

Paul's Uncertain Transitions

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Focusing on the constitutive contradictions that run through the letters of Paul, this article offers a historical-materialist answer. In other words, it widens the analysis of Paul beyond mere literary or limited contextual questions, to ask what modes of production constitute the problem to which Paul attempts an unwitting but profoundly influential answer. That is, what socio-economic situation provides the question that Paul seeks to answer at an ideological level, thereby attempting an imaginary resolution of a real social contradiction?

History ... represents life as continually disrupted (Adorno 2006a, 91; 2006b, 134).

I seek to offer a historical materialist answer as to why Christianity is politically ambivalent, with a particular focus on the meagre collection of letters by arguably the most important ideologue in Christianity – the Apostle Paul (I dispense with the quaint ‘Saint’ since either everyone is a saint or no-one is). It helps, of course, if you happen to have your correspondence enshrined in sacred scripture. Why Paul? It is partly because his few letters are the subject of some extended discussion among philosophers (Badiou 2003, 1997; Agamben 2005, 2000; Taubes 2004; Žižek 2000, 2001, 2003; Trigano 2004; Sichère 2003; Rey 2008), some from the Left, partly because Paul’s position was to become so dominant, shaping not merely Christianity itself, but the ideology of an empire, but above all because he offers an imaginary resolution, or a literary and ideological mediation of competing social formations. Through a series of oppositions – law and grace, sin and faith and so on – all of which are clustered around the death and resurrection of Christ, Paul attempts a transition from one to the other, a transition that is also an effort to offer a passage from an older economic system to the one that the Romans were brutally imposing in the ancient Near East. The problem is that Paul’s transitions are neither neat nor complete, so he actually allows both sides of his many oppositions to continue. This ambivalence on his part enabled Christianity to take contrasting positions in relation to power, especially economic power, and it explains why Christianity so easily slipped into a seat beside the powerful. By contrast, a very different position like Christian communism (produced by the legendary images of the early church in Acts 2 and 4) took one side, offering an idealised representation of fading social formation. No transition or mediation here; it was a desperate resistance to the new order of Roman power and for that reason failed to get any substantial grip.

In Romans 13.1 Paul writes, ‘Let every person be subject to the governing authorities ... anyone who resist the authorities resists what God has appointed’. This text and the few verses that follow it have raised the pulse of more than one rebel, revolutionary or even postcolonial critic, while at the same time warming the heart of not a few conservatives and other despots and megalomaniacs. Romans 13:1-7 raises an acute problem in the Bible itself: for every text of resistance and liberation, we can also find at least one of accommodation and oppression. My exploration of the problem moves in three ever wider circles, the first focuses on Romans 13 and the stumbling block it poses for those who interpret the New Testament as an anti-imperial and anti-colonial collection of texts. From there I move out to connect this specific tension with the full run of political ambivalences and contradictions in Paul’s letters. And finally I widen my scope to include socio-economic issues.

ANTI- OR PRO-EMPIRE?

It is difficult to avoid the sense of Paul's exhortation in Romans 13. 'Let every person be subject (*hypotassesthō*) to the governing authorities (*exousiais hyperechousais*)' is quite clear: all of us must subordinate ourselves to those with power, authority, dominion and what have you. But this verse must be seen in the context of the full argument in Romans 13: 1-7:

¹ Let every person be subject to the ruling authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ² Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement. ³ For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of him who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴ for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵ Therefore one must be subject, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. ⁶ For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. ⁷ Pay all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due.

Three points are worth noting in this text: a hierarchy of power; a concern with insurrection; and taxes. I will leave taxes alone (vv. 6-7), since the point flows on from the other two. As far as hierarchy is concerned, what runs through Paul's text is a chain of command (see v. 1b): God first, who bestows power and authority upon designated rulers, and then all the rest who must obey them. Here it seems to be earthly rulers, but the same hierarchy applies to the spirit world (1 Cor 15:24). Now emerges the concern with sedition, which is really the main focus of this text, covering four of its seven verses. And it turns on a play with *tassō*. Originally designating the proper ordering of troops, *tassō* has come to mean the correct arrangement and order, the determined sequence of things. So Paul points out that authority has been ordered (*tetagmenai*; v. 1) by God and it requires one to 'be subordinate' (*hypotassesthō*; vv. 1 and 5) to that authority. However, what one must not do is undermine or go against that order (*antitassō*), or more strictly be a disruptor of order or 'a rebel' (*ho antitassomenos*; v. 2). In other words, Paul is dead keen to counter any possibility of civil disobedience, sedition and insurrection. Woe to the 'one who resists the authorities' (*ho antitassomenos exousiai*, v. 2), he writes, for the wrath, judgement, terror, punishment and sword of the ruler and thereby of God will soon follow (vv. 2-5). Be afraid, be very afraid if you engage in such evil acts. I can't help wondering why Paul is so eager frighten his readers into obedience, into 'good conduct' in order to gain the approval of the authorities (*epainon ex autēs*; v. 3). I suspect it is because he or those who took up his message saw the radical possibilities of that message and it frightened the hell out of him, but more of that later.

More than one conservative or reactionary has found a text such as Romans 13 extraordinarily useful. To cull a few more notable examples from a very long list, there is the dirty deal done with the state under Constantine and the resultant effort at 'catholic' orthodoxy, or the 'holy' Roman emperors who followed through the Middle Ages, the uncanny ability of monarchs to be, as Christ's representative on earth, both head of state and of the church, the class status of the Church throughout feudalism, Luther calling on everyone and anyone to slaughter any rebel peasant they might encounter, the *sine qua non* of deep religious commitment by as many presidents of the United States as one cares to remember, and the grovelling support of wealthy and powerful rulers by any number of ecclesiastical bodies.

