

## Bourgeois Right and the Limits of First Phase Communism in the Rhetoric of 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15

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*Second Thessalonians 3:10b offers the teaching that “anyone unwilling to work should not eat.” Both conservative and socialist readers have cited this teaching as an encapsulation of their mutually incommensurable worldviews. I conduct a historical-critical investigation of the situation in which this passage was written; I argue against recent historical reconstructions that posit that 2 Thessalonians is authentically Pauline, and articulate a Sitz im Leben for the text in line with the principles of historical materialism. Specifically, I contend that the Thessalonian community was a tenement church composed entirely of marginalized people who were particularly vulnerable to economic crises in the late first century Roman Empire; this community fit the criteria for what Marx and Lenin would later call first-phase communism. A lack of sufficient employment opportunities led many members to rely too heavily on the community’s agape feast, thus threatening the community’s viability. The situation at Thessalonica can thus be characterized as what Habermas calls a rationality crisis, whereby the community was forced to abandon the core principles of its agapaic communalism and revert to a regressive policy that Marx calls “bourgeois right.” I conclude that modern conservative uses of the text serve different class interests from its author’s and that, while socialist uses of the text share its author’s class interests, those uses starkly illustrate the precariousness of first-phase communism. This precariousness, then, demonstrates that Permanent Revolution is necessary to secure the viability of communist societies against the structural vulnerabilities to which they are especially susceptible in the context of hegemonic capitalism, and thus that Socialism in One Country is a fatally flawed doctrine.*

### I. INTRODUCTION. 2 THESSALONIANS 3:10B: WHOSE LINE IS IT ANYWAY?

#### A. G’Lenin Beck: Two Readings at Ideological Cross Purposes

The Second Epistle to the Thessalonians contains what Vladimir Lenin ([1918] 1972, vol. 27: 391) would later call “the prime, basic and root principle of socialism” that would eventually be canonized not only in the New Testament but also in Article 12 of the 1936 Constitution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, viz. the principle that “anyone unwilling to work should not eat” (2 Thess. 3:10b, NRSV). Nevertheless, socialist revolutionaries are not the only modern political movement claiming this teaching as their own. On his radio program on April 7, 2010, conservative comment-ertainer Glenn Beck, after his co-host Pat Gray read 2 Thess. 3:10b on the air, offered the following attempt at a socioeconomic exegesis of it:

That is the answer. That’s the problem with government welfare and everything else. Get a damn job! [Co-host Pat Gray interjects: “Universal health care, all those things.”] Right. You’re not willing to work, then I’m not willing to give it to you. The government is, and

that's the problem. That's the difference between government enslaving people and people giving charity."

Moreover, the translators at the notorious Conservative Bible Project, in their textual analysis, call the principle "capitalism in a nutshell" (Conservapedia 2011). Just what sort of a teaching is this, then, that such disparate groups—a late first century Pauline community, 20<sup>th</sup> century socialist revolutionaries, and the 21<sup>st</sup> century American right, among others—can all find it a natural fit in their mutually incommensurable *Weltanschauungen*?

Beck's reading of 2 Thess. 3:10b describes willingness to work as a key criterion for having access to the means to life; in fact, he rhetorically riffs on the concept of willingness in announcing his own unwillingness to support social programs that assist the poor. Lenin ([1918] 1972, vol. 27: 391), though, abandons the criterion of willingness entirely; his appropriation of the text eliminates "θέλει" altogether, rendering his reading as "he who does not work, must not eat."<sup>1</sup> Beck's rhetorical riffing notwithstanding, modern uses of the text (perhaps especially the politically conservative ones) seem to have inherited Lenin's elimination of the criterion of willingness. Denunciations of social welfare programs, for instance, often depend for their rhetorical effectiveness on the presumption of poor people's unwillingness to work. To the extent that such presumptions are always at work (albeit often unstated) in the background, political discussions about poverty now frequently conflate the phenomena of *not working* and *unwillingness to work*. Unbeknownst to him, then, it seems that Lenin's own rendering of the text has been appropriated by the political right just as much as its New Testament counterpart.

