

CHAPTER EIGHT

Roman Slavery and the Class Divide: Why Spartacus Lost

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Given the grinding poverty and social misery endured by the ordinary people of Rome, why did they fail to make common cause with the slave population, especially when the latter moved toward insurgency with the strength of numbers as when they were led by someone like Spartacus? This question informs the present inquiry.

1. Oligarchy and Poverty

When Spartacus and his brave hearts launched their rebellion in 73 B.C., Rome was a Republic. This is easily forgotten when people today read about his struggle. Nor does Stanley Kubrick's movie dwell upon that fact, choosing instead to show – correctly so – that actual rule in Rome was by an aristocratic oligarchy embedded in the senate. To be sure, the common people, the plebs, exercised a sporadic influence with agitations in the streets and in the Forum. On occasion, with enough organization and turnout and with the right leadership from inspired tribunes or some other *populares*, men of the people, they might carry the day on one or another measure in the Tribal Assembly. But it was the senate, dominated by an inner circle of ultraconservative noblemen (*nobiles*), that determined foreign policy, appointed provincial governors, and held the purse strings of the Republic. In brief, the

Republic's political system permitted the wealthy few to prevail on most, if not all, issues.

For those at the bottom of the social order, life was a mean struggle. The mass of the propertyless *plebs urbana*, the urban population, and their country cousins, the landless *plebs rustica*, lived from hand to mouth under material conditions that often were akin to slavery. The city-dwelling commoners, the Roman *proletarii*, were piled into thousands of poorly lit inner-city tenements. These dwellings were sometimes seven or eight floors high, all lacking toilets, running water, and decent ventilation. The rents for these fetid warrens were usually exorbitant, forcing the poor to double and triple up, with entire families cramped into one room. Tenants who escaped the typhoid and fires that plagued the slums still lived in fear of having these structures collapse upon them, as happened all too frequently. The ingenuity for which Roman architecture is known was not lavished upon the domiciles of the indigent.

As is true of many societies before and since, in ancient Rome the very material wretchedness that the poor endured was treated as evidence of their moral and personal deficiencies. In the minds of the well-to-do, the plebs were the authors of their own poverty and had only themselves to blame for their woes. That darling of classicists through the ages, Marcus Tullius Cicero, was tireless in his disparagement of the lower classes. He was part of an already established tradition when he described the *plebs urbana* as "the city's dirt and filth" and as "a wretched and starving rabble" or as the "the city scum" and an "inexperienced mass." He acknowledges that they are starving but sees it as their own fault. And whenever the people mobilized against class injustice, they became in Cicero's mind that most odious of all creatures, a mob.¹

As in any plutocracy, in the Roman Republic it was a disgrace to be poor and an honor to be rich. Those of the opulent class, living parasitically off the labor of others, were hailed as men of quality and worth while the impecunious, who struggled along on the paltry earnings of their own hard labor, were considered vulgar and unworthy. Though he wrote during the time of emperors, the satirist Juvenal might as well have been speaking of Republican society when he observed: "Men whose domestic poverty is an obstacle to their qualities do not easily rise, but at Rome any such attempt is even tougher."²

1 Cicero, *To Atticus* 1.16.11 and 1.19.4; *Philippics* 2.116, cf. 8.9. For a recent introduction to the subject under discussion on these pages cf. Thomas Habinek, "Slavery and Class," in *A Companion to Latin Literature*, ed. Stephen Harrison (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 385–393.

2 Juvenal, *Satires* 3.164–166.

2. Common Cause Between Plebs and Slaves

Why then did the Roman plebs, this wretched and impoverished populace, not ally itself with the slaves? Together they would have composed a powerful and potentially irresistible tide. First, we should note that in fact there actually were times when plebeians made common cause with slaves. Many of Rome's working people were themselves ex-slaves or the sons of ex-slaves. Some of the *proletarii* regularly worked alongside slaves, as at certain construction sites, and were inclined to feel a common sympathy with the servile population on basic issues. For good reason did Cato the Younger, dearly beloved by today's conservatives, fear restiveness among the poorest citizens, for they were often the ones who could stir up all the people.³

An incident of A.D. 61, reported by Tacitus, is worth noting.⁴ The city prefect had been murdered in his bedchamber by one of his slaves. According to ancient custom, when a master was killed by a *servus*, all *servi* in the household had to be put to death. This was to insure that all the guilty parties were punished, including those who may have secretly collaborated or who looked the other way and knowingly failed to report the plot. Total extermination sent a message to the servile population that *all* of a master's slaves were personally responsible for his safety. But the city prefect's household had some four hundred *servi*, including women and children. The threatened mass execution of such a number, many of them entirely innocent, evoked angry protests from the Roman citizenry, who assembled outside the Senate House. The senate's decision to go ahead with this mass execution was delayed by a crowd of people armed with stones and torches. Emperor Nero had to call out the troops to line the route along which the condemned were to pass. The moral outrage expressed by the protestors signaled a sympathetic bond between impoverished slaves and the impoverished plebs.