Romans 13 was not the only text called upon to justify such reactionary readings. For instance, John Calvin added to this flagship text Titus 3: 1 on obeying the powers, principalities and magistrates, 1 Peter 2: 13 on submission to kings and governors, and 1 Timothy 2: 1-2 on prayers

and intercessions for all in authority (Calvin 2006, 4.20.23; Calvini 1957, 5.494.6-26).¹ As I have argued elsewhere, Calvin gets himself into a massive knot, since he is too perceptive a student of the Bible not to see that there are a good many texts that advocate the overthrow of an ungodly ruler, a position he ends up advocating, albeit with many qualifications (Boer 2009b).

I will come back to this tension in a moment, but before I do I want to juxtapose Romans 13 with the positions taken by those who approach the New Testament from the perspective of 'empire' and post-colonial criticism. The fact that so many books published in the last few years on the New Testament have 'empire' somewhere in the title is an indication of a significant shift in scholarship. Four streams have come together to form what is now a wide and full river: older Marxist inspired studies that have sought the historical conditions of a rebellious movement (Belo 1981, 1975; Horsley 1989, 1992, 1995, 1996), liberation theological approaches to the Bible (Gutiérrez 2001; Miranda 1974, 1982), more recent postcolonial approaches (Marchal 2008; Segovia and Sugirtharajah 2009) and the growing sense (not new in itself) that the New Testament cannot be understood without considering its place within the Roman Empire (Brett 2008; Carter 2001, 2006; Elliott 1997, 2000, 2008; Horsley 1997, 2002, 2003, 2008). A significant feature of many of these studies is that they find deeply anti-imperial themes in the biblical texts. Or at least one can find, they argue, a consistent anti-imperial theme running through them. Invariably the comparison is made with our own times, whether it the imperialism of the United States, or the global ravages of trans-national corporations or the profound difference between the majority of impoverished peoples of the world and small number of the obscenely rich.

It is a long way from Romans 13, so let us see what some of them make of that text?² Most of the positions fall into standard patterns of interpretation, although all of the share the assumption that at some level Paul must be consistent and coherent. Although some have toyed with the idea that Romans 13:1-7 is, without any evidence, an interpolation (Kallas 1965), most fall back on the tried and not-so-true position that the text is a particular injunction limited to a specific time and place (Käsemann 1980, 338-47; Elliott 2008, 154; Telbe 2001, 171; Ehrensperger 2007, 173-4; Carter 2006, 133-6). This argument has all manner of variations, such as a temporal one in which Paul advocated submission while the Romans seemed all powerful and resistance would have meant immediate annihilation (Ehrensperger 2007, 173-4), or that he took up a standard theme and repeated it without reflecting too much (Käsemann 1980, 338-47), or that he distinguishes between being forced to obey and willingly doing so (Carter 2006, 133-6). The problem is that this position turns on a deeply theological and problematic distinction between universal and particular admonitions. One cannot help notice that it is more popular when there is a rather bad example of government in mind – the Nazis for German critics or the USA for American critics. A less popular and indefensible line is to argue that Paul is being ironic, offering a subtle critique of Roman power (Jewett 2007, 787-9; Carter 2004). Over against these various twists and turns, the very non-postcolonial Voelz (1999) actually offers a novel argument: the text is perfectly clear but it refers only to good governments – he explicitly mentions Nazi Germany as example where it would not apply. Only one critic that I can find countenances the possibility that Paul may be thoroughly inconsistent and incoherent: in a remarkable work, Elliott argues that Paul does show signs of strain since he was under the influence of imperial ideological forces that produced ripples and disjunctions in his letters. In the case of the

¹ Stevenson (1999, 143-4), heavily stresses this element in Calvin's political thought, drawing on letters that give direct advice on the matter. See also Calvin's commentaries on 1 Peter 2:13, 1 Timothy 2:1-2 and Titus 3:1 in (Calvin 1855, 79-80; 1856, 51-3 and 324). I follow the standard practice of referencing Calvin's works. References to the English translation of *Institutes of the Christian Religion* use section, chapter and paragraph numbers, while references to the Latin edition of 1957 [1559], *Institutiones Christianae Religionis*, edited by P. Barth and G. Niesel, use volume, page and line numbers.

² This is a heavily interpreted text, as one would expect. See the survey of positions in Telbe (2001, 177-8), and especially Riekkinen (1980).

text in question, the argument that rulers derive their authority from God may well be read as an implicit counter to the Roman assumption that the emperor was God; yet at the moment Paul seeks to outfox the emperor, he also comes down on the side of obedience to such rulers. In other words, Elliott recognises a contradiction or two in Paul's texts, contradictions that arise from the 'material and ideological conditions in which the letter was written and which the letter was an attempt to resolve' (Elliott 2008, 156; 1997). I would like to take Elliott's suggestion further and argue that Paul is thoroughly contradictory and that his incoherence cannot be understood without his socio-economic situation.

MULTI-VALENCE

We have arrived at the point where anti-imperial readings run up against and struggle with texts like Romans 13, offering what are usually old exegetical responses. Barring Elliott's insight, none of these approaches dare pursue the possibility that Paul may have been openly ambivalent on this matter, that there is a basic and irresolvable opposition in his thought. It should actually be no surprise that there is a tension or two in Paul's thought since his whole theoretical framework turns on them. Yet the assumption by critics is that Paul has managed to work through them or overcome them, that he is, unlike us, singularly consistent in his thought and that we may even find the one true meaning of Paul's thought.³ The trick for interpreters who assume that Paul must be coherent is to find out how he does so, for it is not always so clear. So let us explore those oppositions and tensions further.⁴