These two disparate political readings of 2 Thess. 3:10b are not even the only examples of later, Western thinkers citing the passage in support of their political and economic agendas. John Smith ([1624] 1907, vol. 1: 174), at the outset of his tenure as president of the Jamestown colony in 1608, in the aftermath of the poor leadership of his predecessor Matthew Scrivner and in response to food shortages and the perceived laziness of many of the settlers, issued the following decree: "[Y]ou must obey this now for a Law, that he that will not worke shall not eate." Smith ([1624] 1907, vol. 1: 183) also recounts that Kemps, a Native American whom Smith had taken prisoner, "made himselfe sport, in shewing his countrie men (by them) how he was used, and feeding them with this law, who would not work must not eat." Additionally, Max Weber ([1904] 1930: 166) in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* points out that the Puritan interpretation of the command (in combination with the characteristic Puritan emphases on ascetic living and the division of labor), particularly in the work of Richard Baxter, directly contributed to the development of the capitalist mode of production. 2 Thess. 3:10b has a history of being pressed into the service of disparate material interests.

I propose to conduct a historical-critical investigation into the composition of the community that originally received the epistle of 2 Thessalonians, as well as the situation to which it responded and the context in which the community received it. My primary concern is to determine whose class interests its author sought to advance; moreover I seek to determine whether the instruction was warranted by the situation to which it was a response. The socialist and conservative invocations of the passage clearly aim to advance mutually irreconcilable class interests: The former is concerned with the interests of the working class and identifies those "unwilling to work" primarily as the bourgeoisie who profit not from their own labor, but from their ownership of the means of production and the surplus value derived from working class people's labor. The latter, conversely, advances the interests of wealth and capital by instead identifying the poor as the ones "unwilling to

<sup>1</sup> The phrase appears in slightly different forms in Lenin's writing and the Soviet constitution. Lenin's version reads, "Кто не работает, тот не должен есть." ("He who does not work, must not eat.") Meanwhile, Article XII of the so-called "Stalin constitution" contains the slightly softened, "Кто не работает, тот не есть." (He who does not work, shall not eat," *sans* the obligatory *должен*.)

work,” thereby (as in Beck’s rhetoric about “government enslaving people”) undermining legitimation of, and support for, social welfare programs intended to assist them.

### *B. Preview of Results*

I take as my point of departure in my historical-critical excavation of 2 Thessalonians the view that critical readers can arrive at reasonable, evidentially defensible answers to the questions that Bruce Lincoln (2006: 127) poses in “How to Read a Religious Text”: “Who is trying to persuade whom of what in this text? In what context is the attempt situated, and what are the consequences should it succeed?” I aim to demonstrate that there is a radical reading of 2 Thessalonians that has been unduly ignored, if not actively suppressed, by orthodox readers within the institutional structures of Christianity, who have domesticated those aspects of the epistle that challenge their cherished modern, Eurocentric presuppositions. As Robert Jewett (1994: 74-77) observes, commentators in the mainstream of confessional biblical interpretation systematically ignore the possibility that the text refers to any sort of communal social arrangement. Their temptation, instead, is to retroject their own capitalist, individualist worldview and presuppositions onto the texts, resulting in a cultural environment among confessional interpreters that remains hostile to communalism of any kind. My aim, then, is to reverse this disturbing trend, in the hopes that doing so will uncover a reading of 2 Thessalonians that both fits the available historical evidence and opens possibilities for liberative uses of the text that advance the interests of working class people.

