

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88183-8 - Slave Systems: Ancient and Modern

Edited by Enrico Dal Lago and Constantina Katsari

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PART I

*Slavery, slave systems, world history, and  
comparative history*

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## CHAPTER I

*The study of ancient and modern slave systems: setting an agenda for comparison**Enrico Dal Lago and Constantina Katsari*

Historical studies of slavery are, by definition, both global and comparative. Slavery, in fact, is an institution whose practice has covered most of the documented history of the world and has spread across many different countries and regions around the globe. Thus, very few societies have remained historically untouched by it, while, at different times and in different degrees, most have seen a more or less strong presence of slaves employed for a variety of different purposes within them. Throughout history and in many societies, masters have utilized their slaves for tasks as diverse as working on landed estates or even on industrial complexes, or, more commonly, serving in households and other domestic settings, and, more rarely, for specific military or religious purposes.

The chapters gathered in this collection represent the variety of experiences associated with slavery, while they focus particularly on the scholarly study of its influence on the economy and society of those cultures that made extensive use of it. Though the dimensions of the scholarly study of slavery, much as slavery itself, are truly global in their breadth – and the authors of each chapter are aware of this – the declared scope of the present book is to focus on the comparative analysis of two specific regions of the world where slavery flourished at different times: the ancient Mediterranean and the modern Atlantic. What justifies the choice of these two particular areas is the fact that, in the course of their history, both regions saw the rise, heyday, and eventual end of self-contained, self-sustaining, highly developed and profitable systems of slavery, or ‘slave systems’.

Historians and historical sociologists have commonly used the term ‘system’ to describe a complex set of factors that allowed the economy and society of a particular historical culture to operate. Depending on the time and place, a ‘system’ would be defined by the existence of specific sets of relationships between different economic operators – such as elites, labourers, or merchants – and between them and different types of institutions – such as the state, the king or emperor, the banks, etc. The ‘system’

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operated in such a way that the particular types of social relationship that characterized it mirrored the economic relationships, which in turn defined its very structure. The organic integration among its different parts, which created an economic mechanism that was both self-contained and self-sustaining, allowed a specific 'system' to operate efficiently. The well-defined economic mechanism aimed at dealing with the effective production, distribution, and consumption of goods within a specific social scene or across societies and states. Despite the fact that the term 'system' has been connected with the economy, we should not forget that such socio-economic systems have also a cultural dimension that plays a definite role in their formation.

A much studied case is that of the feudal system, first described by Marc Bloch for medieval western Europe and then by Witold Kula for early modern eastern Europe.<sup>1</sup> In its simplest definition, the term 'feudal system' refers both to the social ties that bound a nobility to perform military duties for a king in exchange for grants given in land, and also the particular type of labour arrangements that bound the serfs to their lords on the latter's landed estates. More recently, scholars have used the term 'system' also to indicate particular types of organic sets of economic and social relationships that have historically encompassed large areas of the world, with different countries and regions included within them. Arguably, the most famous example is in Immanuel Wallerstein's 'world-system' analysis, at the heart of which is the process of historical formation, from the sixteenth century on, of the particular economic relationships that characterized the different components of a capitalist system spread over the entire globe and centred upon western Europe.<sup>2</sup> In Wallerstein's view, these economic relationships arose together with strong social inequalities associated with them and also in relation to different types of labour – among them slavery – that characterized the different areas within the system.

The expression 'slave system' refers to the scholarship cited above in that it describes a self-contained, self-sustaining set of organic relationships, both at the economic and at the social level. In this case, though, at the heart of this set of relationships was the institution of slavery, whose influence pervaded nearly every aspect of at least some of the cultures that were integrant parts of the few historically known 'slave systems' – especially the ones flourishing in the ancient Mediterranean and the modern Atlantic. Much like feudalism defined the feudal system, therefore, slavery

<sup>1</sup> See Bloch 1975 (1932); and Kula 1976 (1962).    <sup>2</sup> See Wallerstein 1974–89.

