

**P**ower and imagination by Prof. Martines is an impressive, thesis, briefly put, is that the human, thesis, briefly put, in that the human, social, civil expressions of urbanism, the arts, literature, rules, mores, customs, manners, and grammars of the late middle ages and the high renaissance from 1100 to 1600 in the Italian walled city-states were handmaidens and servants of the power elites contesting for supremacy in the city. He closely examines and describes the communes, oligarchies, popolos, signorias, and the principi that made up the changing political population of the Italian city states (securely protected by their encompassing walls) on the northern part of the Latin boot.

He ranges widely and impressively into the foundation of city debts, the complexities of urban land holding, the growth of rural land control by absentee urban landlords, and in passing he implies but does not explicitly state meaningful parallels with our own times. For instance, he traces similarities with present fiduciary crises when pointing out, for example in a discussion of Venetian and Florentine debt repudiation and restructuring, that

"The exploding costs of government undermined the institution of the obligatory loan, threatening to turn it into a direct non-returnable tax ... the suspension or lowering of interest rates was a measure of last resort (and) payers of obligatory loans could sell their credit shares on the open market even if they lost the interest and much of the principal ... in such transactions rich citizens and speculators were likely to fare better than poor ones."

Substitute "treasury bills" for "obligatory loans" and Florence and Venice 1380 become London and New York 1981.

## FROM SLAVERY TO FEUDALISM

**S**IR Moses Finley is the doyen among scholars who have specialized in the study of classical slavery.

His new book\* is a refreshing distillation of the wisdom accumulated during 40 years of research. Its value resides in the way that he cuts through those modern theories that tell us more about the ideology of contemporary scholars than about this evil institution, writes *Ian Barron*.

The book is a work of iconoclasm. There is a refreshing willingness to concede that evidence (especially of a quantitative sort), is either seriously limited or of dubious value, a problem that has hitherto not deterred others from building grand theories.

For example, some scholars apply the notion of profit maximisation to their study of slavery. This won't do, points out Finley, who is Master of Darwin College and Professor Emeritus of Ancient History, Cambridge.

That slavery was sustained as a viable economic system for centuries is not challenged. But the owners of slaves, he points out

# LAND AS THE KEY TO POLITICAL POWER

Power And Imagination (Italian City States In the Renaissance), By Prof. Lauro Martines, Allen Lane Press, 1979, 508 pages, £12.00.

BY  
**HERBERT  
MEYER**



Martines traces the commercial trading basis of many of the Italian city states, and stresses their prime function as markets of exchange, noting with especial regard the Venetian money-lending and Genoese sea-faring prowess. He covers with fine detail the trappings and machinations of power and the conflicts between the middle class communes and popolos of the middle ages and the emerging nobility and strong men, condottieri, principi and signori who eventually took over the republics of Sienna, Florence, Venice, Milan, Genoa, Bologna and the whole northern section of Italy.

**F**INALLY he postulates that all cultural events are caused by their dependence on and catering to a powerful ruling class of citizens – the Zforzas, the Dorias, Gonzalas, Panavicinis and Medicis.

For Martines the relation between the state, the people, art and culture, politics and economics, comes down to one problem – the wielding of power. As Martines says: "The key is power."

This is self-evident, but as a historian the Professor is too easily deluded by the trappings and rituals of power. So he does not ask the vital question: *If power is the key to the state, then what is the key to power?*

Although he unearths vital golden clues and rare nuggets of evidence, Martines does not make the necessary connection between power and its only, unitary, necessary and sufficient base. *The base of power is the control of the land.*

Power in fact can be defined as the actual control over the land and labour of others. This is not simply one of the perks that power gives one, this is what actual power is.

Unconsciously Prof. Martines knows this, because he is too good a researcher to suppress evidence. What he signally fails to do is to connect, except in the most tenuous and off-hand way, the vital relationship between urban power and rural land tenure. He is indeed masterly in his treatment and analysis of the rural land holdings of the urban Italian city states, on the untrammelled land speculation in urban building plots, in the growth of medieval Italian sky-scraper tower blocks, and he is positively riveting when he shows the real social relationships which cause power to flow from the oppressed to the oppressor. So important is this golden section of the work that it is worth quoting at length.

Speaking of the relationships between landlords and peasant

"lacked both the techniques and the practical possibilities necessary for maximization of profits in a meaningful sense, beyond squeezing labour, cheese-paring and adding new holdings to the old."

What caused the decline of slavery? Finley swiftly sets aside the neat old explanations, and he carefully traces out the decline over a long period of time, through a consideration, for example, of the terms used by jurists.

**L**AND tenure is Finley's main analytical tool for studying both the emergence and decline of slavery. His three pre-conditions for slavery are: the concentration of privately owned land into a relatively few hands; commodity production for markets; and the absence of alternative supplies of labour. By tracing out the changes in the pattern of land tenure, we can perceive the transformation in social relationships.

"As always, the starting-point is the land. That private ownership continued right through the Roman Empire requires no demonstration, nor that there was a continuing trend of greater and greater accumulation of holdings by the wealthiest sector of the population, with the emperor and the imperial family at the top of the pyramid. Once the incorporation of new territories had ceased and the settlement of underdeveloped acquisitions had been more or less completed, all further accumulation had necessarily to be at the expense of the less successful or less powerful owners."