The pericope (2 Thess. 3:6-15) in which the command regarding work is found has been characterized as an instance of the rhetorical genre of *paraenesis*, i.e., exhortation (see, *inter alios*, Russell 1988: 105).; in it, those who are “unwilling to work” are, in Greek, described as behaving ἀτάκτως (vv. 6 & 11). This term is often understood to refer to idleness; nevertheless, as Ceslas Spicq’s (1956) semantic analysis shows, behaving ‘ἀτάκτως’ was not merely a matter of idleness, but primarily one of disorderliness that had the potential to disrupt an entire community. What is the identity of these who are, according to the author or 2 Thessalonians, behaving ἀτάκτως? To what particular behaviors is the author objecting by labeling them as such, and what is their motivation for those behaviors? Were those whom the author describes as behaving ἀτάκτως truly to blame for whatever social problems had arisen within their community? Or, conversely, does the passage serve an ideological function of scapegoating a particular class or group within the community?

I conclude that the social situation of 2 Thessalonians more closely resembles what Marx ([1875] 1966: 22) and Lenin ([1917] 1943: 76) call a first, or lower, phase of communism. The Thessalonian congregation practiced a form of communalism whereby they collectively shared the meager means of life that they had available in order to ensure the provision of all members’ needs. Analogous to first phase communism, though, the Thessalonians’ communalism existed within the context of the Roman Empire’s mode of production and attendant class and power relations. The Thessalonians’ inability to extract themselves from or change those bourgeois relations of production, then, points to a vulnerability inherent in socialist praxis within the context of a bourgeois mode of production.<sup>2</sup> That is, the problem within the Thessalonian Pauline community is best understood as what Jürgen Habermas (1975: 2) describes as a systems-theoretic crisis, in which “the structure of a social system

<sup>2</sup> It would be anachronistic and inaccurate to identify the mode of production in the Roman Empire of the first century C.E. as capitalist, as it differed from capitalism (itself a significantly later historical development) in several key respects. Nevertheless, the Roman economy and the later-developing capitalist mode of production bear several relevant similarities, most notably that both organize societies wherein the majority of people labor while a small but powerful group exploit those laborers and extract the value of their labor. Unlike the capitalist mode of production, though, the primary economic engine of the Roman Empire was agriculture. Such differences notwithstanding, I follow economic historians such as Rostovtzeff (1957) and Ste. Croix (1981) in taking the class relations of the Roman Empire to be foundational, and to be an analogous precursor to the class relations that characterize modern capitalism.

allows fewer possibilities for problem solving than are necessary to the continued existence of the system.” The community had attempted to organize itself as a primitive commune, but found that this arrangement was insufficient to solve the problems they encountered while still living within a Roman imperial context—viz., systemic, high unemployment caused by inadequate employment opportunities.

I contend, based on the results of my historical-critical investigation, that conservative appropriations of 2 Thess. 3:10b advance different class interests from its author’s. Hence on those views that emphasize the importance of authorial intent (views common among conservative Christians themselves), conservative uses of the text actually misappropriate its rhetoric. Even socialist uses of the text, in spite of sharing its author’s class interests, are not unproblematic, though. Those uses of the text demonstrate that the type of socialism that obtains in societies still enmeshed within a broader bourgeois hegemony must, necessarily, remain incomplete. The Thessalonians’ attempt to practice communalism within the broader context of the Roman Empire was, then, a precarious one that fell apart when the crises that beset the empire began to undermine the community’s viability. Hence, for socialists who wish to appropriate 2 Thess. 3:10b, its lesson is that a strong, viable, completely socialist society requires a commitment to Permanent Revolution.