Bonding between poor commoners and slaves was possible because of the conditions of labor created by the prevailing mode of production. Much of agriculture consisted of *latifundiae*, vast plantations upon which concentrated numbers of the *plebs rustica* and even greater numbers of *servi* labored almost as an undifferentiated mass under the exploitative dominion of overseer and plantation owner. Being part of the same formidable workforce toiling shoulder to shoulder, as it were, plebs and slaves sometimes found it possible to act in unison. Spartacus himself

3 Cf. Plutarch, *Caesar* 8.3–4.

4 Tacitus, *Annals* 14.42–45.

won some support from poorer elements within the free population during his rebellion. Starting out as a slave in a gladiatorial school in Capua, he and seventy-eight other men escaped and over time grew into an army of seventy thousand. They were able to build such a formidable force in part because many freedmen and other free commoners joined their ranks along with thousands of fugitive slaves.

Despite all this, we cannot deny that unity of action between slaves and impoverished Roman subjects was the exception rather than the rule. There were far more Roman subjects in the ten legions needed to crush Spartacus than in his own army.

3. The Myth of the Idle Poor

Down through the ages, historians have characterized the Roman *proletarii* as an idle demoralized rabble who lived parasitically off free handouts of bread and circuses. With their stomachs kept full by the dole and their minds and spirits distracted by a continual array of arena spectacles, the plebs had no reason to make common cause with rebellious slaves. They had devolved into selfish idlers, bought off by the authorities.

Contrary to this image propagated by past and present historians, dole recipients did not live like parasites off the “bread” they received, which actually was a sparse wheat or corn allotment used for making bread and gruel. The people’s tribune C. Licinius Macer once pointed out the insufficiency of this dole in a speech to the *plebs*: “five measures [per man], . . . which really can be no more than prison rations. For just as that meager supply keeps death away from prisoners but completely weakens them, so this small amount does not relieve you from domestic cares.”⁵ Macer understood that people cannot live by bread alone, not even at the basic physiological level. The plebs also needed money for rent, clothing, cooking oil, and other necessities, including additional food. Most of them had to find work, low-paying and irregular as it might be. The bread dole often was a necessary supplement, the difference between survival and starvation, but it was never a total sustenance that allowed people to idle away their days. In any case, we might question why so many scholars have judged the Roman people to be venal and degraded just because they demanded affordable bread and were concerned with having enough to feed themselves and their children.

5 Macer’s speech is preserved by Sallust, *Histories* 3.48; quotation at 3.48.19.

As with bread, so with circuses. There is no denying that the games, chariot races, and gladiatorial contests – the few amusements available to the poor at no cost – helped them forget their grievances for a spell, acting as popular distractions not unlike televised sporting events today. The emperors seemed to have been well aware of the diverting function that the arena spectacles served, which explains why they maintained them regardless of cost.⁶ The games were the major spectator sports of rich and poor alike. Probably a higher proportion of wealthy nobles and equestrians frequented them, seated in reserved front-row stalls that afforded them the best view, than did common people. The rich had the time and leisure to attend. In the Colosseum, and presumably in earlier amphitheaters, the front rows were reserved for magistrates, foreign dignitaries, and senators. The rows directly behind them were set aside for the upper social classes, with additional seats for priests, military officers, and other special groups. Women were segregated, consigned to the worst seats at the very top. And behind them was standing room for the impoverished *proletarii*.⁷

To suggest that the plebs failed to make common cause with slaves because they were pampered layabouts is to ignore the grimmer class realities prevailing in ancient Rome. Still there is no denying that bread and circuses, especially bread, did in some limited and dismal way blunt the desperation that the plebs faced every day, helping them to see themselves as at least a notch above the slaves.

4. Clients and Mercenaries

One way the nobles maintained their influence over the populace was by recruiting large numbers of the plebs into their private service. Forced by sheer poverty, many indigents sold their services and loyalties for modest sums. The patronage that the rich extended to their paid followers (*clientelae*) served the oligarchy well. Influential patrons spent many a morning at home in audience to a throng of followers who came to press for a favor, pass on useful information, receive an assignment, pay their respects, and secure a meager handout of money or food. The

6 On the importance of organized spectacles in ancient Rome see, e.g., Roland Auguet, *Cruelty and Civilization: The Roman Games* (1972; rpt. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1998); Donald G. Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998); and Alison Futrell, *Blood in the Arena: The Spectacle of Roman Power* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997; rpt. 2000). All contain additional references.

