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paradigm for gaining deep cultural insight from the difficult literary legacy of ancient jurists—Greek, Roman, and Jewish.

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James Q. Whitman, *From Masters of Slaves to Lords of Lands: The Transformation of Ownership in the Western World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025. 442 pp. ISBN: 9781009497534.

According to Marx, the massive socio-economic transformation that occurred after the fall of the slave-based Roman empire altered the dynamics of Western civilisation by paving the path to a feudal order, which saw the emergence of a new class of landowners. At the core of Marxist theory lies the claim that ancient societies were structured around slave ownership as their dominant mode of production, a narrative that long shaped sociological scholarship. This interpretation has increasingly been challenged; the latest challenge comes in the form of James Whitman's book, which offers a nuanced and illuminating perspective on the nature of property rights in antiquity.

The primary objectives of the book do not involve reiterating the established history of property law in Western civilisation. As W. states, the book examines the legal imagination that constructed property rights in the West, focusing on how ideologies and mentalities influenced legal systems. The book is divided into two parts: the first investigates the history of human ownership in Roman law, while the second analyzes how social transformations in late antiquity shaped the concept of landownership. The work presents a substantial body of historical detail, elucidating various aspects of the Roman legal tradition. The opening chapter traces the origins of human ownership in archaic societies, beginning with its earliest forms. Humans, similar to other animals, have likely always asserted some type of territorial claim. However, these forms have not always resembled the modern Western concept of landownership. W.'s analysis in the first chapter presents evidence of private property in primitive societies, challenging the prevailing notion of primitive communism. Quotations from figures such as Vergil and Marx are used to illustrate how scholars embraced the adage 'The Earth belonged to no one'. Nevertheless, this assertion is contested later in the chapter, as W. provides substantial archaeological and ethological evidence that private property predated the emergence of the state. Particularly notable is the discussion at the conclusion of this chapter, where W. introduces the anthropological theories of Marshall Sahlins, demonstrating how hunter-gatherers achieved affluence by adopting a Zen-like strategy of desiring little.

The second chapter, 'Masters of Men and Beasts: The Early Roman *Fantasia* of Ownership', presents extensive evidence demonstrating that Roman law embodied a distinctive set of values, fundamentally different from those of the primitive societies discussed previously. W. challenges misconceptions in Roman legal scholarship by critically examining widely cited claims, such as the assertion by Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff that 'the father in ancient Rome could kill or sell his children'. He

contends that such statements are often exaggerated and lack consideration of the broader social context in which Roman law operated, where legal structures reflected prevailing idioms of power. W.'s analysis highlights how concepts such as *patria potestas* and *dominus*, along with the myths surrounding these terms, contributed to the persistence of Roman legal traditions. For instance, the notion that Roman fathers possessed the right to kill their children may be more accurately understood as a myth—a vivid expression of Roman legal imagination—rather than as a factual account of Roman society. Nevertheless, these legal myths play a crucial role in the functioning of the law. Law does not merely describe reality; it also measures and judges the world against idealized models. In the context of property law, this process requires an imaginative rationale for ownership and the powers it entails.

The third chapter traces the emergence of *dominium*, absolute ownership in Roman law, as a pivotal feature in Western private law following the fall of the Roman republic. In fact, the birth of the Roman empire has been described by Marx as the moment that set the trajectory for class exploitation. Thus, the Marxist interpretation of *dominium* cannot be ignored in understanding how ownership developed in the Western world. In this chapter, W. aptly presents Engels' Anti-Dühring thesis, which reveals how the rise of the new form of undifferentiated 'free' status brought with it the rise of absolute private property in the Roman empire.

Subsequent chapters examine the gradual decline of human ownership alongside the emergence of private landownership, a process that reached its apogee in the eighteenth century. Part II, titled 'From Masters to Lords', discusses how socio-economic upheaval, followed by the fall of the Western Roman empire, changed the dynamics of property rights. W. highlights the significance of medieval aristocracy based on land and its underlying effects upon property rights. In the conclusion, W. argues that the ultimate abolition of slavery cannot be attributed solely to the moral values championed by Enlightenment thinkers or Christian abolitionists. Rather, the replacement of slavery with private property emerged from gradual transformations in the Western legal imagination. To substantiate this argument, W. guides the reader through multiple historical epochs, and his analysis of Roman law challenges several entrenched narratives advanced by social theorists from Marx to Weber.

As an aside, in discussing the rise of private property rights and the abolition of human ownership it would have been interesting to note comparable institutional developments in Asian societies, particularly the distinctive system of property relations structured around caste hierarchies in ancient India (studied by D. D. Kosambi and Gananath Obeyesekere). I nevertheless recommend this book to legal historians and classicists as an essential study for understanding how human beings became masters of things rather than owners of human beings.

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