

REVIEW ESSAY

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF SLAVERY

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ANTHROPOLOGIE DE L'ESCLAVAGE. LE VENTRE DE FER ET D'ARGENT. By Claude Meillassoux. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1986. Pp. 375.

In this ambitious theoretical synthesis, Claude Meillassoux draws together two lines of his earlier work: his analysis of the "domestic community," as presented in his work on the Gouro and in his 1975 *Femmes, greniers et capitaux*, and his investigation of "slave societies," as presented in his edited collection, *L'esclavage en Afrique précoloniale* and his studies of Gumbu. This volume at once consolidates his previous analysis and breaks new ground.

The subtitle translates as "the womb of iron and silver." This extraordinary image serves to emphasize Meillassoux's primary analytical focus: the reproduction of the social order in societies relying heavily on slavery. The book is Marxist in its methodology and in its focus on social class. But it is designed to revise rather than to reaffirm Marxian analysis. In particular, Meillassoux argues that reproduction – of kin, class, and society – should be accorded an importance almost as great as that of modes in production in determining the pace and direction of social change.

The image of the womb of iron and silver is sustained throughout the book. After an introductory pair of chapters emphasizing that slaves were foreign to the community in which they were held, the book is divided into three sections. The first section ("le ventre") centers on the slaves themselves – their conditions of life and their reproduction as a social group. The second section ("le fer") analyzes systems of aristocratic slavery such as that of the Bambara kingdom of Segou; the third section ("l'argent") analyzes such cases of mercantile slavery as that of the Maraka of the middle Niger valley. Two concluding chapters discuss the dissolution of slavery and restate Meillassoux's position on the role of reproduction in the overall analysis of social change. A glossary, providing definitions of roughly 130 terms, is essential reading for those who wish to assess the argument in detail.

The empirical grounding of this work of theory is centered, as the above examples suggest, on the Western Sudan. In addition to his own research, Meillassoux relies particularly on work by Richard Roberts and by Jean Bazin. To a lesser degree, Meillassoux utilizes the literature on the rest of West Africa and the entire continent. His regional centering of the analysis is at once a strength and a weakness: the generalizations are clear, but the reader is left with the task of discerning which aspects of the theory are applicable generally, and which are limited in their validity to the western Sudan.

Meillassoux's thesis on the reproduction of slave society is intended to be applied universally. Here he presents in revised form his earlier argument that slavery does not correspond precisely to a mode of production, since there lacks an organic set of relationships within the society through which exploitation of a work force leads to reproduction of the system. Reproduction of the slave system requires the capture of slaves from outside the society. Slavery as a system can only be analyzed by focusing both on the society which uses the slaves and on the society which produces the persons made into slaves. He punctuates the generality of this assessment by going back to Marx and arguing that Marx was aware of the importance of social reproduction in addition to mode of production, but failed to follow it up explicitly.

The empirically testable corollaries of the thesis are that (1) slaves do not reproduce themselves, either biologically or socially (this is a matter both of the slaves' infertility and the author's definitional dexterity), and (2) reproduction of a slave labor force requires continued introduction of new slaves, and thus forces the analyst to include the source society as well as that of the enslavers. The exceptions – New World slavery in the period after slave imports ended and African slavery after the European conquest – are here presented as anomalies restricted to a time when slavery was in decline. Meillassoux has a tendency to state his conclusions in flat and categorical terms, which may induce readers to view him as arguing that reproduction is all and production is nothing; on the contrary, I think he is moving toward an integration of the two. In particular, production takes place within a given society (with a given social organization), while reproduction of the slave community can take place only with the interaction of more than one society.