7 Lionel Casson, *Everyday Life in Ancient Rome*, rev. edn. (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 104.

democratic tribune Macer tried to shake the commoners into taking action against the plutocracy and admonished them: “like sheep, you, the multitude, have submitted yourselves to the service and enjoyment of some individuals. You have been stripped of everything that your forefathers left you except that you yourselves now choose your masters with your ballots just as you once chose your defenders.”⁸

The patronage system wedded portions of the lower class to the uppermost stratum. As social historians have long noted, patronage created relationships of personal dependence.⁹ It gave Roman political life its private armies and lasting semi-feudal character. The affluent patrons used their clientele as voting blocs, electoral campaign workers, ready-made gangs of counter-agitators, and even death squads. These armed cadres of what historian Theodor Mommsen called “bludgeon boys” were used in times of crisis to beat and assassinate oppositional popular forces and their leaders. Such arrangements had an intimidating and demoralizing effect on popular democracy. One is reminded of the comment by nineteenth-century American tycoon Jay Gould: “I can hire one half of the working class to kill the other half.”

Aside from these private armies, the ranks of the Roman army itself were composed of men of modest means, whose small holdings or dire poverty made them willing recruits. Many fought with the promise of a land allotment or the lure of war booty. Various complements were drawn not only from the *proletarii*, first allowed to bear arms during Marius’ rule, and from the rural populations of the Italian peninsula but also from far-flung colonies. These provincial units did not always make the most reliable troops, but, when facing insurgent slaves, they served well enough.

5. The Slave Menace and Racist Ideology

Of crucial import was the way the slave population was repeatedly demonized by the ruling elites as a murderous alien menace to Rome and to

8 Sallust, *Histories* 3.48.6.

9 Cf., e.g., Max Weber, *The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations*, tr. R. I. Frank (1976; rpt. London and New York: Verso, 1998), 281. Weber’s book first appeared in 1891. Recent studies of Roman patron–client relationships in Republic and Empire, with additional references, are Richard P. Saller, *Personal Patronage under the Early Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982; rpt. 2002); *Patronage in Ancient Society*, ed. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill (London and New York: Routledge, 1989; rpt. 1990); and Koenraad Verboven, *The Economy of Friends: Economic Aspects of amicitia and Patronage in the Late Republic* (Brussels: Latomus, 2002).

all its citizenry. Hence the Roman proverb: "So many slaves, so many enemies."¹⁰ In 63 B.C., Cicero publicly accused Catiline, a nobleman, of conspiring with armed slaves and plebs to torch Rome and launch the destruction of the Roman people. Describing a case of slaves turning against their master, Pliny the Younger referred to the "dangers, indignities, and mockeries" that slaves impose on their supposedly kind masters, for their "brutality" leads slaves to murder and rebellion.¹¹ The Roman historian Florus saw Spartacus' rebellion not as a monumental struggle for liberty but as a disgraceful undertaking, perpetrated by slaves and led by gladiators, "the former people of the lowest class; the latter, of the worst."¹² Cicero readily discredited any popular action by charging that *slaves* were involved. Thus he denounced the disturbances that erupted in the wake of Julius Caesar's assassination as being perpetrated by "slaves and beggars."¹³ That a slave is a lowly human being or subhuman barbarian is a theme readily found in various ancient texts.¹⁴ In the minds of many Romans, slaves were substandard in moral and mental capacity, barely a notch or two above animals.

In the generation after Spartacus, the *popularis* Publius Clodius, an ally of Julius Caesar, actually recruited the poorer citizenry, freedmen, and slaves in an attempt to rebuild people's organizations (*collegia*) and put them on a paramilitary basis as a means of defense against the plutocrats' death squads. The senate oligarchs repeatedly tried to drive a wedge between Clodius and the citizenry by alleging that his followers were made up exclusively of slaves and criminals. In a speech, Cicero referred to the supporters of Clodius as "city scum and slaves."¹⁵ Privately, Cicero denounced Clodius as a scoundrel of the worst sort: "he runs from street to street and openly offers the slaves the hope for freedom . . . and he uses slaves as advisers."¹⁶

All slavocracies develop a racist or caste ideology to justify their oppressive and dehumanized relationships. In Rome, male slaves of any

10 Seneca, *Moral Epistles* 47.5.

11 Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 3.14.5.

12 Lucius Annaeus Florus, *Epitome of Roman History* 3.20.1–2 (= 2.8.20.1–2).

13 Cicero, *To Atticus* 14.10.1.

14 One of the earliest ancient statements on slavery is voiced by the slave Eumaeus, who had been born a king's son, in Homer's *Odyssey*: "Zeus . . . takes away one half of the virtue / from a man, once the day of slavery closes upon him" (*Odyssey* 17. 322–323); quoted from Richmond Lattimore, *The Odyssey of Homer* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965; several rpts.), 261.