## II. THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF 2 THESSALONIANS

### A. *The Epistle and its Audience*

My account of the social context of 2 Thessalonians accepts the conventional view among New Testament scholars, that the text is a pseudepigraph composed in the late first century c.e. While there have been a handful of prominent defenses of the epistle’s Pauline authenticity mounted by confessional biblical scholars (Jewett 1986 and Nicholl 2004, most notably), I find such arguments wanting. Lest my project be pulled in too many directions simultaneously, though, I table my engagement with those confessional arguments and proceed with a discussion of my own reconstruction of the *Sitz im Leben* of a pseudepigraphal 2 Thessalonians. As a pseudepigraph whose authority depends on its recipients accepting Paul’s claim to apostleship, 2 Thessalonians is difficult to date precisely; the latest possible date is ca. 110 c.e., when Polycarp quotes it in his epistle *To the Philippians* (11:4). We can most likely narrow the range of dates even further, however, given that in order for Polycarp to quote the letter, it likely had already been in wide circulation when he did so. Hughes (1989: 86-95) argues that the forgers whom the author of 2 Thessalonians seeks to discredit with the “authenticating” signature at 3:17, and who are earlier described as teaching falsely “by letter, as though from us” (2 Thess. 2:2), are the authors of the pseudepigrapha addressed to the Colossians and the Ephesians. These two texts are, after all, known pseudo-Pauline epistles whose respective theologies uncannily mirror those that the author of 2 Thessalonians identifies as false teachings. I concur with Hughes regarding the identity of the pseudepigrapha to which 2 Thessalonians alludes, and therefore conclude that a date sometime in the 80s c.e. (within a generation of Paul’s death, but after Colossians and Ephesians) is most likely.

I contend that, while the epistle is not authentically Pauline, both the author and original recipients of 2 Thessalonians were the members of the Pauline congregation at Thessalonica. Unlike the other deutero-Pauline epistles ostensibly addressed to congregations (Colossians and Ephesians), 2 Thessalonians addresses a specific situation confronting the community to whom it is addressed. The references to a specific situation (i.e., the disorderliness of the ἀτακτοί), along with the structure and language imported directly from 1 Thessalonians, together point in the direction of the author of 2 Thessalonians being a member of the congregation at Thessalonica, availing himself of Paul’s authority by mimicking a readily available Pauline text in order to address a situation particular to that Pauline community. Thus 2 Thessalonians functioned as a supplement to the

authentically Pauline 1 Thessalonians, retaining its structure and language so as to conform with what the members of the Thessalonian community already knew about the foundational teachings that it had received from Paul and to fit seamlessly with that earlier epistle stylistically and rhetorically, while also being tailored to address the specific situation occurring at Thessalonica at the time that 2 Thessalonians was written.

The specificity of the situation that the letter describes renders most sensible the hypothesis that its real and implied audiences should be understood as identical. Given that the letter was written in response to a crisis, much of its rhetorical effectiveness at quelling that crisis would have depended on its recipients understanding its message as being intended specifically for them and their situation. Given that a pseudonymous 2 Thessalonians can plausibly be dated no earlier than the 80s, while 1 Thessalonians was written ca. 50 and Paul himself died in the mid- to late 60s, the individual members of the Thessalonian community would not have been identical with the individuals to whom Paul's original letter was addressed. Nevertheless, although the recipients of 2 Thessalonians were a new generation of Thessalonian community members, they would have understood that letter's teachings regarding work as a part of the received tradition of their temporally continuous community. They naturally would have identified themselves with the implied audience (i.e., first generation Thessalonian believers who, along with Paul, founded their community) through an understanding of the continuity of the Thessalonian community itself as an entity that perdured over time, even as its particular members changed over years and generations. Conversely, had the recipients of 2 Thessalonians been able to view its instructions as directed toward a situation taking place in a different community, they may simply not have felt as strong an impetus to follow its instructions. Thus the letter's rhetorical force is largely dependent upon its recipients identifying with the Thessalonian congregation to whom it is addressed. The *paraenesis* at 2 Thess. 3:10b, then, offers a clue about the basis of the community's perdurance and the point of identity between its founding generation and later members—viz., the community's foundational principles, evinced in the rule about work and eating, of providing communally for its members' material needs.

### ***B. The Socioeconomic Situation of the Thessalonian Congregation***

Second Thessalonians' author's rebuke of those behaving ἀτάκτως is a misidentification of a problem of severe economic hardship facing the community. As Jewett (1993) argues, this economic hardship was itself a consequence of the congregation's having been composed of marginalized and structurally vulnerable people within the Roman Empire. The problem with work among the Thessalonian community had little to do with any members' unwillingness, and much to do with a lack of available employment that particularly affected the community's predominantly poor members. The congregation could have experienced their marginalization, structural vulnerability and economic hardship as persecution (as described in 2 Thess. 1:5-10). Moreover, they would have understood such persecution as coming from forces, either spiritual or political, working against their community from a less vulnerable position than their own (as described in 2 Thess. 2:9-12). These economic forces easily could have threatened the very existence of the Thessalonian Pauline community. Furthermore, the eschatological problem discussed in 2 Thessalonians is a consequence of the congregation's experience of persecution as a result of this structural vulnerability and genuine threat to the life and viability of the community. That is, the crisis in the Thessalonian congregation manifested itself in precisely the ways that one would expect on a naturalist, materialist conception of history.