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defined a 'slave system' by providing the foundation of an economy in which (a) elite wealth and slave ownership were two notions inextricably connected to each other, (b) a large part of the trade revolved around buying and selling slaves, (c) a high percentage of the workers were enslaved labourers, and/or (d) states and other types of institutions relied on the profits made with slavery for their prosperity. Also, within a 'slave system', the social hierarchy mirrored the economic one based on slave ownership, while slavery influenced relationships equally within the family and in society at large in some particular cultures.<sup>3</sup>

By using the term 'slave system', we intend to refer explicitly to the pervasiveness of the institution of slavery – an institution based on the 'slave mode of production' and system of labour – in the economy and society of those regions, countries, and states that were interconnected parts of a unified market area. In some respects, then, the concept of 'slave system' relies on the definition of 'slave society', first advanced by Moses Finley and then utilized also by Keith Hopkins and Ira Berlin.<sup>4</sup> According to this definition, unlike in a 'society with slaves', in a 'slave society' slavery was at the heart of the economic and social life of a particular culture and it influenced it in such a way to create a large class of slaveholders, who effectively held a great deal of power and exercised it over the non-slaveholding population. Significantly, according to both Finley and Hopkins, genuine 'slave societies' were historically only a few<sup>5</sup> and, among them, the best-known cases are classical Athens and imperial Rome in the ancient Mediterranean and the nineteenth-century United States and Brazil in the modern Atlantic. Both the ancient Mediterranean and the modern Atlantic represent two major 'slave systems', which, in turn, include areas representing specific socio-economic 'subsystems'. Such 'subsystems' were, for example, the Athenian or the Brazilian ones. The wider 'slave systems' of the Mediterranean and the Atlantic consisted ultimately of a collection of different cultures interrelated in an organic way, as a result of the influence of slavery on their economy and society. Eventually, these systems provided the opportunity for the development of genuine 'slave societies' at the centre of their trade networks.

If one decided to study 'slave systems' such as those of the ancient Mediterranean and the modern Atlantic within the framework of a

<sup>3</sup> The classic study of 'slave systems' in antiquity is Westermann 1955.

<sup>4</sup> See Finley 1998; Hopkins 1978; and Berlin 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Notice also that Orlando Patterson supports a view opposite from Hopkins; see Chapter 2 note 5 in this volume.

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chronological sequence of phenomena on a global scale, undoubtedly the methodological approach of world historical analysis would be the most appropriate. World history, intended as a discipline that studies the global past of human societies, is consistently on the rise nowadays. Scholars who have chosen this approach have either attempted exceptionally broad ranging surveys or, more interestingly, they have focused on finding common patterns of historical development among societies located in particular areas of the world. Among the latter types of studies, the most acclaimed have treated patterns of historical spread and influence of either a particular economic feature, such as trade, or else of a particular socio-political institution, such as Islam.<sup>6</sup> Yet, while slavery *per se* could easily be researched as either of the two, the study of ‘slave systems’ would require, because of its nature, a more specific type of world historical approach.

Recently, historians and historical sociologists have become increasingly aware of the importance of seas and oceans for the study of world history, focusing, above all, on the unifying influences that the latter have exercised in economic and social terms on the cultures that have flourished around them.<sup>7</sup> In particular, scholarship on the Mediterranean and the Atlantic has steadily increased in size, thus acknowledging the importance of these regions as historically integrated socio-economic areas within a global context. Specifically, recent studies such as Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell’s *The Corrupting Sea* and John Elliott’s *Empires of the Atlantic* not only followed the established historiographic tradition by considering the two seas as unifying entities but they opened new paths by providing invaluable suggestions for researchers of the ancient Mediterranean and the modern Atlantic within the context of world history.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, important suggestions in this sense have come also from the few studies that belong to the recent field of research of ‘historical globalization’.<sup>9</sup>

To be sure, the suggestions coming from the studies mentioned above would prove particularly useful, if one wished to proceed to identify patterns of historical development by employing a comparative method, when researching on two specific ‘slave systems’ such as the ancient Mediterranean and the modern Atlantic. In this case, the methodological approach would focus specifically on sustained and combined analysis of

<sup>6</sup> On the state of the art of world history, see Hodgson and Burke III 1993.

