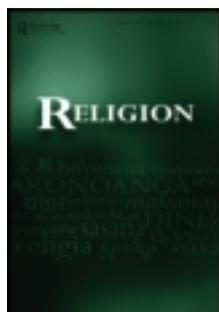


This article was downloaded by: [Roland Boer]

On: 15 September 2011, At: 03:22

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Religion

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rrel20>

Marxism and the spatial analysis of early Christianity: the contribution of G.E.M. de Ste. Croix

Roland Boer ^a

^a Faculty Research Professor, University of Newcastle, University Drive, Callaghan, NSW, 2308, Australia

Available online: 14 Sep 2011

To cite this article: Roland Boer (2011): Marxism and the spatial analysis of early Christianity: the contribution of G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, *Religion*, DOI:10.1080/0048721X.2011.577825

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2011.577825>



PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Marxism and the spatial analysis of early Christianity: the contribution of G.E.M. de Ste. Croix

Roland Boer*

Faculty Research Professor, University of Newcastle, University Drive, Callaghan NSW 2308,
Australia

ABSTRACT This is an in-depth engagement with the neglected Marxist classicist, G.E.M. de Ste. Croix. Although Ste. Croix's focus was Ancient Greece and, to some extent, Ancient Rome, he wrote extensively on the New Testament and early Christianity. In this respect, the author focuses on four key features of Ste. Croix's work: his spatial analysis – the distinction between *chora* and *polis* – of the Gospel narratives in relation to Jesus, and the treatments of property, slavery and women, especially in the way the early church quickly gave up the radical nature of its founder's positions. Although the article critiques elements of Ste. Croix's analysis, particularly in terms of historical narratives that assume a 'fall' narrative and his desire for linear and singular interpretations, it is more interested in the gems of his analysis, not least of which is the spatial analysis and the way he unwittingly highlights the issue of contradiction.

KEY WORDS Marxism; G.E.M. de Ste. Croix; early Christianity; spatial analysis; women; slaves; property

My engagement with the formidable but neglected Marxist classicist, Geoffrey Ernest Maurice (G.E.M.) de Ste. Croix, concerns four specific features of his much larger sphere of work. Those four items concern the New Testament and early Christianity, namely, a spatial analysis of the tension between *chora* and *polis* in relation to Jesus and the early church's attitudes towards property, slaves and women.¹ However, I also seek to extract a gem or two that may generate further fruitful study. In particular, Ste. Croix's spatial analysis with a Marxist bent is distinctly useful, taking the shape of an opposition between *chora* and *polis* in the Hellenistic world or early Christianity. This is but one element of a more substantial, if unwitting contribution, which is to highlight the crucial and complex role of (political) contradiction within a religion such as Christianity. Indeed, at the point of contradiction, the specific contribution of Ste. Croix to

*Email: Roland.t.boer@gmail.com

¹These are particular points in a much wider reach of work that included the class struggle in the 'Greek World', which for Ste. Croix stretched from the 7th century BCE to the 6th century CE, the nature of Athenian democracy, of which Ste. Croix was a champion, the causes of the Peloponnesian War, and the matters of martyrdom, persecution and early church councils (Ste. Croix 1972; 1981; 2004; 2006).

New Testament matters now breaks out to address wider concerns in the study of religions.

Situating Ste. Croix among Marxists and New Testament scholarship

Before we proceed, two significant preliminary questions need to be addressed: why focus on Ste. Croix and why has he been neglected? Ste. Croix was one of the most original, controversial and painstakingly careful (in terms of his sources) of Classics scholars, taking a Marxist position in a discipline that is notoriously staid and conservative. Yet, despite the occasional nods to his massive erudition and his deep understanding of the social, economic, political and ideological complexities of Greco-Roman societies, he has not received the recognition and achieved the influence of lesser scholars. And in a closely related realm – biblical criticism and the history of biblical societies – his groundbreaking studies have influenced but one New Testament scholar to any extent.²

Background

One may begin to answer the question concerning his neglect by noting his idiosyncratic path into scholarship. Ste. Croix was not your usual English Classics scholar: Macau-born (1910), school leaver at 15, articled clerk and then solicitor (1926–40), air-force pilot, given to vigorous marches through the country, tennis player with some ability (he competed at Wimbledon in 1929 and defeated Fred Perry, the last great English male player), and then Classics scholar from the age of 40. He died at the age of 89 in early 2000 after devoting his years of retirement to writing and a vigorous programme of public lectures. By the time he was teaching classics, Ste. Croix was a Marxist, not merely using Marxism as a tool for historical analysis, but also as a political commitment. Such commitment shows up on nearly every page of his work. It might involve showing up the late Athenian Isocrates's despicable defence of property and privilege, or the spirited defence of Greek democracy as a genuine avenue for the poor and the artisans to have a say in politics and the law, or the way the Romans sought to ensure that those born to rule did so without too much interruption from the annoying masses, or the profound dislike of Christianity and the church. The underlying cause for Ste. Croix is that of the masses who were continually ground into the dust, as well as uncovering the mechanisms by which the 'propertied classes', as he calls them, ensured that they remained propertied. In short, he blended scholarly rigour and originality with political passion. These factors still contribute to the nervous reception of his work among Classics scholars. For example, in the posthumous publication

²Predictably, Ste. Croix's work has been celebrated by Marxist historians. Perry Anderson calls it 'one of the most strenuously theoretical works of history ever to have been produced in this country' (Anderson 1992: 2) and Paul Blackledge suggests it should 'be numbered among the greatest works of 20th-century Marxist historiography' (Blackledge 2006: 104). Neither is skilled in classics or biblical scholarship. In regard to biblical scholars, the only scholar who makes some use of Ste. Croix is Dale Martin. Although he invokes Ste. Croix in order to defend the category of class in regard to the ancient Greco-Roman world (Martin 1999: xvi) and on minor points such as manual labour and wage/salary (Martin 1990: 44–45, 75), the references are glancing and come nowhere near a sustained assessment of Ste. Croix's arguments. Yet Martin's engagement is fulsome in comparison to others who actually manage to cite Ste. Croix (compare Castelli 2004; Crossan 1993; Elliott 2008; Heyman 2007; Horrell 2007; Kelley 2006; Runciman 2004).

of some of his papers in *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy* (2006), the editors, Michael Whitby and Joseph Streeter, nurse the essays in a way that betrays a profound anxiety concerning their arguments. Each essay is prefaced by a discussion that seeks to guide interpretation, while the pious introduction dismisses his Marxism and his criticisms of Christianity as a personal foible.

Marxists ...

A third reason may be found in the fact that Ste. Croix rarely refers to Marxist critics who have worked on biblical material, let alone any biblical scholars who have made use of Marxist analysis. In reply, one suspects that they too have, so to speak, turned the cold shoulder. On the Marxist side we find a tradition that begins with Engels's studies of Bruno Bauer, the Book of Revelation, the Peasant War and, one of his last pieces, early Christianity (Engels 1972 [1894–95]; 1973a [1850]; 1973b [1882]; 1973c [1883]; 1978 [1850]; 1989 [1882]; 1990a [1883]; 1990b [1894–95]).³ These studies were soon followed by works that attempted the first sustained materialist analyses of early Christianity with a particular focus on early communism, by Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Kautsky and Albert Kalthoff (Kalthoff 1902; Kautsky 1977 [1908], 2007 [1908]; Luxemburg 1970 [1905], 1982 [1905]). Since this early push there has been sporadic interest by Marxist critics in the New Testament, although most of it has remained in the territory first staked out by Engels, Luxemburg and Kautsky – the origins of Christianity in terms of economic and ideological factors. And much of it took place in Eastern Europe during the Communist era (Kowalinski 1972). One exception to this collection comes from an unexpected quarter, namely, Ernst Bloch's sophisticated analysis in *Atheism in Christianity*, in which he argues for a subversive, utopian thread that runs through both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament (Bloch 1968; 2009).