Paul's letters are riddled with oppositions: Jews and Gentiles (Rom 2:8-10; 3:9, 29; 9:24; 10:12; 1 Cor 1:23; Gal 2), slave and free (Rom 6; 1 Cor 7:20-2; 12:13; Gal 3:28), male and female (Gal 3:28), flesh and spirit (Rom 7:1; 1 Cor 6:16; 15:39, 50; Gal 6:13; Phil 3:1-4), elect and damned (Rom 9:11; 11:7, 28), Adam and Christ (Rom 5:11-13, 16-18; 1 Cor 15:22), death and life (Rom 5-6; 7:10; 8:2, 6, 38; 2 Cor 2:16; 2 Cor 4:10-12; Phil 1:20), grace and law (Rom 4:16; 5:20; 6:14-15; Gal 2:21; 3:18; 5:4), grace and sin (Rom 5:20-1; 6:1, 14-15), grace and works (Rom 11:6), Christ and law (Rom 7:4, 25; 8:2; 10:4; 1 Cor 9:21; Gal 2:16, 21; 3:1, 13, 24; 5:4; 6:2; Phil 3:9), Christ and sin (Rom 5:21; 6:1, 9, 11, 23; 7:25; 8:2, 9-10; 13:14; 1 Cor 8:12; 15:3, 17; 2 Cor 5:19; Gal 2:17; 3:22; 5:14), righteousness through faith or works (Romans 1:17; 3:21-2; 4; 9:13; 10:6; Galatians 3:11; 5:5; Philemon 3:9), law of sin and law of Christ (Romans 7:25; 8:2). An extraordinarily persistent pattern of oppositions, is it not? Unlike cows in a field at night (in which they are all grey) not all oppositions are equal, at least as far as Paul is concerned. At times he approves one item – life, grace, Christ, righteousness through faith – at the expense of another – the damned, sin, law, works, righteousness through works. At other times he reshuffles the oppositions: as is obvious from the list, both Christ and grace are fulcrums for many of those oppositions. In other words, Christ and/or grace also entail redemption, election, life and faith, all of them standing ground and seeking to overcome the evil alliance – once again sin, law, death, works and so on.⁵ But at other times he sets up an opposition only to argue that the

³ Most recently I encountered these problematic assumptions in an exchange with Troels Engberg-Pederson, author of *Paul and the Stoics* (2000), at the Religion and Political Thought conference in Copenhagen, 24-5 September, 2010. By contrast, an earlier scholar no less than Ernst Troeltsch is quite willing to admit that Paul suffered from at least one 'characteristic uncertainty' that has given rise to the tension between predestination and the universal will of divine love (Troeltsch 1992, vol. 1, 73).

⁴ One or two critics have in fact argued that other parts of the New Testament are treacherous and highly ambivalent if one wishes to find a clear anti-imperial message. See the thorough discussions of the political ambiguities of the Gospels of Mark, John and the Apocalypse in Moore (2006). However Moore is content to identify the contradictions without offering any explanation for them. On the Gospel of Mark see also Liew (1999).

⁵ At this point we could extend this mixing in a way that would reveal some of Paul's more problematic assumptions. For example, what do the reshuffled oppositions of elect versus female, or law versus spirit, or indeed Jews versus life say about Paul's own deeper patterns of thought?

opposition itself is abolished (*Aufhebung* before Hegel, if you will) because of Christ. In this group are the contentious pairs of male and female, slave and free, Jew and Gentile of Gal 3:28. Are they really abolished 'in Christ', as Paul would have it, or is this a way of ensuring that nothing changes in the real world. Don't worry about these, suggests Paul; in Christ they no longer exist, so you don't need to do anything about gender relations, or ethnic difference, or class conflict in this world. It is unclear precisely what Paul means. That lack of clarity and even uncertainty becomes glaringly obvious when Paul begins to complicate, undermine and rearrange his oppositions. For example, precisely what the 'law' is remains problematic. Is it the law of Moses, the law of the Romans, any law of the land? Sometimes it joins the negative register, especially in opposition to Christ and grace. But then the law changes guise and obtains new documents, becoming the law of Christ (positive) over against its former self as the law of sin (negative). Law has been split, transformed and is supposed to overcome itself. And sometimes an opposition must deal with a third term, as with flesh and spirit; now we find that the body turns up, sometime allied with flesh and sin, and sometime ally with life. Does not Paul argue for the resurrection of the body? So the body and thereby the flesh is also on the side of resurrection, life, Christ and grace. In short, these tensions lead to a deep instability in Paul's thought.⁶

Rather than go through all of these oppositions in detail, let me focus on two of them, perhaps the most important of all – law and grace, and death and resurrection. As for law and grace, the key texts are Paul's letters to the Romans and the Galatians, where we find statements that have formed the battle ground in more than one reform movement within Christianity, most notably the Reformation itself. Paul writes: 'you are not under law but under grace (*charin*)' (Rom 6:14); again, 'Law came in, to increase the trespass; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more' (Rom 5:20); and in Galatians, 'I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose' (Gal 2:21). But Paul never keeps his oppositions monogamous, so before we know it grace is coupled with sin and death: 'as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness' (Rom 5:21); or with works, 'if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works' (Rom 11:6). And then faith operates in a tag-team effort in Galatians, 'a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ' (Gal 2:16); and then again in Romans, 'For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law' (Rom 3:28). All the same, the operative distinction is between grace and law: the law (usually assumed to be of Moses, but there are no descriptors attached, so it may well be any law) has been abrogated by the coming of Christ; it has been annulled, negated and subsumed through God's grace – a free and undeserved gift.

The catch with these statements is that they have the propensity to follow various tracks, such as license (if we are of the Elect then nothing we do will change that), quietism (it is all up to God), activism (showing the fruits of grace), Calvinist predestination (since we are completely reliant on God's grace we are also reliant on his decisions as to who will be saved and who damned), the Methodist tendency to Arminianism (God's grace is available to all but we can accept or reject it), Puritanism (in response to grace we need to live lives acceptable to God), antinomianism (all law has been abrogated so we need pay no attention to it), and even political radicalism (grace is after all the theological version of revolution).

But what of Paul's own situation and these strange but important letters? Paul initially argued for freedom from the law through grace, but some of the groups to whom the letters were written and those which grew up around these letters took up the idea with far more gusto than he seems to have wished.⁷ They interpreted freedom from the law in terms of sex, worship, Roman law, the role

⁶ I draw this point, in part at least, from Agamben (2005), although he turns it into an argument for the difficult-to-pin-down remnant before trying to locate the key to Paul's thought in the moment of pre-law (Boer 2009a, 181-204).