At the outset, Meillassoux pursues a decade-old debate, characterizing Igor Kopytoff and Suzanne Miers as having located the origin of slavery in an internal evolution repeated scores of times within African societies: slavery is in this view an extension of kinship, and it evolved independently and uniquely in each African society.¹ In contrast, Meillassoux argues that slaves are systematically non-kin, and that slavery cannot have evolved within a "domestic society" (because, if slaves are seen as a class, a group exploited and reproduced by the organic functioning of society, they cannot have been brought into existence in a domestic society where goods were shared and where reproduction of society from within was a fundamental objective), and that it came about only through the capture of people in one society by another. The slave, in this view, is irrevocably foreign: the other. The ideology of slave-holding, to be sure, presents the slave as part of the master's family, but Meillassoux argues that Kopytoff and Miers mistook the ideology for the reality. (One might add that the descriptions of slavery on which the Miers and Kopytoff volume is based – as well as those in Meillassoux's 1975 collection! – were drawn primarily from the late nineteenth century, at a time when slave trade had been sharply curtailed, and that the vision of slavery as self-sustaining rather than reproduced by capture was more easily set forth in this context.)

Kopytoff and Miers focus on "rights-in-persons," held by corporate lineages. They assert the existence of a "slavery-to-kinship continuum" and focus therefore on the institutionalized marginality of the slave rather than on the slave as an unborn or alien person. (Meillassoux sees not a continuum between slavery and kinship, but a "qualitative change.") They do consider only one society at a time, and see the "roots of servile institutions in the need for wives and children. . . ."² They thus acknowledge the foreign origin of many slaves without seeing in that origin an essential characteristic of slavery.

Frederick Cooper has labeled this an "absorptionist" approach to slavery, focusing on social structure to the exclusion of economic realities. But Meillassoux, in Cooper's view, went too far in counterposing production and reproduction, and underplayed the interrelations of forms of slave production with modes of reproduction: we "need to see slavery as part of changing regional economic systems, not simply within the bounds of ethnic groups." Cooper's vision of slavery focuses as much on social movements as on economic or social structures: "slavery was shaped not simply by markets and social structure, or even by dominant classes, but by the process of interaction and struggle itself."³ In this book we can see Meillassoux as having responded to Cooper in part – with a more integrated presentation of production and reproduction and a greater emphasis on the inter-ethnic and inter-societal nature of slavery – but he focuses on social and economic structures rather than social struggles as agents of change to a degree that may not please Cooper entirely.

Although Meillassoux denies that slaves were kin, he uses the techniques of kinship analysis to good advantage. He divides members of society into those who are born into the community and those who are from without (*ingénu* and *étranger* are his terms). He argues that, in social terms, neither male nor female slaves had any offspring: free males were the procreators of slaves, as captors of those enslaved after birth, and as owners of those born into slavery. With a selection of African terms and proverbs he demonstrates that these societies were clear on the distinction between physical and social aspects of slavery: this is a type of distinction which has only recently been rediscovered in the Western tradition, as with the distinction between biological sex and socially constructed gender. At the same time, Meillassoux's kinship analysis of slavery is based on the assumed universality of unilineal, corporate kin structures – patrilineages, in short. Here he reduces the generality of his argument by neglecting to consider how his analysis would work for the case of bilateral kinship: the latter, as Wyatt MacGaffey has argued convincingly, was prominent in the areas of Central Africa where slavery was widespread, and may well have developed as a result of slavery.⁴

While Meillassoux insists that the study of slavery must focus on the interaction of societies, he provides some excellent insights on single societies. He gives an effective analysis of the interaction of social classes – including

²Kopytoff and Miers, "African Slavery," 67.

³Frederick Cooper, "The Problem of Slavery in African Studies," *Journal of African History*, 20, 1 (1979), 119.

⁴MacGaffey, "Lineage Structure, Marriage, and the Family amongst the Central Bantu," *Journal of African History*, 24 (1983), 184.

