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THE STUDY OF ANCIENT SLAVERY AND THE PATH TO RENEWAL: A CRITIQUE

O estudo da escravidão antiga e o caminho para a renovação: uma crítica

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DEBATE
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ABSTRACT
This response highlights an underlying issue of the contribution offered by Joly and Knust – namely the problematic relationship between the top-down proposal of a theoretical framework for the study of ancient slavery on the one hand, and on the other hand the role of practices of domination, however light-touch, in the structuring of social relations in academia, and by extension contemporary society at large. In so doing, the response articulates a broader critique of top-down research agendas, challenging also the establishment, a priori, of theoretical frameworks for research in – that is, for – the field as a whole.

KEYWORDS
Ancient Slavery. Modern Scholarship. Research Design. Bottom-up/Top-down Approaches.

RESUMO
Esta resposta destaca uma questão subjacente à contribuição oferecida por Joly e Knust, nomeadamente, a relação problemática entre a proposta de cima para baixo de um quadro teórico para o estudo da escravatura antiga, por um lado, e em outro sentdo, o papel das práticas de dominação, ainda que leve, na estruturação das relações sociais na academia e, por extensão, na sociedade contemporânea em geral. Ao fazê-lo, a resposta articula uma crítica mais ampla às agendas de investigação de cima para baixo, desafiando também o estabelecimento, a priori, de quadros teóricos para a investigação no/para o o campo como um todo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES
Escravidão antiga. Pesquisa contemporânea. Design de pesquisa. Abordagens top-down.

The idea that "The rest of us must tread another path" has a famous pedigree in the study of ancient, more specifically Greek and Roman, slaveries – as the cited quip readily recalls, taken from Moses Finley's notorious opening chapter of his *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideologies* (Finley, 1980, p. 65). It summed up Finley's conclusion to his scathing critique of the work undertaken by Joseph Vogt and some of his collaborators under the auspices of the Mainz Academy's research project into ancient slavery in the nearly three decades leading up to Finley's lectures at the Collège de France in 1978:1 these lectures were subsequently published in the book that, for some, is Finley's most readily remembered contribution to the study of ancient slavery – including the noted promotion of the path to renewal. Besides much else that provoked Finley's ire, he chiefly decried what he perceived as misplaced empiricism that was characterized by a lack of due theory in the approach of the criticized scholars. Whatever the merits of Finley's critique (and my own view on this is considerably more complex and significantly less gullible than its widespread, basically positive reception notably in the Anglosphere),2 it creates from the start an uncanny echo to Fábio Joly and José Knust's exploration of a fresh "path to renewing the field" (Joly; Knust, in this issue) that I have been asked to comment on. To be precise, this kind of overt "search for renewal" and predetermined "questioning of certain orthodoxies" (Joly; Knust, in this issue) echoes the almost missionary undertones that Finley's bombastic intervention sounded. This is not to suggest that Joly and Knust merely follow Finley's example; plainly, they are openly critical of what they see as weaknesses of Finley's approach, particularly his use of the concept of "slave society" (on which more below). Likewise, Joly and Knust do in my view better than Finley in acknowledging the intricate dynamics between grand concepts and theoretical approaches on the one hand and the nitty-gritty base work of historical research with typically fragmentary and highly ambiguous evidence on the other (on which also more below). But the fact remains that, albeit clearly differently to Finley, they issue a call for change, directed at the research community at large. In so doing, Joly and Knust express a desire to theorize that goes beyond (or, rather, that comes before) the research itself: the theoretical framework is established *ab initio*, and the work with the sources is consequently given a secondary role, one that is effectively set to validate the predetermined framework. Put differently, the framework – that is, the so-called First Mediterranean and Second Mediterranean Slavery, i.e. what they refer to in the abstract as "a new conceptual model for the study of ancient slavery" (Joly; Knust, in this issue) – is not the outcome of the authors' research, but a kind of work plan that is designed to shape new work, thereby also directing its broader interpretative thrust. The following comments center on what to my mind is an underlying issue that this approach generates in respect of modern social practices, thrown into relief not least through the proposal's location specifically in slavery studies.