⁷ I frame the sentence in this way quite deliberately, since the letters may have been written to existing communities, but they also gathered new collectives around them after they were written and collected. For

of women in worship and in the communities – so much so that one sometimes gains the impression of communes full of the slapping sounds of sex, leadership by anyone full of the spirit, flagrant civil disobedience and disregard for social customs (much like the weekend-long parties of the hippies next door, with their music and talk until dawn and smoke from the joints wafting in through our windows). Not quite, but Paul clearly saw problems springing up like mushrooms after rain in the places where he had preached. As some major studies of the letters to – especially – the Corinthians and Galatians have observed, Paul runs around desperately mopping up the mess for which he himself was initially responsible (Longenecker 1990; Martyn 2004; Matera 2007; Martin 1999; Thistleton 2000; Keener 2005; Fitzmyer 2008). While the Galatians erred on the side of abiding by the letter of the law, the Corinthians took Paul's arguments regarding the law to their logical conclusion. Women ecstatics were leading worship, throwing off the social codes of hair coverings; social mores regarding sex were tossed out the window; food offered to pagan idols was eaten freely; people uttered the slogan, 'all things are lawful for me'. This is the classic libertine and antinomian position: the law has been overcome, so what relevance has it for me. Or in a more theological vein, God has forgiven our sins in Christ, so I can act with impunity. And to give it an apocalyptic twist: the last days have begun with Christ and he will return soon, so this world is passing and no longer holds us in its thrall.

When he became aware of the outcomes of his teaching, Paul sat back with a shock: oh my God, what have I done? Although he had emphasised Christian freedom from the law in the letter to those sticklers for rules in Galatia, that message hit all the wrong buttons for his Corinthians readers. And to his own dismay, such developments could quite legitimately claim a beginning within his own thought; they were merely taking his teaching to its logical end. So he sets out to curb what he has inaugurated, desperately trying to rope in grace, faith and freedom: he urges his readers not to dispose of the law entirely, for it is good deep down; argues that there is another law, the law of Christ; bans the sexual license that some saw in the idea; limits the freedom that women were taking in some of the churches; urges some concern for 'weaker' brethren in outward observance (meat given to idols and so on). So we find that the same person who wrote 'not under the law, but under grace' (Rom 6:14 and 15) and 'now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive' (Rom 7:6) also wrote the text with which I began my discussion, 'Let every person be subject to the governing authorities ... anyone who resist the authorities resists what God has appointed' (Rom 13:1). The same mouth that dictated 'all who rely on works of the law are under a curse' (Gal 3:10) also mentions that 'we uphold the law' (Rom 3:31), that the law is 'holy' and 'good' (Rom 7:11 and 16). One more: to the Galatians he writes 'There is neither slave nor free ... for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3:28), while he tells the Corinthians, 'Every one should remain in the state in which he was called' (1 Cor 7:20). Not a bad collection of tensions over such a vital question as the law!

Amidst the crush of jostling oppositions, one does stand out, going beyond that of grace and law. It is none other than the narrative of death and resurrection, focused on Christ. Obvious, one might say, for it is the core claim of Christianity – that this particular person at this particular time died and then rose from the dead. But we forget too easily that the reason it is so central is because Paul made it so (for example, see Rom 1:2-6; 3:21-6; 4:24-5; 5:6-11; 6:3-11; 8:11, 32; 10:9; 14:8-9). The angle I seek comes initially from Julia Kristeva's argument concerning Paul, for she has a distinct insight, in the midst of much dross (Kristeva 1987, 139-50; 1983, 135-47; 1991, 77-83; 1988, 113-22). A heavy psychoanalytic bent pervades Kristeva's work – although one can detect a hidden Marx who peeks out every now and then (Boer 2009a, 123-9) – and it brings her to argue that Paul was able,

the sake of argument, I assume with the bulk of studies of Paul that his references to opponents and opposing positions actually reflect real opponents. It would be far more interesting (but a different study) to explore the possibility that Paul manufactures these opponents in a deft piece of rhetorical shadow-boxing. By doing so, he brings his readers onside by arraying himself against a range of imaginary opponents.

through this narrative of death and resurrection, to crucify many of the psychological pathologies - narcissism, masochism, fantasy, repression, death drive, oral sadism and above all psychosis.

In each case, argues Kristeva, Paul offers a way of traversing these pathologies, appropriating them or negating them through the death-resurrection narrative. Since I am enticed most by her argument concerning psychosis, only a summary of the other crucified pathologies is needed. Fantasy, repression and the death drive are each neutralised or negated in their own. Paul neutralises fantasy by universalising Christ's death on the cross, a process that short-circuits fantasy since it snaps the identification between us and Christ. As for repression, the story of death and resurrection brings one's death to the fore; it can no longer be repressed and thereby idealised. The death drive too is avoided since we are blocked from identifying with the Father on our own, of writing ourselves into the story, due to the collective nature of the story. The other pathologies – masochism, narcissism and oral sadism – follow a slightly different path, for in these cases Paul appropriates the pathology and thereby overcomes it. In the case of masochism Paul internalises the murder of the scapegoat (Christ) but then makes this masochism analogous rather than real – the believer dies in a manner analogous to Christ, not as Christ. Similarly, narcissism is appropriated and overcome: one accepts death as a way to achieve salvation (which is then the limit of negative narcissism), but then, just as narcissism seems to have achieved its goal, Paul transfers the death onto another, Christ, which overcomes the narcissism since it is focussed not on the self but on another, all of which is completed by the command to love one's neighbour rather oneself. And oral sadism, with its destructive hunger for the mother, is neatly overcome by Christ, who places himself between the hunger and its desire; he is the one eaten in the Eucharist, thereby satisfying the desire to eat but removing the sadistic satisfaction.

