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Paulin Ismard: La démocratie contre les experts

Paulin Ismard's *La Démocratie contre les experts: Les esclaves publics en Grèce ancienne* is a fascinating book with a bold thesis. Whereas Oscar Jacob's *Les esclaves publics à Athènes* (1928), the last book devoted to this topic, was mainly concerned with historical issues, Ismard aims also to understand the public slaves, the *dēmosioi*, in terms of the relationship of power and knowledge in city-state ideology. Ismard argues that the widespread and longstanding Greek ideal of transparent and direct rule by the community was only possible, because, out-of-sight, slaves provided the expertise needed for the government to work; the citizens did not need to delegate political power to an administrative class from within, but rather bought foreign slaves to perform these functions. The public slaves' administrative experience and knowledge brought them no great sway: they were still outsiders; technical expertise and administrative experience gave few claims to power - in sharp contrast to politics today (10-11). Eventually I will register some issues with this picture, but first a survey of the contents of this rich and stimulating work.

In his introduction, Ismard espouses a "low intensity" comparative history; he aims for provocative contrasts rather than superficially reassuring similarities (23). His "Introduction" begins with the case of a public slave in Athens, Georgia, during the Civil War. The showmanship of comparing Athens with Athens notwithstanding, his point is that the highly skilled, administrative *dēmosioi* of classical Athens would have been inconceivable in the United States South (14-15). So Ismard argues that African and Asian slave systems provide comparative cases that are not parallel, but at least close enough to be stimulating (21-22). In particular, he repeatedly draws on cases of administrative royal slaves, who functioned within a diametrically opposite political system but, like public slaves in Greece, enjoyed a higher status than private slaves (24).

Next, Ismard explores three archaic Greek antecedents to the public slaves of the classical period. First, like a *dēmosios*, a *dēmiourgos* was usually an outsider, utterly dependent on the king's good will, who provided a specialized skill for the community (34-40). Second, several inscriptions spell out the terms on which an archaic state employed a skilled non-citizen. Like public slaves, these performed technical and administrative tasks on a paid, permanent basis, but were "off screen" compared with the elite magistrates who wielded official power but with all the limits that community control required, e.g., one-year terms (49-51). Third, some tyrants employed slave administrators, such as Maiandros and Mykithios, who wielded considerable power (56-7). But, unlike *dēmosioi*, subject to the city, they represented "domestic slavery applied to political ends" (57). Nevertheless, tyranny contributed to the growth of the state and of government administration; thus it helped create the niche, increasingly problematic under the democracy, which the *dēmosioi* filled (57-8).

The growth of chattel slavery and the political changes at the end of the archaic period - most obviously the development of Athenian democracy - provided the context within which the use of public slaves became established (58). In his chapter on "Servants of the city", Ismard surveys the life and work of the *dēmosioi*, whose numbers at Athens he estimates as perhaps 1,000-2,000 for a male citizen population of 30,000-40,000 (85). He describes the various jobs slaves performed: secretaries of the boule, assistants of the Eleven, accountants, the "Scythian archers" as a type of police, workers on building projects, and occasionally even priests. Throughout, he emphasizes how skilled and responsible some of these positions were. The *dēmosioi* did not typically fight in war and did not develop a common identity, in contrast to royal slaves in other societies, who often grew powerful as a result (94).

Ismard then explores the relatively high legal and social status of public slaves. On the one hand, public slaves were bought on the market and were subject to whipping like other slaves

(100). On the other hand, they seemed to have greater property rights, since they had no individual master with claims on them and on their possessions (103-106). Inscriptions from Athenian Delos (2nd century BC) lists public slaves along with a name in the genitive, which Ismard interprets as a patronymic, a controversial position that would imply official acknowledgment of slave families (108-109). On occasion, the Athenians even honored individual *dēmosioi* in inscriptions - though not with crowns or statues: for example, a garrison expressed its gratitude to the public slave in charge of procuring grain for them (115-116). Ismard suggests that public and private slaves should be considered distinct classes, not in a single ascending hierarchy, but among a multidimensional "kaleidoscope of statuses" (128). Ismard denies, however, that this implies social mobility or that legal distinctions were not important: we should not make Athens too fluid, "the first model [...] of the American dream", "a new version, no less fallacious, of the old Greek miracle" (124). [1]