¹Igor Kopytoff and Suzanne Miers, "African 'Slavery' as an Institution of Marginality," in Miers and Kopytoff, eds., *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison, 1977), 3-81. Meillassoux misspells Kopytoff's name as "Kopitoff" throughout the volume under review.

aristocrats, peasants, merchants, serfs, and slaves – though without defining the classes thoroughly. He analyzes in detail the possibility of slaves reproducing themselves through bringing up their own children: he considers the types and the numbers of non-productive people each slave must support – an important contribution of his approach – and concludes that a putative slave couple simply did not produce enough food to bring more than a single child to adulthood. He contrasts this situation with that in domestic society and in serfdom. (To speak of serfdom, he notes, is not necessarily to claim that the whole superstructure of feudalism was in place.) Serfs, who rendered a given amount of their harvest to the landlord, were able to retain a larger portion of their produce than slaves, and were thus better able to raise children and reproduce themselves biologically. The slave population, on the other hand, tended to decline except for further captures and purchases.

In his section on warrior slavery, Meillassoux illustrates the range of that experience by contrasting the case of Sundiata of Mali, the king who provided protection against brigands, with that of Bitom Kulibali of Segu, the brigand king. These two types of ancestry give rise to the two types of warrior society which Meillassoux identifies: the military tyranny and the warrior despotism. Meillassoux goes so far as to suggest that the institutions of divine kingship, rather than having been inherited from the ages, were developed in warrior society in order to conceal the weakness of successors to the founding warrior kings.

In mercantile slavery, the slaves were recruited by purchase rather than by capture. Meillassoux highlights Islam as a mercantile ideology which sustained the growth of the merchant towns of the Western Sudan and regulated as well as justifying slavery. He gives attention to the internal slave market as a mechanism for circulating resources, arguing that land was not a commodity. In this case the peasant and slave sectors were less distinct than for warrior slavery: peasant slaveowners were common enough. Meillassoux analyzes several mechanisms of exploitation of slaves (totalitarian exploitation, collection of rent in labor and rent in product). His discussion of profitability in mercantile slavery includes the amortization of slave purchases and the choice between commercial profit and agricultural surplus, as well as the distinction between commercial reproduction and eco-demographic reproduction.

An analysis of such breadth and comprehensiveness tends to set its own high standards. The ironic result is that it makes readers greedy rather than satiating them, and it elicits from them a demand for an even more comprehensive and systematic study. This greedy demand is accompanied by a list of theoretical lacunae in – and empirical exceptions to – the work. To begin with some empirical exceptions to Meillassoux's sudanic rules, slaves were indeed absorbed into lineages along the West African coast and in Central Africa; land did become a commodity in parts of West Africa, and so forth. As a result, his analysis cannot be applied without some revision to other regions of Africa.

The allegations of theoretical lacunae are perhaps more interesting. I concluded, for instance, that while he emphasizes the dialectic of slavery as it worked itself out through time, his time was often relative rather than absolute. Thus, he argues that slavery in the Western Sudan grew up as a result of that region's contacts with North Africa, but he is unable to specify either the timing or the mechanism of that influence. This is, of course, another instance of the

historian's usual claim that anthropological work is timeless. On the other hand, he offers at least one striking and explicitly temporal thesis with his suggestion that mercantile slavery was expanding in the seventeenth-century Western Sudan, but that the rise of European demand for slaves intervened and sustained the rise of the warrior slavery of the Segu state in the eighteenth century, and that mercantile slavery rose again to significance only in the nineteenth century.

The list of analytical desiderata can be extended. Since Meillassoux argues that slavery in the Western Sudan was linked indissolubly to the export slave trade, both to the west and to the north, he should have linked the export slave trade more explicitly to his analysis of slavery in African society. Similarly, his analysis of social and biological reproduction is a great step forward, but it would have been strengthened by the addition of a more detailed analysis of slave prices, and particularly the relationships between male and female slave prices. His definitions of society and social system in the glossary do much to systematize the analysis, but it is not clear how one defines the frontiers between societies: were Maraka merchants and Segu warrior kings in the same society or in different societies? His analysis seems to require that they be seen as separate societies, yet they were within the same kingdom.