These various Pauline prescriptions really set the scene for psychosis, for there lays the hidden treasure of Kristeva's dealings with Paul. Simply put, Paul offers a passage from one identity to another, a bridge over the schizophrenic split of psychosis by means of that self-same narrative of Christ's death and resurrection. How does this work? To begin with, her discussion is decidedly collective: the *ekklesia* is the key. Further, that *ekklesia* is made up of foreigners, non-Jews who have become heirs to the promise of the Jewish God. They are Gentiles, potentially from every corner of the globe, and yet they are called to what began as a particular, local and ethnically restricted religion. So by definition such a collective is split, caught between two identities. And the key narrative of death and resurrection enables them to pass from one identity to another, to become dead to the old life and to be born into the new one – all of it mediated by Christ. Instead of trying to insert foreigners into an existing social body, Paul recognises the foreigner's split between two countries and transforms that split into the passage between and negotiation of two psychic domains – between flesh and spirit, life and death, crucifixion and resurrection in a body that is simultaneously the group and Christ's body (see Rom 12:4-5). Their external division becomes an internal one, internal to the collective's construction and the individual's psyche.

Kristeva's work, insightful though it is, always seems to fall short, without sufficient socio-economic context and hobbled by her commitment to psychoanalysis. So I would like to take her point much further, connecting it initially with the myriad oppositions I traced a little earlier. Let us see how they fare. The death-resurrection narrative is indeed one of transition, a long, rocky, overgrown path from one unknown place to another; or rather, it is a journey from one life to a very different life, negotiating perhaps the most challenging of obstacles in between. Many of Paul's other oppositions also signal a crossing: law to grace, works to grace, justification by the law to justification by faith, flesh to spirit, sin to redemption, damned to elect, from a life enslaved to sin to a life enslaved to Christ, and of course, for the believer, a transition from death to life. For Paul, Christ throws all these in a backpack and drags them with him in the long walk from death to resurrection. Other oppositions are transformed in the process – female and male, Jew and Greek,

slave and free, and body and spirit – although some would argue that Paul effects a passage in some of these cases too, especially from female to male, given the history of Christianity.

Or does Paul really enable a transition? Let me reprise my earlier point concerning the instability of Paul's beloved oppositions. Is the passage as therapeutically successful as Kristeva would have us believe? Ambiguity haunts Paul's convoluted texts and practices, in terms of both the *ekklesia* that is supposed to enable the transition to a new identity as well as the transitions themselves. The *ekklesiae* Paul discusses in his letters replicates in many respects the gatherings of the Imperial cult. Paul uses the same language as that cult, attempting to model a new collective in terms of the old. The trap is that it is never clear how much of a break his proposals offer, especially in light of the way Christianity has all too readily affirmed existing structures of inequality (Kittredge 2000). In fact, from those crucial letters to the Corinthians, where Paul bends over backwards to curtail what he saw as antinomian excesses, Paul begins to reassert patterns of gender hierarchy in the structure of the *ekklesia*. In those letters Paul demarcates the 'sanctuary space' of the *ekklesia* by means of a gender hierarchy of cosmic proportions, the model of the male body of Christ and women's dress and speech (Økland 2005). Paul seems to be stumbling, the innovation of the *ekklesia* muddied by its close connections with other collectives that existed around him.

As with the ambiguous *ekklesia*, so with the transitions from one state to another, all of them clustered around the death and resurrection of Christ. Does one really pass from sin to salvation, from law to grace, from works to faith, from death to life? Even Paul is not so sure, as we saw earlier with his response to the Corinthians. The law is good, he says, and you should really obey those earthly rulers, for God has appointed them. Women should really not let freedom go to their heads and as for sex, well, you had better be prudish, like me. Further, the theological problem arises in regard to sin and salvation: we may be dead to sin, Christ may have forgiven us, and we may have entered a new life, but for some reason we continue to sin, the new collective is split by strife and the cares of the world keep crouching by the door. So the transition has not been as effective as Paul might have wished. Even more, if one has had the chance to speak intimately with a man or a woman of deep faith who is near death, then it becomes clear that the transition is by no means certain. Apprehension, uncertainty, denial and outright fear are all there, despite the depth of religious faith. I can't help wonder where the confidence has gone, especially if one is certain that Christ has cut a trail through death beforehand. The easy answer is to mutter about the fear of death that afflicts even the most devout believer, but I would suggest that Paul's ambivalence has much to do with it – a realisation, perhaps, that the crossing was not a clean one.

No certain passage here, no bridge that may be dynamited after crossing; instead, Paul's narrative of passing from one state to another has become messy, fraught with uncertainty, wavering between two states. It is as though he is caught between the pull of his destination and homesickness. But that is precisely why Paul's theology came to dominate and determine the shape of the Christianity that was to follow: *through his uncertainty he ensured that both conditions were preserved*. Without a clean break, caught in the messy state of transition, both sides of the oppositions have claimed a place in Christianity. So we have both law *and* grace, works *and* faith, flesh *and* spirit, Adam *and* Christ, death *and* resurrection, and, most importantly, male *and* female, slave *and* free. Paul managed to craft a contradictory system of thought and practice that preserved both moments, producing an ideology that was to resonate and become dominant after him. In this respect Paul plays an anticipatory role, enabling Christianity to adapt to a series of contradictory positions. It is no wonder that Christianity became the religion of the propertied classes along with slaves and disenfranchised freemen, the religion of emperors and peasants and of all nations. There is no betrayal here, no compromise as Luxemburg, Kautsky, Horkheimer, Ste. Croix and many others have argued, for the ability to develop these contrary positions is found in Paul's own thought and practice.

BETWEEN THE SACRED ECONOMY AND SLAVERY

It is time at last to draw social and economic issues into the picture. Briefly put, the reason why Paul attempts the transitions I have traced is that he seeks to navigate at an intellectual and literary – or ideological – level the difficult passage from one socio-economic system to another.⁸ That statement will take some unpacking.