15 Cicero, *Against Piso* 9. I discuss Clodius in *The Assassination of Julius Caesar: A People's History of Ancient Rome* (New York and London: The New Press, 2004), 76–77.

16 Cicero, *To Atticus* 4.3.2.

age were habitually addressed as *pueri* (“boys”). A similar degrading appellation was applied to slaves in ancient Greece and in the pre-Civil War United States, persisting into the segregationist South of the twentieth century. Slaves in ancient Rome were mostly foreigners, so it was easy to portray them as a barbarian menace in addition to attributing to them an innate inferiority. Spartacus himself was a Thracian, and most of his followers were foreigners. The Roman oligarchs lost no opportunity to keep plebs and slaves apart by playing up their ethnic divide. Cicero was part of a long-standing tradition when he stoked ethno-class prejudices in regard to slavery. He assured his audiences that Jews and Syrians were “nations born to slavery,” that is, they had an inborn proclivity for servitude.¹⁷ They were not of the same cut as real Roman citizens.

That most slaves were from alien stock in Spartacus’ day further fueled the Romans’ tendency to loathe them as wastrels and brigands, troublesome contaminants of respectable society. Ethnic and class biases conveniently dovetailed, making it that much easier to demonize the slave population in the eyes of many ordinary Romans.

6. The Ruling Ideology

Ruling-class rapacity rarely parades in naked form. Those ensconced at the social top utilize every advantage in money, property, education, organization, and prestige to maintain their ideological hegemony over the rest of society. They marshal a variety of arguments to justify their privileged position, arguments that are all the more sincerely embraced for being evidently self-serving. But ideology is not merely a promotion of class interest. The function of ruling-class ideology is to disguise narrowly selfish interests by wedding them to a loftier and all-encompassing view of society.

First and foremost, the Roman oligarchic clique represented its privileges and interests as being tantamount to the common good. It claimed a community of interest with all of Rome’s citizens. The aristocrats professed to be protectors of everyone’s welfare. The laws they promulgated and the rulings their magistrates put forth served not only themselves

17 Cicero, *On the Consular Provinces* 10; cf. *For Flaccus* 65. Cf. further Livy, *From the Foundation of the City* 35.49.8 and 36.17.5, adduced and discussed by Moses I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*, ed. Brent D. Shaw (expanded edn.; Princeton: Wiener, 1998), 187 and 245–246 note 99.

but every Roman – or so they would have the public believe. It followed that the well-being of the Republic and of the entire society depended on the public service rendered by those prominent few who presided so wisely and resplendently over affairs of state, those whose high station itself gave proof of a selfless and deserving excellence.

Secondly, ruling-class protagonists repeatedly warned that any leveling forces were a threat to all and that the rebellious elements among the servile population were out to kill not only their masters but all free Romans. The oligarchs portrayed mass agitation not as righteous resistance to injustice but as divisive and destructive to Rome itself, the work of unscrupulous, unstable, aggrandizing, bloodthirsty demagogues who inflame popular passions and mislead the multitude. It is quite likely that Spartacus' army of slaves was portrayed in these terms, certainly by the third year of their campaign when they fought their way down from Cisalpine Gaul to "threaten" Rome itself.

Finally, slaves were in fact a class apart from Roman citizens. Although common citizens might be nearly as impoverished as slaves, they could still think of themselves as Romans, able to vote and voice their sentiments in the Forum, endowed with certain rights and liberties, circumscribed as these might be, and able to make their own day-to-day decisions and to sell their labor on the "free" market rather than themselves being marketed like chattels.

In a word, the nobles maintained their influence mostly with their wealth, social prestige, and the protection and patronage they extended to their paid clientele, along with the threats and actual applications of force they employed with their armed squads and with the Roman army. Their ability to enlist the efforts of the many in causes that served the interests of the few extended into elections and the functions of magistrates, censors, and other governing interests. *Because* they were poor, the commoners could readily be recruited and easily led – or misled – by the rich. They could be given many little tasks and responsibilities for meager payoffs but no real power or social standing. In any case, most ordinary Romans were far too involved in the daily struggle for survival to risk joining in a common cause with rebellious slaves. They were too busy trying to make a living to make revolutionary history.

In sum, the Roman ruling class did what just about every ruling class before and since has done: it kept the populace divided against itself and tied in some way to those at the top; it played upon national loyalties and survival fears; it stoked ethnic prejudices and class bigotry; and it conjured up images of a reputable citizenry that was being victimized by pernicious slaves and the lumpenproletariat – not unlike the way in which

the middle and working classes in modern societies are made to fear and resent a marginalized underclass. For all the variations in characters and costumes, and the differences in historical circumstances, the basic scenario is a familiar one. Well before Spartacus and his rebels were finally crushed by Roman legions, they had been isolated and outdone by the cultural and ideological hegemony of the oligarchy.

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