

SOCIAL FORMATIONS ASSIGNMENT

Question:

What were the economic, political and institutional processes that led to the expansion of Slave labour in the Roman civilization?

SLAVERY IN ROMAN ITALY

Slavery, as per defined by League of Nations Committee in 1926, is “the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised.” This definition stresses ownership of property implying slavery to be principally an economic institution. A second definition by a sociologist describes slavery as “the permanent, violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonoured persons.” This definition stresses upon the slaves’ subjection and isolation, suggesting slavery should be principally understood as a social relationship founded on the exercise of authority over an inferior party by a superior party. So was slavery an economic phenomenon or social phenomenon in the context of Roman civilization? This question cannot exist before the understanding of conditions for creating forced labour. Finley says the need to mobilize labour power for tasks beyond the capacity of an individual or family was present whenever a society attained a stage of sufficient accumulation of resources and power in some hands (whether king, temple, ruling tribe or aristocracy). The requisite labour force was obtained by compulsion- by physical violence or actions or by psychological force of law and custom. Thus slavery was one kind of forced labour between many others, though significantly different from the others as each form of forced labour was unfree in different ways. However, historians only seem to generally emphasize that they were not free. With the development of capitalism did wage labour emerge as the characteristic form of labour for others, thus making labour power as one of the main commodities in market place and in contrast with slavery, the labourer himself is the commodity. As a commodity, slave was a property over which masters exercised full control. It means therefore that a slave is not defined by how badly or well he/she is treated but by the fundamental fact of being unprotected as a human being or citizen by law. The unfreedom was a legal thing as the slave had no rights of family and reproduction. Even the children of slaves were without rights. Slaves had a partner or children only with the consent of the owner. All forms of compulsory labour other than slaves enjoyed social freedom to own some property protected by law. Unlike slaves, other compulsory labourers were self-reproducing. The place of slave in a society is not a matter of their totals (numbers) but of their location in two senses- first, who their owners were; secondly, what role they played, in the economy but not only in the economy.

Roman Italy is considered one of the few slave societies of the world. A slave society can be understood as a society in which slaves play an important part in production and form a high proportion of the population (say over 20%).

Means of supply of slaves were:-

- The reduction to slavery of enemies defeated in warfare was one of the principal mechanisms by which Rome provided itself with slaves in the central period of its history. Finley says that war and conquest were no doubt important contributing factors to the establishment and preservation of a slave society, but they were not a necessary condition and certainly not a sufficient condition. Also it's a debatable topic that why out of all options of extracting the most out of the war captives after victory in wars, slavery (one of the least common and usually reserved for particularly obstinate or treacherous enemies) became so rampant.
- Natural reproduction among the existing slave population.
- Long-distance trade with people and communities beyond the frontiers of the empire-trade, i.e., independent of expansionist warfare- was a further supplier of new slaves to Rome.
- Piracy within the sphere of Roman influence. (Pirates of Mediterranean)

Roman republic ancient economy was agriculture for which slaves were supplied by continuous and sequential warfares but in Roman principate, time of peaceful conditions, when warfare no longer provided slaves in sufficient numbers, owners were forced to turn to the systematic breeding of slaves to keep up supplies. Finley here argues that demand must have preceded supply and existence of a sufficient demand requires at least three necessary conditions:-

- In an overwhelmingly agrarian world, **private ownership of land**, with sufficient **concentration in some hands** to need extra-familial labour for the permanent work-force.
- Sufficient development of **commodity production** and **markets** (in present discussion, location and distance of market is not taken in consideration).
- Presence of a **negative condition**, the **unavailability of an internal labour supply**, compelling the employers of labour to turn to outsiders.

All the three conditions must exist at the same time.

Slavery, most importantly, was a means of labour, service and status symbol. In ancient Rome, the old political order (traditional oligarchy) lost its stability and a powerful monarchy strongly based on exclusive control of a professional army was established as a result of a series of bitter and destructive civil wars between rival generals. In parallel to transformation in political order, intrusion of large number of slaves transformed the traditional system of production. This impacted the native Roman peasants who often grew barely enough to feed themselves as now they were evicted to make room for slaves who produced a surplus for sale in the market. Slave displaced peasants migrated to the city of Rome and to other Italian towns, or joined the army or migrated to newly pacified Italian towns. Displacement of citizen peasants by slaves embittered the poor and also became an opportunity for ambitious individuals like generals to rise politically. The provision of food and work for 2 million slaves imported to live side by side with 4 million citizens implied economical and political changes in organization. Mass slavery in Roman Italy should also be seen as a product of Roman politics. In the Roman political system, aristocrats depended for their status and power on election to political office, which they solicited from plebs(). Aristocrats manipulated the electorate. The political power of the citizen body significantly limited the extent to which rich Romans could systematically exploit free

Roman citizens as overt dependents (**negative condition, the unavailability of internal labour supply**). Rich used slaves instead of free men as dependent workers, because slaves had advantages which outweighed their obvious disadvantages. The chief disadvantage of slaves was their high capital cost but in the exceptional circumstances of imperial conquest, Roman nobles could afford the high capital cost of slaves. These three components of slavery -- the slave's property status, the totality of the power over him, and his kinlessness -- provided powerful advantages to the slaveowner as against other forms of involuntary labour: he had greater control and flexibility in the employment of his labour force and far more freedom to dispose off unwanted labour. The presence of a substantial number of slaves in Roman society defined free citizens, even if they were poor, as superior. For the owners of large farms, slaves offered several advantages over free labour:-

- Slave-ownership conferred status and was an expression of power and superiority.
- Slaves could be completely controlled by the master.
- They could be forced to work long hours throughout the year.
- Slaves could be organized in gangs and allowed some agricultural specialization.
- In a society without a market in free labour, recruitment by force(i.e. Slavery) was probably the only method of securing large numbers of full-time dependents with particular skills. Slaves were the fuel of an agrarian revolution, a means of organizing labour in an economy without a labour market.
- Slavery fed on itself. Providing a single male with food cost substantially less than a family.

Economically, change in land uses and movements of peasant population was simultaneous with the creation of a new surplus and new market for its consumption. Slavery became a means to achieve surplus because of rise in the productivity of labour. Man-power saving was possible by changing from peasant to slave farming substantially. **The creation of market**(comprising peasants who migrated to Rome and other Italian towns and the new urban slaves) acted as a reciprocal and made the increase in productivity useful. The single biggest market was the city of Rome.

Land was the only safe large-scale investment available and the rich invested in it. The obstacle was that fertile land around Rome densely occupied by citizen peasants and the rich either bought up peasants' land or took possession of it by violence. Small holdings were reorganized into larger and more profitable farms(but not huge single estates).

It's evident from a few religious examples such as the participation of slave women in the Matralia, a womens' festival and Slave Womens' Festival etc. that there is a primitive religious institutionalization of a slave presence that complements the legal evidence. The cultural and institutional visibility of Slavery at Rome, across time and space, implies that for slaveowners slave-owning was a never failing source of personal advantage. The social and economic benefits that accrued to owners derived from their almost limitless abilities to control and coerce human property. From a cultural point of view thus, slavery was at no time an incidental feature of Roman social organization and at no time an inconsequential element of Roman mentality.

Referred readings:

1. Slavery and Society at Rome, Keith Bradley.
2. Conquerers and Slaves, Keith Hopkins
3. The Emergence of A Slave Society, Finley.