Over against the garden variety idealist solutions – so common in treatments of Paul and indeed early Christianity in general – I am after a materialist answer.⁹ A comment or two on those idealist approaches: they usually operate with two assumptions: Paul must be a consistent thinker and the solution is idealistic. But what if Paul is not consistent? What if the tensions in these few letters cannot be resolved? It seems to me that the contradictions in Paul *are* unresolvable. Indeed, the effort to solve them and render Paul a consistent and systematic thinker is misguided, for there is enough evidence to draw the conclusion that Paul was a very inconsistent thinker. The question then becomes: why do these contradictions and paradoxes appear in Paul's letters in the first place? Further, many of these attempted solutions are resolutely idealistic. One either takes one side in Paul's arguments – he was a guardian of the law, a conservative who felt that one should support the powers that be, or he was a radical antinomian who sought to undermine those same powers – and argues that the other position is an aberration; or one searches Paul's context and identifies some crucial third term outside his texts that provides the hidden key.¹⁰ In other words, one set of ideas is supposed to provide the solution to the problems of another set of ideas. It is a little like trying to repair your bicycle's flat tyre by sitting down and thinking about it; or rather, it is as though I (the critic) join you (Paul) in thinking about your flat tyre while neither of us actually does anything about the tyre. To do so would be to take a materialist line.

In contrast to such idealist answers, I prefer to widen the scope by including socio-economic factors, specifically by means of the theory of 'imaginary resolution': Paul's contradictory texts function as a persuasive imaginary resolution of the seismic shifts taking place in society and economics at the time. The contradictions that show up in Paul's texts are creative and tension-ridden responses to socio-economic tension and tumult. So those well-known oppositions – grace and law, faith and works, Jew and Gentile, death and resurrection and so on – may be seen as perpetual efforts, at an intellectual and religious level, to resolve contradictions in the social formation in which Paul lived. And those contradictions turn on the clash between different social formations or modes of production. As New Testament scholars with an economic ear (all too rare among such scholars) have shown, Palestine at the time struggled with the imposition of a slave-based system over the top of a far older economic system that had been the status quo in the Ancient Near East for centuries.

⁸ The argument that follows is analogous to Lenin's astute observations on Leo Tolstoy, who brilliantly depicted and protested against the collapse of feudalism and the rapid spread of capitalism in rural Russia between 1861 (the abolition of serfdom) and the 1905 revolution (Lenin 1908, 1910a, 1910b, 1910c, 1911). Negri takes a similar approach in his argument for a 'Dutch anomaly' in relation to Spinoza's thought (Negri 1991, 3-21).

⁹ In biblical studies this second option is studded with almost endless proposals. Some examples include the Stoics (Swancutt 2004; Engberg-Pedersen 2000), collective 'Mediterranean' notions of personality that must not be confused with 'Western' individualist notions in our understanding of Paul (Malina and Neyrey 1996), and Hellenistic perceptions of sexuality and the body that become the necessary background for reading Paul (Martin 1999).

¹⁰ This idealistic affliction is the same, no matter what angle on Paul you prefer, whether the 'old perspective' with its introspective and theological Paul (loosely everything before 1980), the old 'new perspective' in which Paul must be understood in his Jewish context or the new 'new perspective' where the Roman Empire becomes the key.

In reconstructing the economic situation of first century Palestine – however brief it must be – I focus on three areas: Roman economic practices in the eastern Mediterranean, the brutal conquests and mass enslavements, and spatial analysis.¹¹ When the Roman legions began marching into the Eastern Mediterranean, they encountered an existing economic framework that had persisted in the face of the conquest by Alexander in the fourth century BCE. Despite significant urbanization – the most notable being Alexandria, Antioch and Seleucia – of the coastal littoral and an orientation to the sea rather than the rivers, the economic patterns of the hinterland remained intact. I will have more to say about these patterns in a moment, but it is worth noting that what goes by the name of Hellenistic civilisation was the result of Greek conquest and adaptation in the Near East. As they settled in, produced hybrid states, built their cities and adapted their economic patterns to what the locals had done, the Greek rulers – Seleucids in Syria and Mesopotamia, the Lagid dynasty in Egypt (the Ptolemies) and the Attalids of Pergamum – soon eclipsed Greece in economic importance. The outcome was a concentration of political power, Hellenistic culture, Greek language and wealth in significant city-states in contrast to vast rural zones outside those cities, focused on village-communes in which older economic patterns continued with little change. The only difference for the autonomous peasants and dependent tenants was that those who demanded tribute had changed.

The Romans took one look and decided they quite liked what they saw. Of course, they wiped out the armies of the Hellenistic rulers and set up a system of client states who now owed their continued existence to Roman ‘goodwill’ – at least, as long as the tribute kept flowing to Rome. Although they were initially cautious about setting up Roman provinces in the East, by the first century BCE they seemed to lose their reticence, enthusiastically conquering, plundering, enslaving and taking over the reins of power. This shift in approach must be underlined, with a thick pen and plenty of pressure, for it sets the scene for the first century CE when the first Christians began their writing, Paul included. With the change in policy, economic approaches to the Near East began their seismic shift. Earlier, the Romans were content to leave the economic structures in place: peasant village communes and dependent tenants worked to the bone in order to keep the sparkling cities running and the coffers in Rome full – just as the Hellenistic rulers had done before them (minus the ships transporting sequestered good to Rome) and as the Egyptian/Persian/Babylonian/Sumerian rulers had done before them. However, when the testosterone began flowing in the first century BCE, the Romans began to interfere more directly. What emerged was a significantly centralised economy, in which the cities were sites of consumption of goods produced in the agricultural heartland (that is, they were certainly not sites of production), and in which much of what appeared to be trade was state-managed transport of goods to ensure the armies could stay on the road and cities fed (Horsley 1996, 72-87; contra Anderson 1974, 64-5). In other words, the famed Roman roads were not built for the sake of the postal service or for wagons laden with trade; they were for rapid movement of armies, spatial control over the countryside and the movement of state-sequestered goods. The infamous *pax Romana* (analogous to the *pax Americana* of our own day) was actually splattered with the blood of systematic violence, destruction, enforcement and enslavement in order to expand and maintain the empire. In the case of the province of Judea, which was riven with one insurrection and suppression after another, the Roman fist landed heavily, again and again. However, there is a particular text from Horsley that says more than he anticipates:

During the first century B.C.E. Roman warlords took over the eastern Mediterranean, including Judea, where Pompey’s troops defiled the Jerusalem Temple in retaliation for the resistance of the priests. The massive acts of periodic reconquest of the rebellious Judean and Galilean people included *thousands enslaved* at Magdala/Tarichaea in Galilee in 52-51 B.C.E., *mass enslavement* in and around Sepphoris (near Nazareth) and thousands crucified

¹¹ In doing so I draw upon the lucid sketch of Anderson (1974), the detailed work of Horsley (1989, 1992, 1995, 1996, 1997, 2007) and the spatial analysis of Ste. Croix (1981).

at Emmaus in Judea in 4 B.C.E., and the systematic devastation of villages and towns, destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, and *mass enslavement* in 67-70 C.E.. In the area of Paul's mission, the Romans ruthlessly sacked and torched Corinth, one of the most illustrious Greek cities, slaughtered its men, and *enslaved* its women and children in 146 B.C.E (Horsley 1996, 10-11).