<sup>7</sup> See Wigen 2006; Horden and Purcell 2006; Games 2006; and Matsuda 2006.

<sup>8</sup> See Horden and Purcell 2000; and Elliott 2006. The few studies on the Mediterranean, including Harris 2005, refer invariably to Braudel 1975 (1949). On the ever-growing scholarship on the ‘Atlantic world’, see Armitage and Braddick 2002.

<sup>9</sup> See Hopkins 2002.

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the two 'slave systems', so to identify important similarities and differences between them and to understand their meaning in comparative historical perspective. Ever since March Bloch published his pioneering article on the comparative history of European societies in 1928, comparative historians have debated on the correct approach and aim of historical comparisons.<sup>10</sup> In the end, it is fair to say that most of them have agreed on the fact that, broadly speaking, the features he had originally outlined – a certain similarity between the facts observed and certain differences between their contexts – are still the indispensable requirements for a comparative study of the type that, according to Peter Kolchin, employs a 'rigorous' approach to historical comparison.<sup>11</sup>

There are, of course, other ways of doing historical comparison, and several of the studies that employ them would probably fall under another category described by Kolchin as employing a 'soft' approach to historical comparison, for the reason that, rather than developing into full-blown comparative analyses, they either simply hint at the possibility of doing this or provide brief comparative treatments of significant themes they treat.<sup>12</sup> Most likely, though, the majority of comparative studies would fall somewhere in between these two extremes of 'rigorous' and 'soft' approaches to historical comparisons. The chapters collected in this book are a proof of the validity of different comparative approaches to the history of the 'slave systems' of the ancient Mediterranean and the modern Atlantic, and these approaches cover the entire spectrum contained within the two definitions of 'rigorous' and 'soft' comparisons. At the same time, the essays also provide a critically informed approach to comparative history that does not refrain from identifying the latter's limitations in regard to the study of particular historical problems.

When researching 'slave systems', whether from a global or a comparative historical perspective, one should first acknowledge the importance of studies written by a number of scholars who have analysed slavery in all its different aspects. Particularly significant, for the purpose of the present book, are those studies that have attempted to treat the development of slavery as an institution through subsequent historical periods and also those that have provided treatments encompassing all the varieties of slavery that have characterized different historical societies. Among the former types of studies, the most significant are those written by David

<sup>10</sup> See Bloch 1928; see also Skocpol and Somers 1980.

<sup>11</sup> See Kolchin 2003a: 4. On the debate over comparative history, see Cohen and O'Connor 2004.

<sup>12</sup> See Kolchin 2003a.

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Brion Davis, who has provided – in his trilogy *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolutions*, and *Slavery and Human Progress* – the most comprehensive treatment of the history of slavery as both a social institution and a cultural feature of the western world from antiquity to the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> Davis' is, in many ways, a model of world historical analysis with invaluable suggestions for the study of 'slave systems', for it shows, through the development of the institution of slavery, the similarities and differences in the types of contexts in which it operated at different historical times in the West. Among those studies that have, instead, provided a broad treatment of slavery covering different parts of the world in different historical periods, the most acclaimed has been Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death*, a model study of both world history and comparative history at the same time.<sup>14</sup> On one hand, in fact, it is fair to say that Patterson's book is the one study that has succeeded more than any other to show the importance and pervasiveness of slavery as a global institution in the entire history of the world. On the other hand, the suggestions for comparative studies of 'slave systems' are also innumerable in Patterson's work, since at its heart lies comparison on a grand scale between all the known slaveholding historical societies; the author's purpose to arrive at a working definition of the most likely constant characteristics of slavery and of its variants has been amply fulfilled.