The nature of the situation that the *paraenesis* of 2 Thessalonians addresses, though, has been the subject of scholarly debate. Much of that debate has centered on the identity of the ἀτακτοί and specific nature of their wrongdoing; nevertheless, before these facts can be established, it is first necessary to establish the composition of the Thessalonian congregation. If some members of the

congregation were not working (and were therefore putting a strain on the productive members' resources), then an adequate explanation of both the unproductivity of the former and the severity of the strain on the latter should take the economic circumstances in which that situation was occurring into account. The history of the interpretation of 2 Thessalonians, however, has largely focused instead on positing an eschatological explanation for the behavior of the ἄτακτοι (see, *inter alios*, Barclay 1993). That is, they expected the *parousia* to arrive imminently, and had therefore given up working in order to devote themselves full-time to proclaiming it publicly. This public preaching of Jesus's impending return, then, was the *περιεργαζομένου* (intruding, meddling) to which v. 11 refers. Recently, though, beginning with Russell (1988), scholars have begun to give more credence to a sociological explanation for the disorder described in the *paraenesis* of 2 Thessalonians. Such sociological explanations, on my view, better account for both the historical and textual evidence regarding the situation at Thessalonica.

The historical materialist will note Marx's ([1859] 1911: 10) view of history as described in his Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond definite forms of consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men [*sic*] that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.

Here Marx introduces his now-famous view that a society's relations of production form that society's base, and that other features of the society (including religion, which Marx considers a form—albeit an alienated one—of political consciousness) together constitute its superstructure.<sup>3</sup> Taking Marx's materialist conception of history as my starting point, then, I favor a sociological explanation for the disorderliness described in 2 Thessalonians over an eschatological one. Notably, though, one hardly even needs to be a Marxist to understand that apocalyptic fervor is often prompted by economic (i.e., material) hardship. Those whose lives in this world are happy, peaceful and comfortable are, after all, not the ones most likely to await its end with eager anticipation. On a historical materialist reading of the text, then, a significant economic hardship is the most likely explanation for both the alleged disorder and the eschatological issues discussed elsewhere in 2 Thessalonians. On this reading, the two issues are related (as those who favor the eschatological explanation contend); however, the relationship is not one of causation, but instead one of correlation via a common cause: The Thessalonian congregation having been composed of marginalized people led, in turn, to a high rate of unemployment during times of economic hardship, because the structural vulnerability of those marginalized people resulted in their being disproportionately affected (relative to the rest of society where, as we shall see below, a gradual economic recovery had already begun) by those negative economic forces. As G. E. M. de Ste. Croix (1981: 364-65) observes, Roman society could not do without patronage; everything depended on it and the favor and recommendation that accompanied it. Hence those at the bottom of society, who stood outside the system of patronage, were especially vulnerable to economic deprivation. A clear advantage of this view is that it rests on an established theoretical framework (*viz.*, the materialist conception of history) rather than relying on *ad hoc* assumptions.

<sup>3</sup> One need not, nor do I, read Marx as a strict economic determinist on his point regarding the relationship between base and superstructure. Instead, on the materialist conception of history, a society's economic base may be better understood as shaping those institutions that comprise its superstructure, though not defining every detail of said institutions. Thus, in the case of the Thessalonians, economic deprivation effectively shaped (rather than strictly determined) a communal religious consciousness that was characterized by eschatological anxiety.