The decline of slavery was not accompanied by a shift towards greater personal freedom, but rather towards dependence of a different variety. Barbarian invasions from the north and increased taxation from the imperial centre to finance wars and a growing bureaucracy compelled men who tilled the soil to seek protection from local lords.

farmers, Martines quotes contemporary advice given by landowners. Thus:—

“When a nobleman (viz rich landlord) is with a lone peasant out in the country however much he may insult or threaten him, the peasant does not utter a word. But if the nobleman should so much as raise his voice against the man when in the company of other peasants all would turn and knock him down from his horse ... Florentine collections of advice ... had much to say about dealings with country tenants and farm workers, the advice to treat with them only when they are alone is often repeated. Landlords are urged to be deeply suspicious, to be on their guards always against their tenants, to bully them, to summon them into the intimidating city and to browbeat them there. To do them no favours and to expect none. Relationships between landlord and tenant were a school for antagonism.”

This school of antagonism inevitably arose from the land tenure system known as *Mezzeria* in Italy and *Metayage* in France. In one word: share-cropping. Martines incorrectly refers to the Italian farmers as *Mezzadros* and the system as *Mezzadria* — we prefer the older and stronger *Mezzaria* for its close connection to *Miseria*, which is what the system promised for the *Miserabili* who were the tenant victims.

The *Mezzeria* (or *Mezzadria*) was a system of crop sharing which worked as follows. The landlords supplied the land, the tenant his labour. The landlord sometimes also supplied seeds and farming implements and took as his rent anything from 30 to 60 per cent of the crop in return. The landlord paid no taxes or imposts which were all borne by the share-cropper. In a good year the landlord received 50%, the state 30% and the share-cropper 20% if he was lucky. No wonder then that, as Martines says,

“That was what the institution known as *patrocinium* was about: in return for protection and a measure of relief, the peasant accepted the personal authority of a landlord (or landlord's agent) over himself and his holding, hence the loss of what remained of his independence.”

Feudalism slowly emerged as the dominant form of exploitation, just another link in the long chain that has manacled men who (beginning about the time that he first considered himself to be “civilised”) had lost the primordial right to a free, and equal, access to the resources of nature.

\*M. I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*, London: Chatto & Windus, £8.50.

● Pictured right: Prof. M. I. Finley

## Danish land tax: farmers hit back

DANISH farmers plan to sue Tax Minister Karl Hjortnaes for depriving them of money which they claim is rightfully theirs under the Common Agricultural Policy rules.

In December 1979, Denmark devalued the krone by 5%, as a result of which the income to farmers was expected to increase by £36m net of tax during 1980.

The government moved swiftly, and imposed a special 0.7% land tax to cream off the benefits. Now, because farmers claim that their incomes dropped by an average of 33% during the year, legal action is planned to recover some of the money from the Treasury.

“It was inevitable that the *Mezzadro* should strive to hide some of the fruit of his labour so as to surrender smaller portions to the landlord. He had only his labour and cunning to help him and his family against debt, misfortune, bad weather and illness. Share-croppers who could not work were put off the land. Between landlord and peasant there were written contracts of course but there was nothing to guarantee them except the law courts and these were controlled by the class of absentee landlords in the city.”

So we see that the key to power is control of the land. In Italy the key to control of the land was the system of share-cropping known as *Mezzadria* (or *Mezzeria*, take your pick). It was enforced by bullying propaganda by a mafia or absentee landlords *Uomini di rispetto* who isolated the peasants and then made them offers they could not refuse, oppressed them, impoverished them, and then taught themselves and the peasants that this was the natural

order of things. The bias, as Martines shows, was even clearly expressed:

“In the law codes of the cities where peasants are described as ‘natural born inferiors,’ as ‘basest order of society’ or as malicious, insolent, stupid and malign. In much fifteenth century verse the peasant is a buffoon, a lout, an ignoramus, a cheat.”

In short, to oppress the poor, first enslave them to the land, then humiliate them, and finally, blame them for their own troubles.

Obviously, when protecting unjust gains and illegitimate power, attack is the best form of defence. And what has this to do with the rise of the Medici? Obviously Machiavelli could not make his ruler a prince unless and until the Mafias, using the *Mezzadria*, had made the peasants paupers.

The high renaissance could not flourish until the point was reached when, as Martines shows, 80% of the land of Tuscany was owned by 3% of the population of Florence: If power is the key to art and culture, then the key to power is its base; and the base of all power is the control of land.

Oh, if only the Professor could connect! If only he could see that a city wall or a country hedge excludes men and women from their natural birthright in the land: the right of all free men to till free land.

Until the land is tilled, without Medicis, Machiavellis, Mafias or Mezzerias, until this final wall comes tumbling down, we all shall still live in the walled-in ghettos of the illegitimate, riotous, dangerous, unjust, splendid and terrible Italian-city-states of our own modern world. How ironically right was Victor Hugo when he said that all men have two native lands — their own and Italy.