THE PATH TO RENEWAL IN THE STUDY OF ANCIENT SLAVERY

Cherished as these are not least by government funding bodies and other grant awarding institutions, grand research designs set to direct the work of numerous scholars create a tension of a kind that is not typically commented on in academic discourse, one which is further amplified in the context of the specific subject matter at stake – i.e. the study of slavery. Thus, and notwithstanding exceptions and aberrations, slavery constitutes a form of domination.3 It is, in other words, the product of a top-down approach, and this

[1] For the Mainz slavery project, see the project website: https://www.adwmainz.de/index.php?id=997.
[2] For two examples of opposing understandings of Finley's critique, see respectively Deissler 2010 and Vlassopoulos 2016.
[3] I do not seek to engage here in the debate about the validity of Orlando Patterson's thesis of slavery as social domination, leading to the natal alientation of those subjected to it, briefly cited by Joly and Knust (Joly; Knust, in this issue, with

irrespective of the extent to which enslaved folk may have been able to influence how their enslavement unfolded on the ground. Scholars across time and space have of course sharply criticized the domination machinations of slavery, including in the study of ancient slavery: notably, already through what is often seen as the first modern work on ancient slavery, Henri Wallon sought to advance the cause of abolition (Walon, 1879). Seen especially against the backdrop of the place of domination and top-down approaches in slavery, I must admit to experiencing some considerable unease over top-down approaches to research design in academia – including the kind of agenda-setting that Joly and Knust propose. My concern is with the impact of top-down approaches, however light-touch in the form of academic agenda-setting, on the structuring of social relations in contemporary society. To be precise, I here point up the effective marginalization of individual scholarly agency, i.e. of an independent, bottom-up approach that facilitates and enables the generation, *ex nihilo* and *ex novo*, of significant – and self-directed – historical agendas, theories and interpretations. Commenting on Joly and Knust's study thus constitutes an opportune occasion to raise the question of how outward calls to renewal and the public promotion of "another path", to be delivered through a predetermined theorical framework, could advance bottom-up thought and practices in the world we live in. How, in other words, can a scholarly approach and a theoretical framework that are top-down in their design contribute to a bottom-up culture, in academia? To be clear: I am not commenting here on any one scholar's political opinions or social attitudes. Rather, I seek to raise the question of the relationship between our scholarly demeanors and the socio-political values that we may wish to advance through our work, not least in the study of slavery. To this end, it is appropriate to highlight some of the more specific presumptions that underpin and flesh out the predetermined research agenda and top-down theoretical framework proposed by Joly and Knust.

First, Joly and Knust borrow the concept of First and Second Slavery from research into slaveries in the Atlantic world (Joly; Knust, in this issue, *passim*). They subsequently pin this concept in a broad sweep onto the chronological contours of the ancient Mediterranean world; in this, they follow what may be deemed a surprisingly unsurprising Roman schema, with the point of transition located in the first century BC, when Roman society was experiencing significant social, cultural and political changes that would bring about imperial rule, traditionally referred to as the transition from the republican to the imperial period. Instead of the "questioning of certain orthodoxies" (see further Joly; Knust, in this issue), the proposed timeframe for the transition between the First and Second Slaveries thus actually reinforces a long-established chronological orthodoxy in the structuring of Roman history. In their own words, Joly and Knust work with:

> the idea of a "Mediterranean slave system" and consider it as having two main phases: a Mediterranean "first slavery", initially constituted in the context of city-states from the 9th century BC, and then, with the Roman Empire, from the 1st century BC onwards, a Mediterranean "second slavery" (Joly; Knust, in this issue).