In the epistle's second chapter, the author of 2 Thessalonians describes the "lawless one" (v. 3) who "opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God" (v. 4). The most obvious candidate for the referent of this description is, Domitian (r. 81-96 c.e., the emperor whose rule coincides with the most likely timeframe of the authorship of a pseudonymous 2 Thessalonians). Nevertheless, as Ste. Croix (2006: 106) points out, there were no general persecutions of Christians between 64 and 250—a period that includes the entirety of Domitian's reign—only brief, isolated, local ones. Moreover, persecution prior to 112—again, including Domitian's reign in its entirety—is particularly obscure (108). Persecution "for the name" (i.e., for the offense of simply being a Christian) might have started as early as 64, or perhaps as late as 112 (110). It is possible that 2 Thessalonians was written hastily in response to one of the brief, local outbreaks of Christian persecution; however, these outbreaks were so local and sporadic that such a hypothesis could not possibly be verified. Moreover, such a context would not explain why the author chose to include the instruction regarding work, which would have constituted a separate crisis from that of persecution. I therefore find it more sensible to conclude that the epistle was written in response to a single crisis, of which both the persecution and disorderliness to which it refers were parts; such a hypothesis both comports with Occam's razor and avoids positing unverifiable assumptions about the epistle's context. The congregation experienced its economic hardship as a form of persecution, from which its members expected eschatological deliverance; some members' refusal to work, likewise, was a consequence of that same economic hardship.

This sociological explanation for the disorder within the Thessalonian community is further supported by several recent studies of the epistle. As Russell (1988: 108) points out, "whatever encouraged this behaviour preceded these eschatological problems because disorderly behaviour existed from the beginning." In assessing the sociological issue at work among the Thessalonians, Russell points out that "the opportunities for employment were limited, and with scarcity of work idleness was more widespread and wages even lower" (112). However, as Bruce Winter (1989: 303-04) points out, "if this is correct, then [the epistle's] solution was an unsympathetic and impractical one, for if any were unemployed through lack of job opportunities, then *ipso facto* they could not eat." Winter considers the purpose of the *paraenesis* to be "to wean [those who were not working] away from the welfare syndrome" (309) of the patron-client relationship. He concludes that the exhortation in 2 Thessalonians is a call for all Christians to be benefactors and provide for the good of the lives of others, rather than simply being content to have one's own needs so provided (314). As we shall see below, however, Jewett's proposed model for the Thessalonian congregation precludes patronage and its abuse from being the source of the problem of refusal to work.

Colin Nicholl likewise employs an intratextual analysis, pointing out that no explicit connection is made between idleness and eschatology in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15, nor does the passage (or the rest of the epistle, for that matter) suggest that the eschatological problems discussed elsewhere even had any direct ethical consequences at all.<sup>4</sup> On his view, however, the sociological explanation for the idleness at Thessalonica is nothing more than sheer greed, laziness and entitlement on the part of the manual laborers, who were a burden to the wealthy (Nicholl 2004: 166, 172)—"*inertia vulgaris* manifesting itself as charitable abuse" (15). This interpretation is doubly problematic: First, it does not accurately reflect the composition and situation of the Thessalonian congregation; second, it is clearly an ideologically problematic depiction of poor and working class people. To the first point, as Ste. Croix argues, the disdain heaped upon the Roman lower classes—e.g., the derisive observation that they were content with bread and circuses (*panem et circenses*, as Juvenal (X.81) coined the phrase)—was entirely undeserved. Ste. Croix (1981: 371) writes, "I myself find it hard to understand why so many of those who have written about the Roman world have thought it discreditable to the humble Roman that his prime concern should have been bread. I see no reason

<sup>4</sup> See Nicholl's arguments against eschatological readings of 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 (2004: 158-63).

to think that the attitude of the common people was unpleasantly materialistic or degraded just because they thought first of filling their bellies.” He goes on to quote Alan Cameron (1973), who points out, “That notorious idle mob of layabouts sponging off the state is little more than a middle-class prejudice, ancient and modern alike.” Contrary to Nicholl’s assertion that the problem at Thessalonica was *inertia vulgaris*, historical investigation shows that such a depiction has never accurately or adequately portrayed the actual living circumstances that the poor have endured; first century Thessalonica was no exception.