... and New Testament scholarship

Ste. Croix does not locate himself in relation to this Marxist work, preferring to restrict his comments to Marx himself, but he also tends to avoid biblical scholars who make use of Marxist analysis (for surveys see Boer 2007; Hochschild 1999; Reed 2010). Now, we may not expect Ste. Croix to have engaged with work that succeeded his own, especially those studies that argue Jesus was revolutionary in some way (Crossan 1993; 1995; Horsley 1989; 1992; 1995; 1996; 2002; Moxnes 1997; 2003; Theissen 1978; 1987; 1999), but he also avoids any reference to the founding text in this tradition of work, Fernando Belo's complex *A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark* (Belo 1975; 1981 [1975]). True, Ste. Croix did begin work on *Class Struggle* when the excitement of the 1960s was still in the air,

³For a detailed analysis of Engels's biblical temptations and contributions, see the last two chapters of Boer (in press). The proposal for a revolutionary origin of Christianity among the lower classes was simultaneously contested and appropriated by biblical scholarship in the early to mid-20th century among scholars such as Deissman (1929) and Troeltsch (1992 [1911]). However, by the 1960s it began to be pointed out that the textual 'evidence' suggests a far more mixed class nature for the Christian movement (Judge 2008 [1960: 1–56]), a position elaborated and made more complex by, among others, the sociological study of Meeks (2003), who also feels called upon to attack Kautsky on p. 3, and the rational choice study of Stark (1996).

delivered some of its content initially as the Gray Lectures at Cambridge in 1973, and finally published it in 1981. Time enough to refer at least to Belo, if not Engels, Kautsky and Luxemburg, but he does not do so.

Three reasons – an idiosyncratic path, Marxism and mutual cold shoulders – may account for the unwarranted neglect of Ste. Croix, apart from the usual matters of disciplinary boundaries, reading habits, timing and vagaries of intellectual fortunes. The function of this study, then, is to bring Ste. Croix in from the cold, particularly in relation to Marxist and biblical scholarship. Although that work has grown significantly in recent years, in terms of literary, sociological and economic analyses (see, among others, Boer 2002; 2007; Boer and Økland 2008; Kyrtatas 1987; Reed 2010), Ste. Croix's contributions may serve to enrich and thicken those debates. Of course, as he enters those discussions, I will also ask some questions and offer criticism, but this is not so much to detract from his importance but to enhance it.

Chora versus polis

The first of those contributions is the spatial, political and economic distinction between *chora* and *polis*. We may read this distinction as an earlier and neglected form of Marxist-inspired spatial analysis. Such analysis first made a significant impression in the English-speaking world with the translation of Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1991), which has in its own way been developed fruitfully in the study of religion. The basic assumption that space is constructed and produced, specifically in light of economic and social relations, may now be a relative commonplace, but Ste. Croix's proposal comes well before the recent attention to space and thereby has its own distinct features to add to the discussion.⁴

Definitions

Some basic definitions first: *chora* refers to the countryside, the vast stretches of territory with peasant farming, village-communes, as well as wilder areas at the limits of human presence; *polis* designates, as the name suggests, the town or city.⁵ Yet if we move a few centuries later to Palestine, when the Romans ran it as a colonial province, when Greek culture was dominant and when the Gospels were written, the opposition between *chora* and *polis* takes on a different sense.⁶ In this case, the *polis* clearly designates a Hellenistic city with varying levels of autonomy, either one established after the invasions of Alexander the Great or an existing city that had become Hellenised – in architectural, colonial and cultural senses. Architecturally, a Hellenistic city was felt to need an amphitheatre, gymnasium, public

⁴For an initial appreciation of Lefebvre's contribution, see Harvey (1999: 373–445). The most influential appropriation of Lefebvre came with Soja (1996), but it has also made its way into the study of religion (see Berquist and Camp 2008; 2009; Boer 2009b; Knott 2005).

⁵Ste. Croix (1981: 9) suggests that in light of the notorious difficulty in defining a *polis*, the best definition is that a *polis* was one if recognised as such.

⁶There is a shift in the relationship between *chora* and *polis* between the Greek and Roman periods: during the period of the kings who succeeded Alexander, the *chora* was administered directly by the royal bureaucracy; under the Romans much of the *chora*, especially the agricultural areas with their *komai* (villages), came under the administration of the *poleis*.

buildings, market place and fountains of water; culturally, it meant that the language of governance, law courts and intellectual matters was Greek; in the colonial sense, a *polis* signalled the presence of a Greek colony in a land that was anything but Greek.

By contrast, *chora* is all the territory outside the colonial city. There the language is the one spoken by the locals (in Palestine it was Aramaic), the dominant life of peasants and agriculture continues as it had done before the *poleis* arrived, and there was relatively little interaction between the two except for the extraction – often by force – of a very thin margin of surplus produce to feed the cities, as well as forced labour for city projects. From the perspective of those in the *polis*, they inhabited islands of civilisation in a sea of barbarians; from the side of the *chora*, the *poleis* were alien and brutal tribute-gathering parasites. In short, the exploiting ruling class of Palestine belonged to the *polis*; those upon whose backs they lived were in the *chora*. Ste. Croix is keen to point out that one ‘should not exaggerate the strictly ethnic and linguistic factors ... at the expense of economic and social ones’ in the differentiation between the propertied classes of the *poleis* and the non-propertied classes of the *chora* (Ste. Croix 1981: 16). However, here there is a twist: the distinction itself reflects the perspective of Greek and then Roman colonial presence, for no literature exists that gives voice to those colonised. In order to gain that perspective, we need to read against the grain.

Jesus

In this context Ste. Croix places Jesus of Nazareth. He is clearly of the *chora* and avoids the *poleis* until the fateful entry into Jerusalem. Palestine at the time was a client kingdom (directly under Herod Antipas) of the Romans, passing from the Greek rule of the Seleucids to Roman rule, but, as Ste. Croix points out, the sharp distinction between *chora* and *polis* was entrenched. Out of Ste. Croix’s exhaustive analysis of the terms used in the Gospels (Ste. Croix 1981: 427–430; 2006: 330–336), let me offer two: first, even when it seems as though Jesus threatens to enter a *polis*, such as in Mark 7:31, in which Jesus comes from the borders of Tyre, through Sidon and to the Lake of Galilee, we still find him in the *chora* and *komai* attached to the cities. Ste. Croix then states: ‘But it is Mark V.20⁷ which brings out most clearly what I am trying to emphasise: that in these cases Jesus is clearly in the country district attached to a *polis* and not in the actual *polis* itself’ (Ste. Croix 1981: 429). The examples multiply, but the most telling is the following: close by Nazareth were Sepphoris, which was seven kilometres away, and Tiberias, which was on the shore of Lake Galilee at almost the point closest to Nazareth. Both were Jewish in population and religion but Greek in their administrative structures and both were ‘the only two real cities of Galilee’ (Ste. Croix 1981: 429). ‘Yet’, he writes, ‘it need not surprise us to find no record of Jesus’ presence in either of these cities’ (ibid.), for they were regarded with hatred and suspicion, seen as belonging to an alien world. Instead: ‘In Mark I.38 it is the nearby *kōmopoleis* (the substantial villages) of Galilee in which he contemplates preaching: that represents the reality’ (Ste. Croix 1981, 429–430).

⁷The text reads: ‘And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decap’olis how much Jesus had done for him; and all men marvelled.’