The First/Second Slavery concept is moreover functional to Joly and Knust's call for a global history approach in the study of ancient slavery, with a particular eye on the histories of the slaving cultures that have generated the concept in the first place – i.e. (some of) those in the Atlantic world, giving in the process due credit to Jeff Fynn-Paul's work on so-called slaving zones (Fynn-Paul, 2009; Fynn-Paul; Pargas, 2018). It remains unclear to me how work that does not fit the outlined framework is engaged with. By way of example, and

Patterson (1982), and the works listed by Joly and Knust). But I contend that slavery is a form of domination that is, to borrow the words of Gwilym David Blunt, "socially constituted" (while being "interactionally arbitrary"): Blunt (2015, p. 19).

as is well known, I have myself argued against the idea of structural change in Roman rural, villa-based slavery, on the Italian peninsula, between the second century BC and the first century AD (Roth, 2007) – a viewpoint that does not conform to the proposed timeframe of the First/Second Slaveries respectively and its noted point of transition in the first century BC. Most likely I am just plain wrong, but the question remains how specific diverging arguments and contradictory historical visions are confronted, especially when what is primarily at stake is the articulation of a grand "systemic vision" (Joly; Knust, in this issue): is it a matter of cherry-picking suitable details and arguments, while simply ignoring those that get in the way? This example serves moreover also to foreground a related point, namely the critique of the so-called "traditional historiographical morphology" (Joly; Knust, in this issue) in the study of ancient slavery, i.e. terms such as "Roman slavery": much like the championed terms "Mediterranean slave system" or "Mediterranean history" and similar (also, e.g., p. 3, *passim*), the term "Roman slavery" (like other such terms) is to my mind convenient shorthand for a complex and diverse historical phenomenon, the varied and variable specificities thereof, its recurrently changing historical nature, and its relationship to other slaveries and other, and indeed broader historical developments, are not denied by the criticized morphology itself. Thus, "to ask questions such as, for example, whether 'Roman slavery' was essentially the same and constant throughout history" (Joly; Knust, in this issue) – or not – is precisely what I have thought I was doing *inter alia* in the just cited work, concerned with an aspect of, plainly, Roman slavery.

But what strikes me more generally as problematic is the many elements *already* identified by Joly and Knust that seemingly characterize the First and Second Slaveries. One chief example: the place of law and manumission in the Second Slavery. Joly and Knust speak of "the impact of the [Roman] empire on the practices of local slave systems through the dissemination of a 'Roman law of slavery'" (Joly; Knust, in this issue). The consequence is the notion of a specifically *Roman* driver for changes in local slaving habits across the Mediterranean. Undoubtedly, Roman practices and conventions, including legal ones, had an influence on non-Roman practices and conventions wherever and whenever contact was made (and vice versa!). But there is plenty of evidence for slaving practices across different locales and cultures that did not require a "world legal culture" to advance and perfect the domination of human beings under the yoke of slavery – or, as Joly and Knust put it, to refine "the processes of enslavement and manumission in the provinces" (Joly; Knust, in this issue). Leaving aside the inadvertent introduction of a colonial vista (in that the non-Roman populations emerge here as somehow dependent in their slaving efforts on Roman ingenuity and resourcefulness), there appears to me to exist an extreme level of presupposition and one-directionality at work. Drawing on an Eastern example (i.e. Roman Macedonia), Joly and Knust clarify that what is at stake is to explore "the transformation of Greek practices into Roman law" (Joly; Knust, in this issue). The idea that not all slaveries in a Roman province need to have transformed to conform to a Roman legal framework is not actively entertained. Indeed, the particular, pre-set framework – here, that of a "Roman world-legal culture" (Joly; Knust, in this issue) – operates to close off, or in any case obstructs this avenue. The outlook is profoundly predetermined, based on the authors' acceptance of what may be called a historiographic orthodoxy – here: the traditional scholarly view on the influence of Rome on other peoples, sketched above. From a methodological viewpoint, this is, ironically, at odds with Finley's warning of what he termed "the teleological fallacy" (albeit in a moral sense: Finley, 1980, p. 17), leading to an interpretation that is shaped by the presumption of a specific end-point. Take one example to illustrate the analytical issues that such an outlook engineers: the Iberian Peninsula, i.e. a locale that enjoyed its own Latinised culture, similar to Rome's at the documentary, epigraphic level. Given notably the profuse onomastic overlaps between Roman citizens and municipal Latins in this locale, much of the

respective inscriptional evidence for slavery in Iberia in the first couple of centuries AD can in fact not be safely attributed to slaving under Roman conventions (that is, under Roman law) – but this is precisely what is regularly done, underpinned by a predetermined understanding of the role of Rome in transforming local slaving cultures (cf. Garcia Fernández, 2023, esp. p. 50-55). Presupposing the transformation of local practices into Roman law leaves little intellectual wiggle-room for more probing analyses and findings – perhaps even an argument that challenges the idea of the pre-dominance of Roman law locally, not least in the context of slaving?

