

**Time of Troubles: A New Economic Framework for Early Christianity.**

Roland Boer and Christina Petterson. 2017. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. ISBN 978-1-5064-0631-2, \$39.00.

*Reviewed by Kurt C. Schaefer, Calvin College*

“This work proposes nothing less than a new model for understanding the economy of the Greco-Roman era, in which Christianity arose. . . . [O]ur approach is deeply Marxist.” These are the bookends of the book’s introductory chapter, a fitting peek at the ensuing analysis that frames the corpus of Christian writings as a response to economic and social realities.

The authors approach this project as theologians. Boer is director of the University of Newcastle (Australia) Faculty of Education and Arts’ *Religion, Marxism and Secularism* project, and research professor at Renmin University (Beijing); his academic work and blogging explores the interactions between Marxism and religion, and he has been called the world’s premier scholar of Marxist criticism of religion and scripture (Fuller, 2012). Petterson’s recent PhD thesis considered the role of Protestantism in Danish colonization of Greenland; this was followed by research associate positions in Berlin and, *apropos* to this book, the University of Newcastle.

The book’s first chapter—“Economic Theory,” nearly one-third of the text—lays out the authors’ framework. This is particularly important material because, as we’re told in the preface, their research “required reading between the lines where the actual evidence ran against one or another author’s theoretical framework” (p. ix). The first section, “Neoclassical economics,” greets us with a terse (6½ page) but spirited rejection of the profession’s mainstream. “Although many biblical scholars and historians of ancient economies draw upon neoclassical economics, we do not” (p. 3). The mainstream is both too narrow and too broad: Its radical reductionism (individualized, de-socialized, and a-historic analysis) is then enlisted to yield a “false universal,” to explain “all human activity at all times. . . . With the removal of history, society, class, politics, institutions, and even religion, this retooled version of neoclassical economics engages in colonizing precisely the areas it has so systematically cut away” (pp. 3–4). Start with an emphasis on an immutable “human nature” marked by individual rationality, then add the presumption of equilibria, an autonomous and self-regulating economy abstracted from

society/history/religion/institutions; the result will be a methodology that is “erasing the historical/social conditions of its own emergence” (p. 9), blinding the analysis of the most important topics at hand. This problem has only expanded in the last thirty years, “in the wake of the triumphalism that followed the ‘fall’ of communism” (p. 4). It would seem impossible to interpret the classical economies without interpreting slavery, serfdom, debt bondage, and forced labor, and it appears to the authors that the mainstream economic apparatus is not well-suited to this task.

What’s their neo-Marxist alternative? A fusion of the work of G. E. M. de Ste. Croix with the *Régulation* school of economic theory. Ste. Croix (1910–2000), a British historian who approached the classical era from a Marxist analytical perspective, emphasized the importance of class in understanding the ancient classical economies. A class is “the collective social expression of the fact of exploitation” (p. 25), determined by its relationship to the means of production and to other classes; a class *society* exists “when a particular (usually small) class controls the conditions or means of production and is thereby able to appropriate a surplus at the expense of other classes” (p. 26), either directly (slavery, debt, serfdom, peasantry) or indirectly (taxation, military service, forced labor).

For Ste. Croix, “a sufficient condition for class is the economic fact of exploitation” (p. 26); though ideology and class consciousness may follow, they are not necessary to the formation of class. The forms of Greco-Roman exploitation of slaves and peasants varied through time, from slave-dependence early in the empire to the Diocletian reform (284–305 CE) that bound the entire agricultural population to particular plots of land on a hereditary basis. In all circumstances, Ste. Croix emphasizes the centrality (for all but the largest cities) of relatively local agricultural production, which is taken to be more important than far-flung trade. This production was organized around the Greek system of a *polis*-city (eventually enmeshed with Rome) supported by a colonized surrounding *chōra*-hinterland; the hinterland is dotted with *kōmae*-villages inhabited by *douloi*-slaves, *addictus*-debt-slaves, and *coloni*-indentured-serfs, all “unfree” laborers. In the most fertile places it still took ten unfree laborers to support each free person, and no more than three percent of the population would qualify as ruling class (p. 33). Possession of land became the dominant form of wealth, into which other forms were generally converted. There ensued a comprehensive identity of landed-ness

with virtue, bravery, and intellect, whereas those associated with trade and the pursuit of profit, often slaves or ex-slaves, were viewed as unsavory threats to the social order.

All un-free labor was viewed through the lens of slavery, whether in advocacy of systemic violence, or by enforcing the viewpoint of the free class, or when arguing that inequality is “true equality” and slavery is an accident of Fortune. Moral, political, and economic terminology aligned to reinforce the message that to be good was to be wealthy, brave, lucky, and beautiful.

This gives us a basic sketch of the *means* of production (the economic elements, Ste. Croix’s emphasis), the *relations* of production (the social elements), and the *mode* of production (*means* plus *relations*, plus ideological, legal, class-consciousness, political, and religious factors), a sketch that Boer and Petterson aim to fill with richer detail from non-literary sources.

To do this, they invoke the *Régulation* school, not to be confused with mainstream theories of regulation. An economic system exists within a context of social/institutional/ideological/cultural systems, and it is the interactions of these systems that allows economies to form and survive; thus, a good economic theory must give you ways of understanding the social and cultural systems that regulate the economic realm. One might think of *régulation* as an element of the traditional Marxist “superstructure” (p. 150). Economies are generated by a social structure, and are only “self-regulating” because they are embedded in a social and cultural context.