The next chapter, "The democratic structure of knowledge", is explicitly Foucauldian in its interest in the relationship between power and knowledge (135). On the concrete level, Ismard emphasizes the difficult tasks that public slaves had to master - for example, relocating a particular Athenian decree in the Metroon (136) or detecting false coins (137-140) - and questions if citizens were even able to do these tasks. More generally, he asserts, "Above all democratic ideology refused to legitimate access to elective office on the basis of any specific expertise" (143). In Plato, for example, Protagoras' myth of Prometheus shows that politics are separate from technical knowledge (*dēmiourgikai technai*), that they depend on the moral qualities given to people by the gods, and that these qualities are distributed equally. Protagoras thus justifies the inclusion of the masses in Athenian politics - contrary to Plato's criticisms of rule by the ignorant mob - as well as the exclusion of the public slaves, who possess only technical knowledge (149).

The last full chapter begins with an analysis of the role of *dēmosioi* in the growth of the Greek state. Ismard argues that the use of public slaves reflects the resistance of the citizens to the administrative machinery and personnel of a powerful state (179). He then explores three famous passages featuring royal or public slaves: the royal shepherd who exposes the truth of Oedipus' birth, the jailer, a *dēmosios* , who admires Socrates in the *Phaedo* , and the eunuch of the queen of Ethiopia, the first non-Jew to be converted to Christianity. Although each of these literary slaves functions somewhat differently, they are all linked to the proclamation of the truth; Ismard believes that the public slaves ought to be added to Foucault's catalogue of four categories of truth-tellers in the ancient world (201).

Throughout Ismard aspires to get beyond an Athenocentric perspective on public slaves, but the evidence is recalcitrant: the majority is Athenian and the rest is scattered geographically and over many centuries and different systems of government. He tends to assimilate this widespread evidence, sometimes without enough justification. In contrast, he may draw too sharp a contrast between the ancient and the modern world: "our expert, whose knowledge is a claim to govern, was in fact unknown to the Athenian democracy" (11). But claims of knowledge do play a role in Athenian claims to leadership: for example, in Thucydides, Pericles' arguments from Athenian financial and manpower resources come close to displaying the sort of knowledge that Ismard reserves for *dēmosioi* . [2]

Although his claim that the Sokoto Caliphate contained more slaves than the ante-bellum United States South is false (20-21) - 1 to 2.5 million << 4 million - Ismard's knowledge of comparative history is impressively wide and yields insight or provokes fertile questions on numerous points. He also engages with a wide variety of theoretical perspectives: from Josiah Ober on group knowledge (151-3) to Jacques Derrida's *hantologie* ("hauntology") (191-2), from alterity, black theology, and queer studies (196-197) to Pierre Clastres on state formation (176-178) and Ernst Kantorowicz on the "king's two bodies" (211-212), to, above all, Michel Foucault on power and knowledge (e.g., 135, 185, 201). Happily, Ismard has a light hand and a clear style: I found that his theoretical engagements enriched the interest of

his project. The book's main text is smart, concise, and accessible to the general reader; with about forty pages of endnotes for two hundred pages of text, it also contains a wealth of detailed arguments few specialists will want to miss.

Notes :

[1] Contra Edward Cohen: *The Athenian Nation*, 246, n. 96.

[2] See Lisa Kallet-Marx: *Money Talks: Rhetor, Demos, and the Resources of the Athenian Empire*, in: *Ritual, Finance, Politics: Democratic Accounts Presented to David Lewis*, edited by Robin Osborne / Simon Hornblower, Oxford 1994, 227-251 on Thucydides 2.13.