This spatial feature of the Gospels explains for Ste. Croix the oppositional nature of the words attributed to Jesus, who he reads as an implicit rather than a militant revolutionary. Jesus' eschatological message that the 'Kingdom of God' was at hand had, argues Ste. Croix, profound implications for his approach to property and wealth (and thereby the propertied classes). Quite simply, the possession of property was regarded as an evil and as a massive hindrance to joining this Kingdom of God. Jesus valorises simplicity over luxury and forgoes the influence and power that comes with wealth. In short, everything about him stands against the deep values of the Hellenistic propertied classes, almost uniquely in the literature of the ancient world. Ste. Croix never tires of pointing out that Christianity was no different from its Greco-Roman environment in regard to property, *except for Jesus*. So contrary are the records of Jesus' words to Hellenistic assumptions concerning property that the early Christians 'had to play down those ideas of Jesus which were hostile to the ownership of any large quantity of property' (Ste. Croix 1981: 426–427): Over against the valorisation of property and the denigration of its lack that he finds everywhere in the Christian literature, Jesus – at least in the Gospels – stood against such an ideological system: 'I am tempted to say that in this respect the opinions of Jesus were nearer to those of Bertolt Brecht than to those held by some of the Fathers of the Church and by some Christians today' (Ste. Croix 1981: 433). Jesus speaks on behalf of those exploited by the colonial, Hellenistic *poleis*.

New and old

What can be said of this analysis? It is a mixture of new and old, of sheer insights and of some quite conventional positions in the never-ending search for the historical Jesus. One insight comes from the crucial role of *chora* and *polis*, an analysis that shows not merely how the figure of Jesus may be placed spatially within the Gospel narratives or indeed 1st-century Palestine, but also how he fits in with an overriding feature of the Greco-Roman world. This insight may well enrich the spate of studies in the last two decades on the city–countryside relations in Palestine, on urbanisation and its effects on social relations, economic (dis)parities, and on familial and peasant economies (see especially Arnal 2001; Horsley 1996; 2008; Reed 2010).

Another insight is drawn from his wider analysis of Greco-Roman moral and class codes. Focusing on some key stories and sayings in the Gospels – the camel through the eye of the needle, the rich ruler who must sell all he has, Jesus' quotation from Isaiah 61, the parable of Lazarus, the Beatitudes and the Magnificat – Ste. Croix directs us to the Greek terms. For example, *ptōchos* is far stronger than the usual translation of 'poor': it means those who are filthy, destitute, down-and-out: it is a term used for beggars. It appears again and again in these passages, carrying both moral and class connotations. In the same way that *kakos* and *agathos*, as well as a host of related terms,⁸ have moral and class meanings – bad

⁸Ste. Croix (2006: 338–339), provides a host of related terms: *hoi tas ousias echontes, plousioi, pacheis, eudaimones, gnōrimoi, eugeneis, dunatoi, dunatōtatoi, kaloi kagathoi, chrēstoi, esthloi, aristoi, beltistoi, dexiōtatoi, charientes, epieikeis* – all for the 'good' propertied classes; for the 'bad' unpropertied classes we have *hoi penētes, aporoi, ptōchoi, hoi polloi, to plēthos, ho ochlos, ho dēmos, hoi dēmotikoi, mochthēroi, ponēroi, deiloi, to kakiston*.

vs. good, poor vs. wealthy, ignoble vs. noble, cowardly vs. brave, ill-born vs. well-born, ugly vs. beautiful, dregs vs. pillars of society – so also does a term like *ptōchos*.⁹ The same applies to *tapeinoi* in the Magnificat: he has ‘exalted those of low degree [*tapeinoi*]’ (Luke 1:52). By contrast, in Greek literature the word is used pejoratively to designate those who are mean, poor and base. Time and again the Gospel sayings reverse Hellenistic class and moral values: the despised are actually those who are of value, while the propertied classes are absolute scum. Ste. Croix could not agree more.

At the same time, Ste. Croix’s depiction of a reasonably radical Jesus, albeit a non-violent one, is by no means new. As a small sample among many, we have the mildly oppositional Mediterranean peasant identified by John Dominic Crossan (1993; 1995); or the figure – identified by Richard Horsley – who was part of a larger pattern of village-based opposition to imperial power that involved peasant slowdowns, sabotage, counter-terrorism, revolts and the message of an alternative community which was addressed to debt-ridden, hungry and poverty-stricken peasants in their own disintegrating communities (2008); or the one of the liberation theologians who preaches the preferential option for the poor (Gutiérrez 1983; 2001 [1969]; Segundo 1976; 1985; 2004 [1985]); or – to take an example from further afield – the rebellious figure that Terry Eagleton (2007) has championed of late in his return to his theological roots among the Catholic Left.

Ste. Croix shares another assumption with many, but not all, critics working with the ancient world (let alone New Testament critics). It is the question as to whether the documents we have contain accurate information about a person who existed at that time and who engaged in these activities. Or do we merely have representations of Jesus, without any verifiable historical information? Ste. Croix desperately wants the material to be historically reliable, at least for the points he makes concerning Jesus and his place. At the same time he is rather anxious precisely on this matter. While he says it matters little to him whether the Gospels accurately identify what Jesus was doing when, or indeed while he admits that the Gospels are woefully unreliable on historical matters, he also asserts more than once that they give ‘a true picture of the general locus of the activity of Jesus’ (Ste. Croix 1981: 430; 2006: 337). More tellingly, his assertion of reliability is stated as an item of belief: ‘if we can trust the only information about Jesus which we have, that of the Gospels (as I believe in this respect we can)’ (Ste. Croix 1981: 427). Yet this assertion is placed in parentheses – a feature that manifests all too clearly Ste. Croix’s creeping uncertainty concerning the reliability of the Gospel narratives. As Ste. Croix was fully aware, the mountains of research on the Gospels and the figure of Jesus argue about this matter incessantly, especially because there is very little material available apart from the New Testament. Here a minimalist position is the most appropriate one, since none of the information can be regarded as trustworthy for historical

⁹As Ste. Croix points out, *ptōchos* is a ‘very strong word indeed, which very often in Greek means not just the poor but the down-and-out, the destitute, the beggar – Lazarus in the parable is a *ptōchos* (Luke 16:20, 22). Classical scholars will remember the appearance of Poverty (*Penia*) as a character in the *Plutus* of Aristophanes (lines 415–612), and how angry she becomes when Chremylus refers to *Penia* and *Ptocheia* as sisters; no, says *Penia*, the *ptōchos* has nothing, whereas her man, the *penēs*, may toil and scrape, but he has enough to live on (lines 548–554)’ (Ste. Croix 1981: 431).

reconstructions. Even the extra-biblical material is open to question,¹⁰ but what that material does not show is an oppositional Jesus. So all we have in the Gospels is a story or four about Jesus, representations with their own appropriate emphases and colour. If Ste. Croix had been able to give up his attachment to some historical core (an attachment held by too many who study early Christianity), then he could perfectly well have argued these *representations* place Jesus in the *chora* and not the *polis*. Indeed, I would suggest that his analysis does not suffer from such a move but rather is enhanced. How so? We would then be able to argue that these representations have become elements of a powerful political myth, one in which Jesus is an oppositional figure, given to standing up to colonial powers.¹¹ Such a myth, which has inspired radical groups and leaders ever since to emulate Jesus, gains through that process of inspiration a concrete historical power after the fact.

Property

Now Ste. Croix stands where many have stood before him: if Jesus – at least as far the representations of him in the Gospels in concerned – expresses opposition to the features of a colonising Hellenistic culture and thereby the Roman imperial presence, then how did Christianity end up with a diametrically opposed stance? What happened to bring about the change?

From Jesus to early Christianity

Here Ste. Croix's spatial analysis provides an incisive insight: if we grant for the sake of argument this narrative of a change between Jesus and the early church, then Christianity undertook a remarkable 'transfer of a whole system of ideas from the world of the *chora* to that of the *polis* – a process necessarily involving the most profound changes in that system of ideas' (Ste. Croix 1981: 433). That move entailed a shift in language (Aramaic to Greek), culture and, above all, class. Christianity took the huge stride from an ideology of the exploited classes to that of the propertied classes and eventually to an ideology of the state. Already by the time of Paul, barely a few decades after Jesus, we can see the change underway.