Manumission does not fare much better. The practice is identified as "a central aspect of second Mediterranean slavery", to the point of speaking more generally of "the 'Age of Manumission'" (Joly; Knust, in this issue, citing *inter alia* López Barja; Masi Doria; Roth, 2023, which focuses merely on a specific dimension of manumission and freed status under Roman law, not on manumission generally).4 Given the paucity of reliable quantitative evidence for manumission from any slaving culture in the ancient Mediterranean, including the better documented Roman slavery, the question has to be asked on what basis manumission is *not* to be regarded as characteristic of earlier slaving? This becomes even clearer if attention is put specifically on Roman slaving and the additional matter of "the possible grant of full or partial citizenship" (Joly; Knust, in this issue) to those freed from slavery under Roman law. Thus, the award of citizenship, as well as manumission that did not lead to its award, were well known already in Roman republican times, i.e. in a period that Joly and Knust identify as the age of the First Slavery and, hence, *before* "the 'Age of Manumission'" (see above). And what about the numerous Eastern manumission inscriptions from the Hellenistic period, not only at Delphi, that also predate "the 'Age of Manumission'"? The point I am trying to make is that if one *begins* with a rigid theoretical framework, the chances are that one will end up downplaying evidence and arguments that do not fit neatly into this framework, lest one would need to abandon that great theoretical edifice. But doing so, when uttered as a general call, runs at base counter to the encouragement of independent interpretative thought and diverging analytical conclusions.

It is high time to clarify an aspect that may be misunderstood in my critique so far. Thus, nothing that has been said in the foregoing lines questions or challenges the validity of theoretical approaches in, here, ancient world studies. Indeed, I consider these as essential for our analytical endeavors, not least because of the fragmentary state of the evidence at our disposal. But there is a difference between postulating a working hypothesis that may guide one's research, and setting a theoretical framework within which individual aspects are to be explored in respect of predetermined understandings of key issues. Joly and Knust do not seem to suggest that the future work they seek to ignite is designed to test, genuinely, the validity of the notion of First/Second Slaveries, or the more specific ideas of "the 'Age of Manumission'" and "Roman world-legal culture" – to name just the two ancient examples chosen above for illustrative purposes. They suggest, instead, to operate *within* and *through* these notions and ideas, emphasizing that these will advance modern understanding of the subject matter – or, specifically, the model itself: "The development of specific research based on these frameworks, analyzing local and regional dynamics within these historical frameworks, will allow the development and refinement of this model" (Joly; Knust, in this issue).

In this focus on the structural framework, the proposal is methodologically reminiscent of Marxist scholarship that sought to provide detailed documentation of particular historical aspects to illustrate the presupposed class struggle that was seen as structuring historical development. Likewise, Joly and Knust allocate here in brief (and elsewhere in their proposal

[4] Note that the work is confusingly cited as Barja de Quiroga; Doria; Roth (2023), and given accordingly in their References.

