sexual desires by resorting to child abuse, the thought that is probably implicit in the expression, 'took solace with a slave girl [not a slave woman] who secretly visited his bed'. Ignoring the clandestine nature of the affair, Plutarch's account here lends credence to the fact the Roman society had sufficient amount of slaves to carry out all the people's "daily" duties, which included the "service" the girl rendered.

Conclusion

The peasant Romans had fought patriotically under the banner of *Senatus Populus que Romanus* (The Senate and People of Rome) during the Republic. Yet, the gains of the victorious wars and

conquests had only served to make the rich members of the ruling class richer and more powerful, creating economic hardship for the common people. This paper has noted that the late Republic betrayed moral decadence among the Roman upper classes. By their greed, the nobles subjected the poor to slavish conditions, which became evidenced by the agrarian crises that caused the peasant farmers to become recruits as political thugs in the city. Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus sought to relieve the pains of the common men in servitude, but they were both killed in political violence at the instigation of the powerful members of the Roman Senate. Such was the oppressive disposition of the ruling class who saw their profile of honour as incomplete without domination of other humans.

With the spirit of wielding authority over the common citizens by the upper classes that was powerful in the Roman culture, the rich were always desirous of social difference between them and the lower classes. Although the Patron-client relationship would be considered mutually beneficial and different from slavery, the rich patrons usually belonged to the ambitious and greedy senate class whose interests were often advanced through oppressive control of the state's resources. However, the role of the upper classes in promoting slavery or creating slavery conditions transcended living in luxury by subjecting fellow citizens to hard economic life. Their exotic taste for luxurious life and holding on to nobility also required having men who would help with the business of war constantly under their control. Besides, in greater quantity that could not be locally met, the upper classes needed people who would do domestic works and maximise the profits from large farm estates. Hence, the privileged men filled

Rome with imported slaves. Cato's example, in addition to typifying members of the upper classes as slave dealers or "human traffickers", suggests that the elite class could also be viewed as accomplices in sex slavery. There might be no much speculation on the role of the nobles in sex slavery since legal structures were put in place by the Roman senate for prostitution; the business of slaves or ex-slaves. The nobles had gained much wealth from war loots as well as a taste for luxury, which required a vast number of slaves to indulge all their pleasures.

The discussion on the role of the Roman upper classes necessarily evokes thoughts of actions or inactions of ruling classes or politicians in Africa today that engender slavery or slavery conditions. Africa has enough stories of leaders who loot the public coffers and live in prodigious luxury while pensioners and other common people they promise to liberate wind in deep pains of poverty in stinking urban slums and in subhuman conditions of debased rural shacks. Although slavery is no longer legal anywhere in the world, the above consideration characterises reports of use of humans as wealth-creating machines and as objects of sexual gratification in neo slavery or human trafficking business. Sadly, sex slavery remains an international business that ultimately best suits the tastes and needs of the rich and the powerful; an institution that shares space with deep-rooted corruption of the greedy powerful political class. Submission is here made that actions of any government to combat slavery would be inadequate as long as powerful politicians or their supporters, who are often beyond the reach of the law, are guilty of complicity. However, despite the Roman ugly record of slavery, a consideration of stories of

manumission in ancient Rome presents some light at the end of the tunnel. This will be examined in another work.

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