Yet space is actually a dimension of class struggle. Jesus was, argues Ste. Croix, implacably hostile to the propertied classes, but in order to survive, the early Christians needed to adapt to those classes or be crushed underfoot. Or, as Ste. Croix puts it: 'Unless Christianity was to become involved in a fatal conflict with the all-powerful propertied classes, it had to play down those ideas of Jesus which were hostile to the ownership of any large quantity of property; or, better still, it could explain them away' (Ste. Croix 1981: 426–427). It is, he argues, a class-generated shift, moving away from the identification with the exploited to the exploiters. Ste. Croix traces the way such a shift took place in terms of property, slavery and women. I deal with each one in turn.

¹⁰Tacitus, *Annals* 44, and a brief reference in Suetonius. The references by Josephus in *Antiquities* are generally agreed to be a Christian insertion. Apart from the wealth of New Testament criticism concerned with the historicity or otherwise of Jesus, see especially the work of Drews (1926), Crossley (2006) and the 2011 collection *Isn't This the Carpenter?*, edited by Thomas Verenna and Thomas Thompson.

¹¹On political myth, which exploits the dual sense of myth as both fiction and powerful story (Lincoln 2000), see further my work of the same name (Boer 2009a).

Mitigation: allegory, almsgiving and mitigation

With a mix of disgust and some amusement, Ste. Croix shows how Paul and then a string of church 'fathers' (Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian, Lactantius, Hilary of Poitiers, Jerome, Augustine, John Cassian, Clement of Alexandria, Paulinus of Nola, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, John Chrysostom and Theodoret) twist uncomfortable biblical passages away from their plain sense (Ste. Croix 1981: 433–438; 2006: 355–368). The best example concerns Jesus' command to the rich man, who asks for the secret of eternal life, to sell all he has and give to poor. It appears in all three synoptic Gospels (Mark 10:21; Luke 12:33 and Matthew 19:21); however, in contrast to the bald command in Mark and Luke, Matthew adds the conditional: 'If you would be perfect'. It is this version that is quoted by all the orthodox interpreters: 'Out of the scores of passages I have come across in the Fathers I have not found one that even notices the discrepancy between the Matthaean text and that of Mark and Luke' (Ste. Croix 1981: 434). In more detail:

So complete was the refusal to recognise the existence of any other version than that of Matthew that when Clement of Alexandria, in his *Quis dives salvetur?*, sets out Mark's narrative of the whole story *in extensor* in his own text, explicitly as his source, he inserts Matthew's 'if you would be perfect' at the explicit point that it corresponds to Mt. XIX.21, without any indication that these words are not in Mark! St. John Chrysostom is even at pains to put the conditional clause at the forefront and to make out that Jesus did *not* merely say to the rich man, 'Sell what you have': he actually rubs it in, expanding the words of Jesus into 'I lay it down for your determination. I give you full power to choose. I do not lay upon you any necessity' (*Hom II de stat.* 5). (Ste. Croix 1981: 434)

Obviously, the conditional phrase conveniently waters down the command, making it a 'counsel of perfection', a perfection to which we should strive but probably never attain. Further, the burgeoning use of allegory came in very handy for blunting the effect of Jesus' sayings in the Gospels. Ste. Croix is not quite fair to the complexity of allegory and its attempt to deal with the uncomfortable truth of a web of contradictions in the Bible. Yet through the wealth and depth of his references, he does make it clear that allegory was also extremely handy when exegeting the passages concerning property and wealth: faced with a tricky passage, one need only argue that it has a meaning at another, spiritual level. Ste. Croix finds such an approach tiresome, amusing and a little frightening (see further Ste. Croix [198: 436–437] and the examples there).

Apart from allegory, there are two main problems with the profound switch undertaken by all the orthodox writers: the idea of almsgiving, which Ste. Croix attributes to the Jewish heritage, and the concept of sufficiency (*sufficientia*). Almsgiving, he argues, is the great relief valve for wealth and property, since through almsgiving one may feel comfortable with all that luxury as long as some of it (largely up to the individual) is given as alms to the poor. Ste. Croix shows (1981: 434–435) how the growing idea that alms can actually forgive one's sin, or indeed secure salvation, fed into a justification for the status quo – in which biblical texts such as Proverbs 22:2 provided handy justification that God had created rich and poor. It provides the giver with a sense of moral superiority and makes the recipient feel degraded. Even more, it becomes an argument in favour of wealth: how can there be alms if there are no wealthy people to give them? As Clement of Alexandria writes in the crucial text *Quis dives salvetur?* (quoted by Ste. Croix),

'What a splendid commerce? What a divine trading!' (Ste. Croix 1981: 435, quoting *Quis dives salvetur?* 32.1). All of which is part of an eloquent argument that almsgiving can actually purchase salvation.

As far as the idea of sufficiency is concerned, the key phrase was *non plus quam necesse est* (no more than is necessary). In other words, sufficient wealth is harmless; wealth becomes dangerous only when there is too much. But there is a catch: who determines what is sufficient? Ste. Croix points out (1981: 438) that the phrase was always left suitably vague. For example, Pliny the Younger could claim that he had but a 'modest fortune' (*Epist. II.iv.3*), even if he was among the two or three dozen richest Romans during the Principate (1st century BCE to 2nd century CE). By the 4th and 5th centuries CE, fortunes became greater still, at which point Gregory of Nazianzus gave the following salve to the wealthy:

Cast away all and possess God alone,

For you are the dispenser of riches that do not belong to you.

But if you do not wish to give all, give the greater part;

And if not even that, then make a pious use of your superfluity (*Carm. Theol. II.33.113-16*, quoted by Ste. Croix [1981: 438]).

Exceptions

All the same, Ste. Croix is too good and thorough a scholar not to note exceptions to his argument. The first exception actually shores up his assessment; so much so that he delights in pointing out that the only ones who really find wealth a problem are the heretics. Among a number of examples, the best is a text called *De divitiis*, written by Pelagius or one of his disciples. It clearly identifies wealth as a crucial problem, suggesting it would really be better to have no possessions at all. As Ste. Croix puts it, this 'seems to me a far better approximation to the thought of Jesus' (Ste. Croix 1981: 437; 2006: 367).

The other exceptions do not fit so easily within his overall argument. Ste. Croix notes that one or two early theologians – Origen (c.185–c.254), Basil (c.330–379), and Ambrose (c.339–397) – had some pangs of conscience; indeed, they felt distinctly uncomfortable with property and wealth (Ste. Croix 2006: 361–363). As for Origen, wealth was decidedly evil. Priests were to give up all property, the texts condemning wealth were not to be allegorised, and one should not pray for anything as mundane as earthly benefits. Ste. Croix spends little time with Origen, apparently since he did not feel sufficiently knowledgeable about the man, but even these points are enough to suggest that Origen is hardly a 'partial exception'. The same applies to Basil, who pushed for the complete renunciation of property in line with the legendary texts in Acts 2:44–45 and 4:32–37, where we find that the early Christians had 'all things in common'. Ste. Croix dismisses Basil's approach as a monastic one that was entirely impracticable when applied to the world at large.¹² But is this not the point? It

¹²In this respect Ste. Croix shares a suspicion of asceticism with otherwise strange bedfellows (see, for example, Troeltsch 1992 [1911]). Apart from noting here Kautsky's (2007 [1908] admiration of asceticism as an economic and social challenge to Hellenistic assumptions concerning class and property, see also the argument that monastic asceticism was held up as an ideal by many Christians in everyday life (Rousselle 1988).

was precisely in the ascetic movement, where we find both hermits and primitive monasteries (after St. Anthony [c.251–356]), that the condemnation on wealth and property was sustained and propagated in early Christianity. They took the Gospel texts attacking property very seriously indeed. This theme of poverty would of course return in the Middle Ages (see below), but it seems to me that Ste. Croix slips past Origen and Basil too quickly,¹³ granting them a few sentences before passing on to the more ambivalent figure of the aristocratic Ambrose. He at least notes that property was not of the order of creation, indeed that property may well be an evil, but then finds all manner of ways to locate an antidote for this ‘poison’, namely almsgiving. Ambrose suits Ste. Croix’s argument far better, since here we find that characteristic move of negating the polemic against property in the Gospels.