For Boer and Petterson, contradiction and, therefore, crisis are the norm. (One might contrast this with the economists’ smooth equilibria that emerge from structured interactions among rational individuals, among whom crisis would be an anomaly inserted from beyond.) Temporary stability may emerge for social relationships that are inherently contradictory, but stability is the exception that begs to be explained by the practices of institutions, ideologies, and behaviors. These practices determine the stabilities and transformations of a system (p. 40). When stability emerges, a *regime of accumulation*, it is regulated by cultural and institutional factors, a *mode of régulation*.

Thus the relative stability of the *pax Romana* was based upon violence, repression, and terror, necessitated by the underlying constant crisis and instability of the entire arrangement. One way of framing this

book is that it aims to analyze the tensions among the structures of the system that constantly threatened its continuance.

The ensuing analysis leads us to these major conclusions:

1. The Greco-Roman economy consisted of three re-shufflings of four major building blocks: subsistence agriculture, *polis* and *chōra*, land tenure (that is, virtual serfdom), and slavery were re-mixed over time. The initial slave regime of the first centuries of the empire gave way to a colonial *polis/chōra* regime, which was in turn replaced by a serfdom-land regime fueled by debt-slavery. These are three different “allocations” in the service of the “extraction” of value for the ruling class, three temporarily stable sets of arrangements that brought some stability to the underlying unstable crisis of arrangements within the system. All of them were dogged by the threat of a reversion to survival-subsistence agriculture among the majority.
2. Slavery had a comprehensive and determinative effect on the nature of exchange in these regimes (pp. 112ff.), with markets functioning as a merely logistical, secondary mechanism. The nature of markets was determined by the persistent need to procure slaves, through the Roman “invention of absolute private property” (p. 114) in the late second century. This invention had ramifications for all other exchange, and allowed the abstraction that humans could be valued as *things* and expected to carry out the will of the master without any personal agency.
3. Christianity arose in this context, a product of the exploitative Greco-Roman economic structures, a supportive response to them, and eventually their dominant ideology (p. 169, for example). Christianity became a major element of the mode of *régulation* of the later Roman empire—a major component of the cultural assumptions, social norms and networks, institutions, patterns of behavior, and belief systems that stabilized the regime and implicitly anticipated the shape of the next regime. Whereas “the Jesus movement” may have been a *chōra*-based insurgency, “Christianity,” its ideological child, supported the slave regime and was a *polis*-based movement (that is, took on the perspective of the dominant class, p. 101). Yet Christianity’s greatest effect was in facilitating the eventual transition to

a serfdom-land regime, anticipating Europe's eventual reliance upon feudalism.

4. Do the early texts of Christianity embody *any* forms of resistance, however muted, to the dominant, exploitative regimes? On this issue, our two authors do not completely agree. Boer sees some hints, though hardly a gospel of liberation; Petterson tends toward viewing Christianity as an ideological servant of the regime.

I think one mustn't demand too much of a book that begins with these sentences: "This book has been hard work, for a number of reasons. By the time we began researching and writing it, our minds were elsewhere . . ." (p. ix). If *they* were bored with it, heaven help the rest of us. Much of the book amounts to a contest over which words should be used to describe an uncontested situation, and the battle yields limited analytical traction. Still, it is clear that a careless neoclassical analysis that is blind to class and property relationships is going to be even less helpful. Because mainstream economists like me place abstraction at the heart of our method, it is *always* the right time to ask if we have abstracted from the very things that should be central to the analysis at hand. Boer and Petterson raise this question with a deep interest in ancient realities, a wide literacy on the details of economic historians' reconstructions, an openness to theoretical nonconformity, a capacity for clear and engaging writing, and a priority for the lives of the marginalized.

I confess that the specifically Marxist elements of their analysis were, for me, unpersuasive. As the authors hinted in their own introduction, their categories sometimes impose more than they clarify. Their insistence that virtually all human interactions must be viewed as involuntary, predatory, negative-sum-game exploitation (p. 123, for example) is particularly prominent and, I think, just the sort of ideological prejudice that they find annoying in neoclassical economics. I wonder at the suggestion that Rome invented private property late in the second century; equally heroic is the notion that coinage introduced a new level of abstraction that made slavery possible, which in turn made philosophy possible. Most of the analysis of biblical texts is trite eisegesis, reaching its nadir (pp. 168ff.) with the claims that Christianity's *koinonia* fellowships were joint slave-owning associations, slavery was essential to Christian missionary work (with Timothy and Silas, for example, serving as Paul's

slaves), and, by adolescent innuendo, Onesimus was the jointly-owned sex slave of Paul and Philemon.

Still, one reviewer of Boer's other work assures us that his "brilliant exposition and highly controversial interpretations suggest that Marxism is the last resort of a bona fide Calvinist theology of grace" (Pallesen, 2009). To paraphrase Timothy Keller, if Karl Marx, Roland Boer, and John Calvin can agree on grace, it just has to be true. We remain in debt to Boer and Petterson for exploring the distant boundary lands of such agreements.

### **References**

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