Inspired by Davis' and Patterson's works, scholars of slavery have gathered in impressive collaborative projects that, for the first time, have attempted to catalogue and detail the varieties of experiences related to slavery and the issues attached to it across historical eras and places. From these efforts, encyclopaedias, chronologies, and guides to both the actual phenomenon of world slavery and the massive and intricate scholarship attached to it have recently arisen.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, a monumental attempt by Joseph C. Miller to systematically keep track of and divide into categories the ever-increasing number of scholarly studies on world slavery has produced a comprehensive bibliography, recently updated as a supplement of the journal *Slavery & Abolition*, which represents the state of the art of scholarship in the field.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the projected edited multi-volume *World History of Slavery* by Cambridge University Press

<sup>13</sup> Davis 1966, 1975, 1984. See also Davis 2006. <sup>14</sup> Patterson 1982.

<sup>15</sup> See Rodriguez 1997; Finkelman and Miller 1998; Drescher and Engerman 1998; and Rodriguez 1999.

<sup>16</sup> See Miller 1999b; and Thurston and Miller 2005.

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promises to encompass all areas of the world and to span from antiquity to the present.

Parallel to broad studies of slavery in world and comparative historical context, another type of research has produced more specific comparative studies, aiming at providing a combined analysis of one or two particular slave societies. The archetype of these studies is Frank Tannenbaum's 1946 book *Slave and Citizen*, which compared the institution of slavery in the United States and Latin America. This book subsequently led to the publication of a number of specific comparative studies – such as the ones by Herbert Klein and Carl Degler – between the slave society of the American South and those of Latin American countries such as Cuba and Brazil.<sup>17</sup> This tradition of comparative historical studies is the one that most appropriately fits Peter Kolchin's idea of 'rigorous' approach to comparative history. This type of comparison, while for a long time restricted to studies on the slave societies of the New World, has recently broadened its scope and included the comparative research between the nineteenth-century American South and contemporary African and European societies characterized by different degrees of unfree labour.<sup>18</sup> From this particular type of scholarship have come particularly valuable suggestions for a 'rigorous' comparative historical approach to the study of 'slave systems', especially from the methodological point of view.

Aside from the few studies that belong to this tradition of scholarship, for the most part comparative research on slavery has employed in different terms and degrees a 'soft' approach to historical comparison. This is especially true in regard to comparison between ancient and modern types of slavery, about which there is no specific and sustained comparative study to date, even though a number of ancient and modern historians have hinted at the possibility. Among ancient historians (aside from the already mentioned Moses Finley and Keith Hopkins) Keith Bradley, Walter Scheidel, Stephen Hodkinson, Brent Shaw, Alan Watson, and Geoffrey de Ste Croix have also provided a number of interesting comparative points with the modern world – and particularly often with the ante-bellum American South – in their treatments of different aspects of ancient slavery. Thomas Wiedemann, specifically, attempted with the foundation of the Institute for the Study of Slavery at the University of Nottingham the promotion of the comparative study of slavery through a series of edited volumes that would have included studies of individual slave societies across time and space. Sadly,

<sup>17</sup> Tannenbaum 1946. See also Klein 1967; and Degler 1971.

<sup>18</sup> See Fredrickson 1981; Kolchin 1987; Bowman 1993; and Dal Lago 2005.