Slavery and women

With slavery (Ste. Croix 1981: 418–425; 2006: 345–355) we find only the merest hints of troubled consciences on the part of Christian writers. Ste. Croix ploughs grimly through a rather sorry story, which comes down to the point that Christianity not only continued pre-Christian attitudes to slavery, but actually exacerbated them. Christian writings are uniformly uninspiring on this account: ‘I know of no general, outright condemnation of slavery, inspired by a Christian outlook, before the petition of the Mennonites of Germantown in Pennsylvania in 1668’ (Ste. Croix 1981: 423; 2006: 355) – and they were outside the mainstream. Not even Jesus offers a challenge, unlike his condemnation of property. All the pagan arguments also appear in the Christian sources, minus the ameliorations. For example, the argument (based on Galatians 3:28 and Colossians 3:11), that one is ‘really’ free in Christ despite one’s earthly status, mirrors the pagan argument that a good man (the gender specific term is deliberate) is ‘really’ free even if he happens to be a slave. By contrast, the bad man is a slave to his passions even if he is free. Slaves had harsher punishments in a two-tiered legal system, were not permitted to marry, and were not permitted holy office – just as in the pagan world.

But Ste. Croix’s main point is that Christianity enthusiastically accepted slavery as part of the inescapable social and economic horizon and then went the extra mile beyond anything found in the pagan sources. One means of doing so was to move the idea of freedom into the spiritual realm: freedom was only ‘in Christ’, to be found either in the church or in heaven after death, which meant that one should not change one’s earthly status. This move is analogous to the distinction between worldly and spiritual wealth, for one’s true ‘treasure’ should be in heaven and not with any worldly lucre (see Matthew 6:19–20, 13:44, 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22). This of course ended up meaning, in yet another ingenious re-interpretation, that worldly wealth was perfectly fine if one did not value it above heavenly wealth. Another means was to drum into slaves the need for obedience, neatly slipping the master into the role of Christ (Ephesians 6:5) and

¹³In fact, Origen and Basil appear only in the essay ‘Early Christian Attitudes to Property and Slavery’ (Ste. Croix 2006: 361) and not in the parallel passage from *Class Struggle*, which was published a little later (Ste. Croix 1981: 435). Or rather, they are named in *Class Struggle*, but nothing is said about their positions, for Ste. Croix wishes to focus on Ambrose alone. Origen and Basil are perhaps a little bit too much of an exception for Ste. Croix’s comfort.

even God (in the extra-biblical *Epistle of Barnabas* and *Didache*). After all, as one Christian writer after another was keen to point out, a faithful slave gave glory to God. In order to drive home his point, Ste. Croix compares non-Christian prevarications concerning slavery with Christian attitudes. Aristotle might cite some thinkers in his *Politics* who thought slavery 'contrary to nature', the famed Roman jurors of the 3rd century BCE may have made the same argument, pointing out that slavery was the only part of the *ius gentium* that was not part of the *ius naturale*, and Philo of Alexandria might speak with admiration of the Essenes and the Therapeutai as not having slaves and denouncing the injustice of slave-owners. No Christian writer comes close.

Anomalies

However, there are a few small anomalies in Ste. Croix's account. One concerns a favourite opponent, Augustine (354–430). Ste. Croix derides Augustine for 'that extraordinary perverse ingenuity which never ceases to astonish one' (Ste. Croix 1981: 420), which in this case was deployed to argue that although slavery is evil in principle, it is a result of the punishment for the Fall. The catch is that for all Augustine's enthusiasm for slavery, he also saw problems with it, both in the Bible and theologically. We might not like his solutions, but he was astute enough to see that there was a difficulty. Another anomaly concerns the ascetic Ephraim of Nisibis and Edessa (c.306–373), who has Mary say: 'Let the man who owns a slave give him his freedom', but Ephraim goes on to state that the slave should then come to serve the Lord. The other anomaly in Ste. Croix's account is that of Pope Gregory the Great (c.540–604), who stated upon the manumission of two slaves that 'it is right that men whom nature from the beginning produced free and whom the *ius gentium* has subjected to the yoke of slavery should be reinstated by the benefits of manumission in the liberty to which they were born' (*Epistle* 6:12, quoted in Ste. Croix [1981: 423]). Ste. Croix is perfectly right to point out that Gregory did not proceed to widespread manumissions, except for Christian slaves owned by Jews. But that diminishes the fact that Gregory recognised in principle that slavery was wrong. Now, Ste. Croix is keen to argue that they are minor exceptions that soon fall in line with the depressing overall picture. True enough, but it seems to me that very existence of such anomalies points to a more complex picture.

Women

A very similar story applies to women as it did to slaves (Ste. Croix 1981: 103–111). This is one of Ste. Croix's less original discussions, so it draws less attention here.¹⁴ His argument is that if it was bad in the pagan world for women, it was far worse in Christianity. He draws attention to the 'unhealthy' attitudes to sex and marriage in the letters of Paul and Revelation, where marriage has secondary status in comparison with virginity. He shows at great length that Christian attitudes to marriage made things worse for women since they were backed up with divine sanction.

¹⁴Since feminist biblical criticism has been one of the most significant movements in that discipline since the 1970s, it is impossible to cite even all the most important studies. However, as sober reminders that early Christianity was not particularly beneficial for gender equality, see the studies by Børresen (1995), Castelli (1999), Fatum (1995), Økland (2005), and more generally Archer, Fischler and Wyke (1994).

He makes much of the subjection of women and the required obedience to men in passages such as 1 Corinthians 11 and Ephesians 5, the fear of menstrual pollution in Leviticus and the blaming of women for the Fall, but I cannot see anything that has not been said before.¹⁵ Nevertheless, it is worth reminding apologists who try to detoxify the Bible that it is often an inescapably toxic text.

Nevertheless, one or two bright spots appear in his argument, the best being a certain Musonius Rufus, who offers a pagan foil to Paul's obsessions (Lutz 1947; Ste. Croix 1981: 110). Rufus really upholds an ideal of marriage that a rather conventional idealist of our own day might hold: human love as the highest form of love, mutual faithfulness (which excludes sex with slaves!), and that equal education should apply to girls and boys. Finally, we have the reappearance of a favourite parable, that of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16:19–31. Here Ste. Croix adapts the final statement of Abraham, when the rich man, suffering in hell, begs Abraham to let Lazarus, now safely ensconced in Abraham's bosom, to go and tell his brothers to amend their ways. 'They have Moses and the prophets ...', says Abraham, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead' (Luke 16:29, 31). Ste. Croix suggests we replace 'Moses and the prophets' with 'the general climate of orthodox opinion in society' and apply it to our own day (Ste. Croix 1981: 110–111).

Fall narratives

Now I would like to pass from critical exposition to a more sustained assessment of Ste. Croix's arguments. I have raised a few questions already, but now I shall interrogate his analysis more insistently. Ste. Croix's command of his sources is intimidating and his accounts of the Christian attitudes to property, slavery and women are quite compelling. However, any sustained assessment of Ste. Croix must begin with his carefully constructed argument that within Christianity there was an extraordinary shift from the attitudes of Jesus – at least as far as Ste. Croix can determine them – to that of the early church. But why did this shift take place?