Horsley provides the building blocks of a more comprehensive economic picture, while balking at undertaking the building programme. Note the texts I have emphasised: reconquest, sacking, torching, slaughter and *mass enslavement*. As Ste. Croix has shown in extraordinary detail, the production of surplus in the Greek world – a surplus that maintained the wealth and power of the ruling elite – was through slaves (Ste. Croix 1981).¹² While the Romans took a more direct hand in the ancient Near East and especially the province of Judea, they shifted from tapping into the existing economic system and sought to impose a slave-based system. What we witness here is a violent shift from one mode of production to another, one that gradually transformed the Roman Empire. The imposition of a different economic and social system took place in a consistent if piecemeal fashion through systematic violence and disruption, especially in the three or four centuries at the turn of the era.

One of the most obvious signs of this shift in social formations is a high level of violence, social unrest and conflict as the new system imposes itself on an older established one. Such troubled transitions produce displacement, tension and violence, in demographic, economic, social, political and psychological terms. The quotation from Horsley brings this out all too clearly: revolt after revolt cruelly crushed, until the Romans became so thoroughly sick and tired of all the trouble that they destroyed Jerusalem and its temple (67-70 CE) and banned Jews from entering the new city of Aelia Capitolana. One would have had to be a hermit from the moment of birth to avoid such seismic shifts, to steer clear of any political opinion whatsoever, or not to want to resolve such tensions and conflicts in some fashion or other. Paul, and indeed all those involved in early Christianity, were in the thick of it.¹³

Space – in its (re)construction and use – is a tell-tale marker of economic tensions and shifts. I think here of the under-utilised insight by Ste. Croix into the tension between *polis* and *chora* (Ste. Croix 1981, 9-19, 427-30). In the initial spatial arrangement of these terms during the period of classical Greek civilisation, the *polis* designated a city or town (they are known well enough – Athens, Corinth, Sparta and so on) while the *chora* referred to the all important fields (*agroai*) and villages (*kōmae*) under the city's control, fields that supplied the vital foodstuffs and myriad other agricultural goods that kept the city going. However, when the terms came to be used for the vast realms conquered by Alexander's armies and then controlled by his successors, the terms slipped to gain new senses. Or rather, the *polis* was still a city or town, built by the Greeks or perhaps taken over by them. By contrast, *chora* referred to all the territory outside the colonial city, cultivated or not, watered or arid.¹⁴ Now the differences mount up, for in the *chora* the local language continued

¹² It is unfortunate that the excellent studies by Briggs (2000), Harrill (2006) and Glancy (2006) do not develop the full economic context of slavery for their studies of New Testament texts.

¹³ 'Jesus and his movement emerged at the end of series of developments that had a profound impact on life in Galilee. In successive generations, Galilee was incorporated into the temple-state by the Hasmonean high priesthood, invaded repeatedly by Roman armies, subjected by Herod, and finally ruled by Antipas, who (re)built two cities for his regime directly in Galilee. The impact of Antipas's massive city-building and Roman client-rule located in Galilee itself must have been sudden and dramatic. Jesus and his initial followers, who formed a movement rooted in villages, were from a generation struggling to adjust to and/or resist the dramatic changes that had so suddenly come upon their communities' (Horsley 1996, 178).

¹⁴ There 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

(Aramaic in the case of Judea and Galilee), while in the *polis* Greek was spoken. Peasant rhythms of agricultural production continued as before in the *chora*, but in the *polis* there was little by way of production, for they squeezed the peasants well beyond their thin margin of surplus for the sake of consumption. In contrast to the earthy culture and religion of the *chora*, tied in so closely to the patterns of agriculture and husbandry, the *polis* was consciously and overtly Greek in culture, dress, legal systems and modes of intellectual exchange. If the villages and farms of the *chora* had humble mud dwellings with at most four rooms in which the domestic animals spent the night along with clan members, the *polis* had its amphitheatre, gymnasium, public buildings, market place, baths and fountains of water.

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 parasites. In short, the exploiting ruling class of Palestine belonged to the *polis*; those upon whose backs they lived were in the *chora*. Given the vast differences between them, in terms of culture, language, architecture, power, and wealth, the interaction between the two zones was minimal, limited to the extraction of those vital goods – by enforced extraction – for the sake of the *polis*. That flow of goods, energy and power, is symbolised by two spatial features: the roads and aqueducts. The Romans roads effected not merely to link the *poleis* to one another, enabling the movement of troops and goods, but they also cut through the *chora*. They criss-crossed, dissected, parcelled into manageable lots, and provided a visual and experiential reminder of who was in charge. There was no doubt in the minds of peasants and tenant farmers what the roads signified. We might picture the situation in terms of Henri Lefebvre's rhythmanalysis (Lefebvre 2004, 1992)¹⁵: the *chora* carries on its older rhythms, tied to the regular circadian rhythms of agriculture and festivals, with human beings moving in ways deeply infused with those cycles, back and forth to the fields, gathering for festivals, bartering and exchanging, along with the different patterns of rainfall, of animal herds, of famine and plenty. By contrast, the roads dissect these rhythms with that of armies on the march, convoys of tribute, the movement of food and other produce from one *polis* to another. Whereas the rhythm of the roads is between *poleis*, cutting across the *chora*, that of the *chora* is internal, except for one feature that links them: the rhythm of resources and tribute to the *poleis* and that of armies and tax-collectors to the *chora*.