Finally, if Meillassoux had grappled more explicitly with the literature on New World slavery, he would have done much to affirm the significance of his analysis in the study of slavery generally. This would have provided a clear reminder that the North American vision of slavery is slavery without slave trade – an unusual circumstance, in a declining era of slavery. Meillassoux's analysis of profitability and reproduction, based on the labor theory of value, consists of a revealing yet heuristic set of calculations. It should be confronted with the neoclassical approach and the historically-based calculations on the same issues in the New World literature.

All of these caveats suggest that the analysis of slavery is not complete, either in Africa or in general. Claude Meillassoux has, however, provided us with the most convincing analysis of the sociology of slavery yet to appear. His analysis is based on a far narrower range of comparison than Orlando Patterson's massive *Slavery and Social Death*, but it is ultimately a more significant contribution.⁵ This is so not simply because he focuses more firmly on the material realities of life with slavery, in contrast with Patterson's primary focus on ideology, but also because Meillassoux provides a more comprehensive method and a stronger, more integrated, and more testable set of theses. The clearest contribution of this book is its analytical framework: an integrated analysis of kin and class, of production and reproduction, of ideology, economy and social structure, coupled with his attempt to assess the historical development of slavery. Of his generalizations, the most important is his thesis on slavery as a multi-societal phenomenon. This thesis did not originate with Meillassoux, but he has presented it at a new level of care and detail. It is tied intimately to his second key thesis, that slave classes cannot reproduce themselves. A third thesis, on the antithesis of slavery and kinship, is also a major if not unexceptionable contribution: these are supplemented by a range of more specific theses and typologies.

⁵Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982).

The concluding passages of this well written book, in evoking scenes from nineteenth-century West Africa and the ancient Mediterranean, provide a clear reminder that slavery remains a topic of intense study not simply for antiquarian reasons, but because it provides a terrain for us to study the still unresolved dialectic of freedom and oppression in the world of today.

REVIEW ESSAY

THE STATE AND ECONOMY IN KENYA

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THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF KENYA. *Edited by Michael G. Schatzberg.*
SAIS Study on Africa. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1987. Pp. 256. \$42.95.

Debates over development in the Third World, Africa, and Kenya are now familiar. The fundamental question has centered around the issue of the transition to capitalism. Is it possible? How should the process be facilitated? Those doubting its possibility or fearing its outcomes, especially its propensity to generate poverty as well as wealth and its uncertain impact upon women, prescribe a more self-reliant and socialist direction. Key concepts in the debate concern processes of capital accumulation, class structure, the possibility and character of a national bourgeoisie as the primary agent of accumulation, and the roles of external capital and the local state. Finally, there is the question of what social forces constitute and influence the state. The essays in this volume touch on all these questions.

The very useful introduction by Gilbert Kadiagala and Michael Schatzberg succinctly reviews two theories of development — the underdevelopment and dependent development schools of thought — and their application to Kenya. The underdevelopment school argues that the colonial and independent states and, successively, settler and international capital dominated Kenya's economy and hampered the emergence of a dynamic national bourgeoisie and a capitalist transition. The dependent development position argues to the contrary that development was not blocked, that accumulation went on in the colonial era, that agricultural capitalists emerged, land was concentrated and a nascent bourgeoisie emerged in agriculture, in trade, and even in manufacturing. Exactly what social forces the state represented was unclear, perhaps even unknowable,¹ but it appeared that while the state nurtured local capital, it also fashioned a strong working relationship with international capital. As the rather economic debate over development theory and the character of the bourgeoisie died out, increasing attention in the literature on Africa as a whole, if not on Kenya, turned to the pervasive role of the state.

This book pays particular attention to the state. In the early post-independence African environment it was widely assumed that the state would play the central role in development, providing not only a minimal framework for a classic transition to capitalism, but also acting as planner, accumulator, and investment and management partner with national and international capital. As

¹Gavin Kitching, "Politics, Method, and Evidence in the 'Kenya Debate,'" in Henry Bernstein and Bonnie K. Campbell eds., *Contradictions of Accumulation in Africa: Studies in Economy and State* (Beverly Hills, 1985), 115-151.