I call such arguments for profound transition 'narratives of a fall', with explicit allusion to the story of 'the Fall' in Genesis 3, for these narratives convey a sense that the transition in question is a compromise in which the original ideals have been betrayed (in Ste. Croix's case the ideals of Jesus, but the point applies to any narrative of fundamental change within a religion). In seeking to explain such a transition, Ste. Croix offers a distinctly Marxist solution. In this case it is clearly a matter of class: the need to survive, the desire to persuade the ruling classes that Christianity was not a threat, and the increasing numbers of Christians from those propertied and wealthy classes all played a role. In this situation, the early eschatological beliefs of the movement with their hope for justice at the coming of God were bound to fade, especially since Jesus was taking his time to

¹⁵It seems there is much shadow-boxing with the legacy of his youthful encounter with Christianity in the form of his mother's commitment to the British Israelites, especially when we come across arguments that the plain meaning of the text – believed to be the Word of God – has been held for centuries. Appearing first in the millenarian turmoil of the English Revolution (1642–51), the British Israelites hold, among other beliefs, that the British are genetic descendants of the lost ten tribes of Israel (only Judah and Benjamin stayed in Palestine), that biblical characters such as Jeremiah, Joseph of Arimathea and Paul spent time in Britain, and that the royal family is descended from King David.

appear with his chariots and horsemen. Above all, the oppositional nature of the culture and politics of the *chora* would never make inroads into or persuade the dominant world of the *polis*.

Traps of the Fall

However such an argument is not without its problems, and not only for Ste. Croix. Indeed, a sizeable portion of biblical scholars argue, like Ste. Croix, that there is something radical about the records concerning Jesus (for example, see Crossan 1993, 1995; Horsley 2002; Martin 2006; Moxnes 2003). Once you grant this position, then you need to account for the way the church attained such grandeur and wealth within at most three centuries, the *terminus ad quem* being the (in)famous conversion of Constantine.

Within those three centuries something happened to the Christian movement. It depends where one draws the line: did the fall from a rebellious, proto-communist movement happen later or earlier. Some, like the Anabaptists and indeed Christian anarchists, argue that the fall happened with that imperial conversion in 312 CE (see Littell 2001 (1958): 46–78). Others place it progressively earlier. In the flood of current ‘empire studies’ the fall happened somewhere in the 2nd century. Although some note the ambiguities of the Bible (Moore 2006), the majority of these studies argue that much of the New Testament is anti-imperial, challenging the propaganda, religion, power and oppression of the Roman Empire (see Brett 2008; Carter 2001; 2006; Elliott 2008; Horsley 2002). So if one agrees that the texts of the New Testament were written during the 1st and early 2nd centuries, the fall must have happened after they were written. Others push the date earlier. It must come, it is argued, after the first Christian communities mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles, where ‘all who believed were together and had all things in common’ (Acts 2:44; 4:32–37). In order to make this argument, one has to make a significant leap of credulity to assume that this account in Acts provides evidence of a real historical practice. But if you do, then the fall happens after these early communities, perhaps in the later 1st century. Yet others push the date yet earlier, locating it with Paul. A characteristic motif of liberal theology and biblical criticism from the late 19th to mid-20th century was that the change took place between Jesus and Paul. Jesus may have been the radical, but Paul is the great institutionaliser, the one who establishes new churches, puts down excesses (either legalism or libertarianism), and commands women and slaves to be subordinate (see Harnack 1908; Schweitzer 2004 [1912]; Wrede 1907). In other words, the shift already takes place within the New Testament. If we add the point that Paul’s genuine letters (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon) are actually the earliest biblical texts in terms of when they were written, then the shift happens very early indeed – around the 40s and 50s. This is where we find Ste. Croix, since, along with Plato and Augustine, Paul is one of his great opponents. After all, Paul is the one who wrote gems such as: ‘Let every person be subject to the ruling authorities’ (Romans 13:1).

There are at least three problems with opting for such a fall narrative. The first is that the Gospels were actually written after Paul’s letters. So what looks like a chronological change between Paul and Jesus ignores the chronology of when the texts were written. In terms of that textual sequence, Paul first wrote his

troubled texts advocating order and subservience, while the texts about Jesus' challenges to wealth, power and privilege came later. One may answer that even though the Gospels were written after Paul's letters, they provide a reasonably accurate record of what Jesus said and did. Ste. Croix opts for this approach, but it is problematic, for there is no way of knowing whether the Gospel texts are reliable or not. Too many searches for the historical Jesus have come up with different reconstructions for one to have any confidence that the historical Jesus may be recovered with any certainty.

So we are left with a situation that troubles Ste. Croix's fall narrative (as it does many comparable fall narratives): the record of Jesus' anti-establishment position comes after Paul's more pro-establishment line. All of which leads to the second problem, at least in terms of Ste. Croix's argument: if Paul comes first and if Paul lives and breathes the *polis*, then the original moment for Christianity is not Jesus and the *chora*, but Paul and the *polis*. Such a conclusion undermines Ste. Croix's narrative, unless we argue for a fall *from* the values of the *polis*. We must assume Ste. Croix's positions on Jesus and Paul for such a criticism to have bite, but it does lead to a third criticism of the fall narrative: it is far too linear. It assumes some more or less pristine moment – at least the early circle around Jesus – that is subsequently lost. The echoes with the loss of paradise in Genesis 2–3, treatments of the nature of early Israel (Gottwald 1999 [1979]; see the treatment in Boer [2005]), and indeed accounts of primitive communism within some Marxist thought are a little too close to such a linear narrative. A far better and more realistic option in light of the biblical material is to identify contradictions that run through all this material. The linear narrative that Ste. Croix and so many others propose is in fact a way of ordering this messy material. Yes, there are texts that are quite radical and others that are decidedly reactionary. But they do not easily fit into such a narrative. It is to the matter of contradictions that I now turn, which is where the implications for the study of religion emerge from the specifics of my analysis.

On contradiction and class struggle

In the introduction I identified two gems in Ste. Croix's analysis, apart from his overall Marxist structure. The first concerns the spatial distinction of *chora* and *polis*, with which I dealt earlier. The second is more paradoxical: on the issue of contradictions and class struggle, I deploy a dialectical argument to bring forth Ste. Croix's insight despite himself.

Morally culpable or not?

As a way into those contradictions, let me begin with another tension in Ste. Croix's arguments, between moral culpability and inability to see the problem. If we ask why early Christian authors almost uniformly failed to challenge property, condemn slavery and the treatment of women, then we find Ste. Croix slipping back and forth between two possibilities: they are morally culpable, or they simply could not see that their positions were problematic. Both are contained within Ste. Croix's answer that it was due to class struggle. Let me take the example of slavery. As Ste. Croix argues in the opening sections of *Class Struggle*, slavery was one part of the un-free labour (which included serfs such as the *coloni*) that was the central means by which surplus was generated for the dominant

classes of the Greco-Roman world. To challenge that, even to push for its abolition, would have destroyed the socio-economic system itself. A similar point could be made for property or gender: to undermine the system of property and gender structures would have sent the system into a tailspin.

At this point we can go two ways. One is to argue that the failure of the ruling classes to condemn property, slavery and sexism was a conscious act for which they are culpable, even if it was a matter of self-preservation. While I have much sympathy with this position, it attributes a self-consciousness that was simply beyond most (apart from those brilliant Roman lawyers and someone like Aristotle or Gregory the Great). It requires that one has sufficient distance to assess whether a system is reprehensible or not, and then decide to support it out of cynical self-interest. But a better explanation is implicit within Ste. Croix's position: slavery was part of the untranscendable horizon – or preferably mode of production – of the ancient world.¹⁶ Its abolition was simply unimaginable unless one was able to imagine a very different world. The wobbles and inconsistencies in the thought of some, such as Augustine or Gregory, reinforce such a position. They saw an anomaly, either in practice or in theory or indeed (in the case of Augustine) in the Bible, but then they came up with ingenious 'solutions' to that anomaly.