by way of example) notable importance to the study of specific local, temporal and thematic aspects (such as the already cited case of the inscriptional evidence for manumission in Roman Macedonia). What they envisage, as far as I can see, therefore leaves plenty of room for the various compartments of the proposed edifice to be painted in exciting, new colors. But their proposal does not suggest that they foresee that edifice being demolished and a new dwelling being erected, with different materials, elsewhere. The latter is the hallmark of some of the best research, underpinned by extensive and intensive knowledge of the respective evidence, including its complexity, and guided by an independent conceptual apparatus and intuition – bottom-up, in other words. Logically, were Joly and Knust to publish, for instance, the "systematic and comprehensive study of the epigraphy of slavery in the Mediterranean" (Joly; Knust, in this issue) that they identify as desirable, I'd be the first to want to read it. I'd also love to see in print Joly and Knust's grand historical synthesis of the history of slavery in the region over the millennium and a half of interest to them – their "systemic vision" (Joly; Knust, in this issue), even if their handling of some historical events in their proposal makes me predisposed to be on the alert for undue historiographic generalization and oversimplification. In this respect, their critique of earlier, detailed work, such as David Lewis' study of slavery in the Eastern Mediterranean (Lewis, 2018), leaves me wondering how *precisely* they configure the relationship of work on the ground, as it were, and their proposed approach (on which see also further below), reminiscent of a similar conundrum in Finley's great methodological critique, reviewed at the outset above. In any case, delivering any of the cited types of contributions to scholarship is not the same as announcing the general need for structuring and framing research along a particular outline, through sketching a "path to renewal" for all and everyone, i.e. for the so-called "field of 'ancient slavery' studies" (Joly; Knust, in this issue). To my mind, the best way to show the worth of a theoretical framework is in its applied form: much as the proof of the pudding is in the eating, so is the proof of the research in the reading – not the theoretical proposition. Doing so will moreover avoid the top-down approach I criticized in the beginning. It will furthermore foster a research culture in which everyone's intellectual agency is given its due, rather than implicitly allocating individual scholars merely a role in a play for which the stage has already been set, by others. Indeed, the stress on individuals, and their own research agendas and academic agencies, recalls another conspicuous dimension of Joly and Knust's proposal: the total absence of any mention of any one enslaved person, or indeed of any one ancient enslaver. The people, in other words, are strikingly missing from the quest to find "the path to renewing the field", underscoring also from this angle the comments made above about the top-down nature of their proposal, effectively privileging structures over lives, ancient and modern.

CONCLUSION

The above critique is to be understood as an invitation to a broader discussion on scholarly practice in a field that deals with a topic in which top-down approaches have led to one of the most significant forms of domination in history, i.e. slavery, thus to reflect on how our own mind-sets and demeanors may advance top-down or bottom-up habitats in life. Returning in conclusion to the starting premise of Joly and Knust's proposal, it is appropriate to acknowledge that I was in any case not persuaded by the role they have allocated to the concept of "slave society" in Finley's work. Notably, Finley utilized the concept to explicate his own view of ancient, classical slavery and its historical development: it was a product, not a starting position of his work on slavery. Whether or not one agrees with Finley's sweeping view of the rise and decline of slavery in the Greek and Roman worlds as

expanded in the three core chapters of *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*, I cannot see how his use of the concept was designed to shut down other interpretative avenues. Within the remit of Roman slavery studies, both term and concept have floated in and out of use. Keith Bradley for instance has drawn on it, as I have too, to name just two obvious examples of scholars publishing in the same linguistic medium as Finley and the majority of the scholars cited by Joly and Knust, i.e. English. Neither in Bradley's work, nor in my own, did the term function as a theoretical straitjacket. In fact, my own use of it has typically been in a non-technical sense. Besides, in non-English language scholarship, both term and concept have regularly played a nugatory role, or none at all – even if there have recently been, as Joly and Knust illustrate in their opening lines, some loud, outspoken voices allocating by contrast a crucial role to term and concept in the study of ancient slavery (Joly; Knust, in this issue). Given my own position, as just outlined, much of the renewal of "the debate" seems to me to be therefore somewhat unmotivated. Joly and Knust in effect appropriately acknowledge that "This debate has indeed been hot in recent decades in the field of the Global History of Slavery, and not so much in the field of Ancient Slavery" (Joly; Knust, in this issue). Wherever Joly and Knust would want to see that debate heading, it is fitting to reiterate in my final lines that one can only but encourage them to put their ideas into practice, and to produce work that illustrates their theoretical impetus and historical vision. It will be enticing to engage with the resulting publications, and the findings and insights that these present. *Buon lavoro*.

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