But the dominant rhythm is symbolised by the aqueduct, for the aqueduct symbolises the *polis* siphoning off ... the resources of the land into the urban centre, to feed the public baths where the imported water acts as focus of sociability and as a symbol of the 'washed' and civilised way of life that rejects the stench of the countryman. Implicit in the aqueduct is a dynamic of power, flowing between town and country (Horsley 1996, 87).

What does all this mean for Paul's untidy oppositions and messy transitions? They may be regarded as the intellectual and literary efforts to deal with these massive and brutal economic and spatial realities. Above all, I would suggest that they should be read as a largely subconscious effort to map and overcome at an imaginary and ideational level the economic clash and transition between two modes of production. One after another these oppositions roll out of Paul's texts, only to be treated in the various ways I suggested earlier. Each one is an alternative effort to deal with the fundamental socio-economic tension. For instance, siding with one side of the equation becomes an ethical decision for one or the other – life over death, grace over law, faith over works. This taking of sides is really the first option open to someone faced with a crushing opposition. But then Paul also suggests that 'in Christ' some of these oppositions are overcome – the famous trio of slave and

bureaucracy; under the Romans much of the *chora*, especially the agricultural areas with their *komai*, villages, came under the administration of the *poleis*.

¹⁵ An extended engagement with rhythmanalysis would trace the disruption of rhythms, especially the counter rhythms of rebel groups characteristic in Judaea at the time.

free, Jew and Gentile, male and female. In this step, Paul makes a first effort at what we might call mediating the oppositions. One negates them by positing a greater and higher reality into which they are absorbed. A third option goes even further: in this case Paul narrates a passage from one to the other, from death to life, from law to grace, from works to faith and from sin to redemption. In the process the first term is appropriated and transformed: so death becomes part of resurrection, law is still needed within grace and works are transformed in faith. Even more, the effort to resolve these contradictions in some way ensures that they remain crucial elements of his texts. In this respect, they are significant traces of Paul's troubled and ruptured socio-economic context.

The risk of such a strategy is very high. On the one hand a transformative story like the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – the key narrative that holds all the oppositions together – may offer a radical breakthrough. It seems as though some of those who first heard and read Paul caught a glimpse of that breakthrough and wanted to take it further. With sin, law, works, as well as gender, ethnic and economic divisions overcome by the story of Christ's death and resurrection the possibility opened up for a very new world that might be realized here and now – sexually, communally, politically, economically. On the other hand, the way Paul replicates the socio-economic tensions in the structure of his arguments, especially in terms of the oppositions I have traced, means that they may come back with a vengeance. Add to that the sense one sometimes gets that Paul himself was genuinely troubled by the radical possibilities of his thought and we have a real tendency towards reaction. So a transformed law may end up being a far more totalitarian law than the previous one, or reformed works may become an obsession with a whole new set of works, or proclaiming the end of gender, ethnic and economic tensions may avoid their very real presence in everyday life.

Paul is deeply ambivalent. Consciously, he tries to tone down the more radical effects of his thought, a move that exacerbates the tensions. Subconsciously he offers the possibility of a transformative breakthrough: the transformation and overcoming of the oppositions in his thought, all of them linked to the story of the death and resurrection of Christ, opens up radical possibilities. Yet these same tensions are far too closely tied to the socio-economic tensions of his context – between an older and highly resistant system (Sacred Economy) and the brutal new system based on slavery – so much so that the old realities of law, works, gender, ethnicity and economy come back with a vengeance.

Above all, the very presence of both sides of these constantly shifting oppositions, along with the lack of clarity about the transition between them, means that both sides – which are always multiple pairs – are preserved for what follows. From an economic perspective, try as he might, Paul was never going to resolve fundamental economic tensions at the level of thought. But in the effort to provide an ideological answer, in which the death and resurrection of Christ becomes a metaphor for the search for new life out of the destruction of the old economic world, Paul leaves open a range of ambivalent possibilities. The early church might appeal to the poor peasant or slave or tenant, but it also had much to say to the wealthy landlord or the powerful judge. It might offer new possibilities for women, but it also reasserts existing gender patterns in which men felt comfortable. It may have offered a new way of experiencing communal life, but it also ensured that such a life was hierarchical and unequal. In short, where grace appeared, so did law; where faith, so also works; where life, so also death; where resistance, so also compromise. And if it seemed to be in touch with the life of the village commune in the *chora*, it also felt at home in the Roman administered *polis*, especially the one at the centre of the empire.

CONCLUSION

Paul's shaky transitions, Christian communism, and indeed the Gospel representations of Jesus offer different responses – at a literary and ideological level – to the deep economic and social tensions ripping their world apart.¹⁶ To that collection we may add the stern concern for order in the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus), or the Apocalypse with its bloodcurdling and lurid depictions of mayhem for all who oppose God. Arguably, the one that has been most influential is Paul's response for the reasons I have laid out in this study. It is not for nothing that the key moments of disruption within the history of Christianity have turned on the interpretation of Paul's texts. For Paul's uncertainties left open the possibility of taking very different positions on the basis of his arguments, whether resistance, accommodation or somewhere in between. He may have offered an alternative story of transition, a new *ekklesia* not sanctioned by the status quo, but his was also a position that suited the Empire all too well. Yet these tensions at a literary level would only be exacerbated by juxtaposing different responses together in one collection of texts in which the patterns of resistance, reaction and accommodation are only exacerbated. From there on Christianity had no option but to struggle with the multi-valence of the texts it decided to call sacred.

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¹⁶ In a somewhat idiosyncratic fashion, Troeltsch also espies a political ambivalence at the heart of Christianity, although he characterises it as a tension between radical individualism (he was, after all, a staunch liberal) and Pauline conservatism (Troeltsch 1992 [1911], vol. 1, 82-3).

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