Biblical contradictions

One element in the treatment of slavery, women and property is vital for my argument. When debates on slavery heated up in the 19th century, they did so on the basis of the Bible (Ste. Croix's treatment stops before this point with the first statement against slavery by Mennonites of Germantown in Pennsylvania in 1668). Many drew upon the traditional arguments from the Bible – the fabled Curse of Canaan/Ham in Genesis 9:25–27 and the multiple texts in the New Testament admonishing obedience by slaves – but others now focused on different texts to show that slavery was not a Christian position (see Glancy 2006; Harrill 2006: 165–192). Similarly, the arguments over gender that first began in the late 19th century with *The Woman's Bible* (Stanton 1993), abated for a while and then rushed forth from the 1970s, also took place in terms of biblical texts. Those who wanted to recover a more positive role for women in light of the Christian tradition began using other texts in contrast to those texts on which Ste. Croix gleefully focuses (in his condemnation of Christian attitudes to women). So we find Genesis 1:27, where God creates male and female in God's image, or Galatians 3:28, where there is neither male nor female, neither slave nor free, in Christ, or narratives in which women play a larger role, such as Esther, Ruth, Deborah or the Song of Songs. Precisely these contradictions gave someone like Augustine or Gregory a sleepless night or two, and then much later enabled the lengthy struggles within a different social formation concerning slavery and women. And when we come to property, the contradictions are there in the very texts with which Ste. Croix deals, for the stories of Jesus contain clear statements

¹⁶I write 'implicit' within his thought, since what is needed here is a robust theory of ideology, which one would expect, given Ste. Croix's Marxist credentials (see Žižek 1995). Yet Ste. Croix is a little thin on the topic, using it often as a code for 'self-perception' by the propertied classes and indentured labour (Ste. Croix 1981: 372–408, 441–452) or as the usually unexamined assumptions behind a scholarly method (p. 34). My treatment here deploys a more complex approach to ideology.

condemning property and wealth, while the early church desperately sought a way around those sayings.

What does Ste. Croix do with these contradictions? He is actually torn and follows a convoluted path in his interpretation – at least from what we can see in the material available. On the one hand, Ste. Croix would like a unified text with a singular meaning, for this is easier to assess and attack. If any anomaly appears, he tends to explain it away in light of his over-arching position. But then another approach shows itself: Ste. Croix is perfectly willing to admit that contrary material exists, especially since he was known for his careful gathering of mountains of evidence. So, on the question of property, he dutifully notes all the texts attacking property in the Gospels. Even more, there are the apocalyptic texts which Ste. Croix admits are examples of protest or resistance literature. For instance, Revelation with its anti-imperial diatribes is ‘splendid, blood-curdling stuff’ (Ste. Croix 1981: 442) which gives voice in religious terms to implacable resistance to foreign imperialism.

Yet, once Ste. Croix admits such tensions in the biblical and extra-biblical material, he follows two overlapping lines of interpretation. One is to propose a linear development in which the initial anti-property and anti-imperial impulse fades and is overtaken by pro-property and pro-imperial positions, as we saw with the way the early church dealt with the issue of property. This is the fall narrative I discussed and critiqued earlier – one with very limited usage, whether in the treatment of Christianity or any other system of ideas or movement that seeks a better world on the basis of a mythic and ideal past.

Class struggle

The other line is far more fruitful, for Ste. Croix connects such literature with class struggle. In this case, the literature gives voice to the cries of the downtrodden who suffer in impotent frustration. Greater potential may be found in this line, since it opens up a much better way of interpreting the contradictory texts in the Bible as well as the literature that follows it. In a nutshell, this approach works with the assumption that literature – religious literature included – embodies such class struggles at an ideological and cultural level: even literature written by the ‘propertied classes’, by the privileged literate elite, constantly deals with these struggles. Manifested as a problem to be overcome, a hindrance to a peaceful society, as condemnation of rebellion and of – on a religious register – sin, the attention to these matters by the ruling classes (Ste. Croix provides myriad examples) shows that class conflict was a constant and pressing concern. In other words, rather than allocate pieces and types of literature to the various protagonists in class struggle, I would argue that this struggle is embodied in all literature in some fashion. Seen from this perspective, Ste. Croix’s study is an excellent analysis of these conflicting class tendencies within the myriad sources he analyses, especially if we bring to his work a more complex understanding of how the literature itself responds to its situation.

To sum up: insofar as Ste. Croix assumed a meta-narrative that stresses a linear historical development as a ‘fall’ from revolutionary origins to post-origin accommodations, he fails to take adequate account of a range of different Christianities. However, his contribution to Marxist interpretations of the Bible, if not religion as such, emerges dialectically: taking account of these differences and reading anomalous texts against the grain of Ste Croix’s linear fall narrative, his Marxist analysis

may be a powerful framework for accounting for the very differences that Ste. Croix found so difficult to acknowledge and negotiate. In other words, given the multifaceted nature of the texts and the early Christianities (plural!) that arose, the question becomes how one might explain this. The dialectical point is that, precisely at this level, a Marxist explanatory framework like that of Ste. Croix is most welcome as a criticism and rectification of the idealist (often theological) proclivities in this field of study.

Roland Boer is Faculty Research Professor at the University of Newcastle, Australia. Apart from voyages by ship and riding as far and as long as he can on his bicycle, Roland Boer has written numerous books and articles on biblical studies, religion, social theory and critical theory. His most recent publications include *Political Myth* (2009) and *Criticism of Religion* (2009).

References

- Anderson, Perry. 1992. *A Zone of Engagement*. London: Verso.
- Archer, L.J., S. Fischler, M. Wyke, eds. 1994. *Women in Ancient Societies: an Illusion of the Night*. New York: Routledge.
- Arnal, W. 2001. *Jesus and the Village Scribes: Galilean Conflicts and the Setting of Q*. Minneapolis: Augsburg.
- Belo, F. 1975. *Lecture matérialiste de l'évangile de Marx: récit-pratique-idéologie*. Rev. ed. Paris: Les Editions du Cerf.
- . 1981 [1975]. *A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark*. Trans. M.J. O'Connell. Maryknoll: Orbis.
- Berquist, J.L., C.V. Camp, eds. 2008. *Constructions of Space I: Theory, Geography, and Narrative*. London: T.&T. Clark.
- . 2009. *Constructions of Space II: the Biblical City and Other Imagined Spaces*. London: T.&T. Clark.
- Blackledge, P. 2006. *Reflections on the Marxist Theory of History*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Bloch, E. 1968. *Atheismus im Christentum: zur religion des Exodus und des Reichs*. Vol. 14, *Ernst Bloch Werkausgabe*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- . 2009 [1968]. *Atheism in Christianity: the Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom*. Trans. J.T. Swann. London: Verso.
- Boer, R. 2002. *Marxist Criticism of the Bible*. London: Continuum.
- . 2005. Women First? On the Legacy of Primitive Communism. *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 30: 3–28.
- . 2007. Twenty Years of Marxist Criticism of the Bible. *Currents in Biblical Research* 5: 298–321.
- . 2009a. *Political Myth: on the Use and Abuse of Biblical Themes*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- . 2009b. Henri Lefebvre: the Production of Space in 1 Samuel. In *Constructions of Space II: the Biblical City and Other Imagined Spaces*. ed. J.L. Berquist and C.V. Camp. London: T.&T. Clark, 78–101.
- . in press. *Criticism of Earth: on Marx, Engels and Theology*. Leiden: Brill.
- Brett, M. 2008. *Decolonizing God: the Bible in the Tides of Empire*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix.
- Børresen, K.E. 1995. *The Image of God: Gender Models in Judaeo-Christian Tradition*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Carter, W. 2001. *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations*. Harrisburg: Trinity Press International.
- . 2006. *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide*. Nashville: Abingdon.
- Castelli, E. 1999. Paul on Women and Gender. In *Women and Christian Origins*, ed. M.R. D'Angelo. New York: Oxford University Press, 221–235.
- . 2004. *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Crossan, J.D. 1993. *The Historical Jesus: the Life of a Mediterranean Peasant*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.
- . 1995. *Jesus: a Revolutionary Biography*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Crossley, J. 2006. *Why Christianity Happened: a Sociohistorical Account of Christian Origins (26–50 CE)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
- Deissman, A. 1929. *The New Testament in the Light of Modern Research*. Garden City: Doubleday, Doran and Company.