The poor are, still today, depicted in terms similar to those that Nicholl understands the author of 2 Thessalonians to be employing (see, e.g., Glenn Beck’s politically conservative exegesis of 2 Thess. 3:10b above). When we understand the ways that such rhetoric works and whose interests it functions to serve, however, we recognize that such depictions not only misrepresent the reality of poverty, but also serve a clear ideological agenda: They absolve the wealthy of their responsibility to ensure that the needs of the poor are met, and deflect blame for the condition of the poor away from society’s most powerful economic actors (i.e., the wealthy themselves, acting on behalf of capital) and toward the powerless poor themselves, who are unwillingly pressed into service as scapegoats for whatever ills plague society. On Nicholl’s view, then, the true targets of the *paraenesis* are first century equivalents of modern day “welfare queens”—a clear example of an ideological construct erected in the service of bourgeois interests. The “welfare queen,” a popular trope in the American conservative movement’s rhetoric ever since then-candidate Ronald Reagan introduced it during his unsuccessful primary campaign for the 1976 Republican Party Presidential nomination, evokes mental pictures of primarily African-American women cheating the welfare system, abusing the generosity of the wealthy, wasting their benefits on alcohol, drugs, cigarettes and lottery tickets, having out-of-wedlock children at epidemic rates solely to increase their monthly welfare benefits, flaunting their unproductivity by purchasing conspicuous consumer goods with hard-working taxpayers’ money, and boastfully taking pride in their laziness. In reality, of course, such abuse of the welfare system never has reached or even approached the comically exaggerated proportions that Reagan’s “welfare queen” rhetoric was (and still is) intended to imply. Nicholl, however, fails to notice (or, more troubling, is perhaps simply unbothered by) the clear rhetorical parallels between such characterizations and those he finds in his reading of 2 Thessalonians; thus he not only concludes that the bourgeois ideological (i.e., anti-poor) reading of the text is the best understanding of its author’s intent, but also inexplicably and unjustifiably assumes outright that it is an accurate assessment of the actual situation at Thessalonica!

Jewett, however, offers an alternative model for the congregation at Thessalonica, on which it was a tenement church rather than a house church. Roman tenements (*insulae*) housed working class people; they typically had shops on the ground level and apartments of various sizes on the upper floors. More spacious living quarters were usually found on the lower floors, with more (and thus more cramped) dwellings fit into the highest floors. These *insulae* were notoriously unsafe, especially for residents on the highest floors, due to often poor construction and the constant threat of fire. Building codes limited the height of *insulae*, such that none could rise over around six or seven stories, in order to minimize the possibility of collapse due to shoddy construction or cheap materials and to minimize the possibility that tenants on the upper floors would be unable to escape in the event of a fire. Nevertheless, such building codes were often ignored, and many *insulae* throughout the Empire remained flimsy, treacherous firetraps. Throughout the first and second centuries c.e., churches commonly gathered in members’ homes; according to Jewett, such gatherings took place not only in houses, but also in these tenements. These congregations drew their members exclusively from among those marginalized residents (poor laborers and slaves) who occupied the upper floors of the *insulae* found throughout the Empire’s inner cities.

Jewett (1993) makes five points in support of his hypothesis that there were tenement churches in the first century, including the congregation at Thessalonica: First, archaeological evidence shows