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his untimely death prevented him from seeing the completion of this project.<sup>19</sup>

Among modern historians, instead, the most effective at providing comparative treatments referring to aspects of ancient slavery have been specifically, besides David Brion Davis and Orlando Patterson, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese and Michael O' Brien, who have also investigated the effects of the legacy of ancient slavery on the society and intellectual culture of slave societies in the New World, and specifically of the American South.<sup>20</sup> Aside from these individual efforts, some ancient and modern historians have also participated in collaborative enterprises of collective volumes either on the history of slavery or on the history of both slavery and serfdom, providing juxtaposed treatments of ancient and modern topics. Even though not explicitly comparative, these collections of papers have hinted at important parallels and connections not only between different types of slavery but also between different systems of unfree labour.<sup>21</sup>

On the basis of the suggestions coming from all the works we have mentioned above and from the methodological developments that we have previously discussed, we wish to start with the publication of the present book a project of diachronic comparative study of 'slave systems', focusing specifically on the ancient Mediterranean and the modern Atlantic. In regards to the comparative approach, our preference goes to the 'rigorous' method described by Kolchin; however, as the chapters in the book show, we recognize the validity of all the studies that have hinted at possible comparisons between the ancient and modern worlds and we refer to them for the justification of our project. The general objective of our comparative project is the analysis of the 'slave systems' that flourished in the ancient Mediterranean and the modern Atlantic in their wholeness. Several of the chapters in this book look at the systems from a rather general point of view, placing them firmly in the context of world history and relating them to the scholarship on both world slavery and comparative slavery. At the same time, we think that the specific focus of particular comparative studies needs to address themes of combined analysis between two or more particular 'slave societies' – whether these are the ante-bellum

<sup>19</sup> See Bradley 1987, 1994; Hodkinson 2003: 245–85; Chapter 4 in this volume; Shaw 1998a; Watson 1987, 1989; Ste Croix 1983; and Wiedemann and Gardner 2002.

<sup>20</sup> See Davis 2006; Patterson 1982; Fox-Genovese and Genovese 2005; and O'Brien 2004.

<sup>21</sup> See especially Bush 1996a; Engerman 1999; and Brown and Morgan 2006.

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American South and the Roman empire, or colonial Brazil and ancient Greece, etc. – as some of the chapters in this book do.

Ultimately, the unifying theme behind all the chapters, whether explicitly or implicitly comparative and whether relying on a world history or comparative history approach, is the fact that they are all based on a ‘diachronic’ view of the ancient and modern past. By this, we mean a view that looks as much at comparisons as at connections between the ancient and the modern worlds, depending on the methodological approach taken by the author of the chapter. In particular, unlike most sustained comparative studies, which focus on ‘synchronic’ comparisons between specific features of two or more contemporary societies, the examples of ‘rigorous’ method present in this book have a clear ‘diachronic’ thrust, which allows them to compare and contrast ancient and modern ‘slave systems’ as independent units of research and identify both common and different features across time and space. The ultimate aim of this enterprise is to start to identify the defining features, both at the methodological level and in terms of application, of a model for the ‘diachronic’ comparative study of ‘slave systems’ – one specifically focusing on the ancient Mediterranean and the modern Atlantic – that might be helpful to other studies of the same type in the future.

The best way to start an actual ‘diachronic’ comparative study of ‘slave systems’ is to discuss the methodological issues specifically related to it. Part I in the present book – entitled ‘Slavery, slave systems, world history, and comparative history’ – is, therefore, dedicated to presenting the research methods of ancient and modern slavery, with a particular focus on the ancient Mediterranean and the modern Atlantic. Referring back to the general points we made previously on world history and comparative history and on world slavery and comparative slavery, this part includes – besides our own methodological introduction – two chapters that represent two radically different approaches regarding the study of ‘slave systems’. The first chapter, in fact, upholds the validity of historical comparison to the point of even setting up an agenda for future research on comparative slavery, while the second chapter questions the very validity of the definition of ‘slavery’ – and thus the possibility of comparing different types of slavery – preferring, instead, to focus on the analysis of ‘slaving’ in world history.

The two chapters are representatives of the ongoing debate between, on one hand, comparative historians and historical sociologists, and, on the other hand, world historians and historians of globalization over the pre-eminence given either to the study of slavery as a collection of experiences