- Drews, A. 1926. Die Leugnung der Geschichtlichkeit Jesu in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart. *Radikalkritik*, <http://www.radikalkritik.de/leugnung.htm>.
- Eagleton, T. 2007. *Jesus Christ: the Gospels (Revolutions)*. London: Verso.
- Elliott, N. 2008. *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Engels, F. 1972 [1894–95]. Zur Geschichte des Urchristentums. In *Marx Engels Werke* Vol. 22. Berlin: Dietz, 447–473.
- . 1973a [1850]. Der deutsche Bauernkrieg. In *Marx Engels Werke* Vol. 7. Berlin: Dietz, 327–413.
- . 1973b [1882]. Bruno Bauer und das Urchristentum. In *Marx Engels Werke* Vol. 19. Berlin: Dietz, 297–305.
- . 1973c [1883]. Das Buch der Offenbarung. In *Marx Engels Werke* Vol. 21. Berlin: Dietz, 9–15.
- . 1978 [1850]. The Peasant War in Germany. In *Marx and Engels Collected Works* Vol. 10. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 397–482.
- . 1989 [1882]. Bruno Bauer and Early Christianity. In *Marx and Engels Collected Works* Vol. 24. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 427–435.
- . 1990a [1883]. The Book of Revelation. In *Marx and Engels Collected Works* Vol. 26. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 112–117.
- . 1990b [1894–5]. On the History of Early Christianity. In *Marx and Engels Collected Works* Vol. 27. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 445–469.
- Fatum, L. 1995. Image of God and Glory of Man: Women in the Pauline Congregations. In *The Image of God: Gender Models in Judaeo-Christian Traditions*. ed. K.E. Børresen. Minneapolis: Fortress, 50–133.
- Glancy, J.A. 2006. *Slavery in Early Christianity*. Philadelphia: Fortress.
- Gottwald, N.K. 1999 [1979]. *The Tribes of Yahweh: a Sociology of Liberated Israel 1250–1050 BC*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Gutiérrez, G. 1983. *The Power of the Poor in History*. Maryknoll: Orbis.
- . 2001 [1969]. *A Theology of Liberation*. Trans. C. Inda and J. Eagleson. London: SCM.
- Harnack, A. von. 1908. *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*. Trans. J. Moffatt. London: Williams and Norgate.
- Harrill, A.J. 2006. *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social and Moral Dimensions*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Harvey, D. 1999. *The Limits to Capital*. 2nd ed. London: Verso.
- Heyman, G. 2007. *The Power of Sacrifice: Roman and Christian Discourses in Conflict*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press.
- Hochschild, R. 1999. *Sozialgeschichtliche Exegese: Entwicklung, Geschichte und Methodik einer neutestamentlichen Forschungsrichtung*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Horrell, D.G. 2007. The Label *Christianos*: 1 Peter 4:16 and the Formation of Christian Identity. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126: 361–381.
- Horsley, R. 1989. *Sociology and the Jesus Movement*. New York: Crossroad.
- . 1992. *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine*. Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress.
- . 1995. *Galilee: History, Politics, People*. Philadelphia: Trinity Press International.
- . 1996. *Archaeology, History and Society in Galilee*. Philadelphia: Trinity Press International.
- . 2002. *Jesus and Empire: the Kingdom of God and the New World Order*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress.
- Horsley, R. 2008. Jesus and Empire. In *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance*. ed. R. Horsley. Nashville: Westminster John Knox, 75–96.
- Judge, E.A. 2008 [1960]. *Social Distinctives of the Christians in the First Century: Pivotal Essays*. Ed. D. Scholer. Peabody: Hendrickson.
- Kalthoff, A. 1902. *Das Christusproblem. Grundlinien einer Sozialtheologie*. Leipzig: n.p.
- Kautsky, K. 1977 [1908]. *Der Ursprung des Christentums: Eine Historische Untersuchung*. Stuttgart: Dietz.
- . 2007 [1908]. *Foundations of Christianity*. Trans. H.F. Mins. London: Socialist Resistance.
- Kelley, N. 2006. Philosophy as Training for Death: Reading the Ancient Christian Martyr Acts as Spiritual Exercises. *Church History* 75: 723–747.
- Knott, K. 2005. *The Location of Religion: a Spatial Analysis*. London: Equinox.
- Kowalinski, P. 1972. The Genesis of Christianity in the Views of Contemporary Marxist Specialists in Religion. *Antonionum* 47: 541–575.
- Kyrtatas, D. 1987. *The Social Structure of the Early Christian Church*. London: Verso.
- Lefebvre, H. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Trans. D. Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lincoln, B. 2000. *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology and Scholarship*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Littell, F. 2001 [1958]. *The Anabaptist View of the Church*. Arkansas: Baptist Standard Bearer.

- Lutz, C.E. 1947. Musonius Rufus, 'The Roman Socrates'. *Yale Classical Studies* 10: 3–147.
- Luxemburg, R. 1970 [1905]. Socialism and the Churches. In *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, ed. M.-A. Waters. New York: Pathfinder Press, 131–152.
- . 1982 [1905]. *Kirche und Sozialismus*. Frankfurt am Main: Stimme-Verlag.
- Martin, D. 1990. *Slavery as Salvation: the Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- . 1999. *The Corinthian Body*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- . 2006. *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
- Meeks, W.A. 2003. *The First Urban Christians: the Social World of the Apostle Paul*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Moore, S. 2006. *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix.
- Moxnes, H. 1997. *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
- . 2003. *Putting Jesus in His Place: a Radical Vision of Household and Kingdom*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
- Økland., B.J. 2008. *Marxist Feminist Criticism of the Bible*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix.
- Økland, Jorunn. 2005. *Women in Their Place: Paul and the Corinthian Discourse of Gender and Sanctuary Space*. London: T.&T. Clark.
- Reed, R. 2010. *A Clash of Ideologies: Marxism, Liberation Theology, and Apocalypticism in New Testament Studies*. Eugene: Pickwick.
- Rousselle, A. 1988. *Porneia: on Desire and the Body in Antiquity*. London: Blackwell.
- Runciman, W.G. 2004. The Diffusion of Christianity in the Third Century AD as a Case-Study in the Theory of Cultural Selection. *European Journal of Sociology* 45: 3–21.
- Schweitzer, A. 2004 [1912]. *Paul and His Interpreters: a Critical History*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock.
- Segundo, J.L. 1976. *The Liberation of Theology*. Maryknoll: Orbis.
- . 1985. *The Historical Jesus of the Synoptics*. Maryknoll: Orbis.
- . 2004 [1985]. *The True Church and the Poor*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock.
- Soja, E. 1996. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Stanton, E.C. 1993 [1895]. *The Woman's Bible*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Stark, R. 1996. *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Ste. Croix, G.E.M.de. 1972. *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War*. London: Duckworth.
- Ste. Croix, G.E.M.de 1981. *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World from the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- . 2004. *Athenian Democratic Origins and Other Essays*. Ed. D. Harvey, R. Parker and P. Thoneman. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2006. *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy*. Ed. M. Whitby and J. Streeter. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Theissen, G. 1978. *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*. Trans. J. Bowden. Philadelphia: Fortress.
- . 1987. *The Shadow of the Galilean: the Quest of the Historical Jesus in Narrative Form*. Trans. J. Bowden. Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress.
- . 1999. *The Religion of the Earliest Churches: Creating a Symbolic World*. Trans. J. Bowden. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress.
- Troeltsch, E. 1992 [1911]. *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
- Verenna, T., T. Thompson. 2011. *Isn't This the Carpenter? An Examination of the Historicity of the Figure of Jesus*. London: Equinox.
- Wrede, W. 1907. *Paulus*. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr.
- Žižek, S., ed. 1995. *Mapping Ideology*. London: Verso.