the ecclesiastical use of *insulae* in Rome as early as the second and third centuries (27). Second, topographic studies have shown that the districts where Christianity likely got started in Rome in the first century were among city's poorest districts (27-28). Third, Jewett catalogs the names of Christians mentioned in Romans chapter 16, showing that many were names primarily associated with slaves (29-31). Fourth, Jewett notes that many strands of early Christianity, well into the fourth century, practiced a form of communalism in their celebration of the Eucharist (32). Finally, having shown the existence of a tenement model with clear communal commitments in the early church, Jewett's form-critical analysis shows that the Thessalonian church was likely an instance of this model (33-39). He argues that the command at 2 Thess. 3:10b about eating would make little sense, and have no possibility of effectiveness, unless it was enforceable. Such enforceability, then, could be achieved only if members of the community shared their meals. Jewett concludes that "a tenement church structure in which communal meals were being provided by the members themselves is the only form of early Christian congregational life for which such instruction could actually be considered absolutely essential" (39), and in which that instruction could effectively be enforced. As a major administrative capital, Thessalonica surely would have had enough of the craftsmen, unskilled laborers and slaves who would have constituted a tenement community of the sort that Jewett describes. In fact, as Moses Finley ([1973] 1999: 193) observes, the majority of most urban populations were artisans, unskilled workers, shopkeepers and professional workers—precisely the stratum of the population from which a tenement church would have drawn its members. Indeed, large numbers of slaves and free poor workers lived and worked together, and plebs in the cities of the Roman Empire regularly associated with slaves (Finley [1973] 1999: 186-87).

The tenement church at Thessalonica differed from the more well-known house church model in fundamental ways that bear greatly on its socioeconomic stability. It lacked patrons or wealthy members; instead its members came exclusively from society's lower classes (primarily slaves, and the poor *libertini* who survived primarily by doing manual wage labor) who resided in the *insulae* of Thessalonica's inner city (Jewett 1993: 32, 39).<sup>5</sup> Jewett describes its organizational structure as "agapaic communalism" in which the love feast common among Pauline communities was a "communally sustained system of common meals" (33). As Jewett points out, the text strongly suggests that its recipients constitute a community that shares its meals (36, 38). The Thessalonians' "Jesus-inspired rent parties"<sup>6</sup> operated according to a peculiar and precarious arithmetic, whereby a large number of poor people (all of whom had barely, and frequently less than, enough to meet their own needs) pooled their resources to keep all of their members away from the brink of starvation and financial ruin. Since the Thessalonian community's members were all poor (and, thus, none could likely contribute much—if any—more than what they themselves would eat), even a relatively small group of non-contributing consumers risked destabilizing their entire system.

Jewett points out, drawing from Mikhail Rostovtzeff's socioeconomic history of the Roman Empire, that the Thessalonian congregation consisted primarily of members who "derived from a

<sup>5</sup> The hypothesis that the Thessalonian congregation was a tenement church at first raises an obvious difficulty for one who holds that 2 Thessalonians is a pseudepigraph: A church composed entirely, or almost entirely, of slaves and manually laboring *libertini* may have been unlikely to have had any members who would have been literate and therefore able to produce a passable pseudo-Pauline text. Nevertheless, this is no less a problem for Jewett himself for, even if 2 Thessalonians is taken to be authentically Pauline, its reception by a tenement church still would have required at least one literate member to read the letter and make its contents known to the rest of the community. Moreover the Roman imperial bureaucracy commonly made use of the labor of slaves to carry out its administrative functions, and it was not uncommon for slaves to hold other highly specialized, relatively high-status (albeit not high-wage) jobs that would have required literacy. Thus, while literacy among slaves and other lower-class members of society was not common, it is not inconceivable that a tenement church of sufficient size in an urban population center such as Thessalonica would contain within its ranks a handful of literate members.

<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to Allen Callahan for this irresistible turn of phrase.

stratum of the population suffering from a degree of relative deprivation.” Moreover, although “the general economic situation in Thessalonica was gradually improving through the first century” (Jewett 1986: 121), members of the tenement church there were likely “witnessing the economic advancement of others, but participating in it only marginally themselves” (Jewett 1986: 122). While Jewett, maintaining the Pauline authenticity of 2 Thessalonians, dates the text to the early 50s c.e., the economic picture for the Thessalonians (and, for that matter, for marginalized populations in urban centers throughout the Roman Empire) does not improve during the timeframe for pseudonymous authorship.<sup>7</sup> As Rostovtzeff ([1957] 1998: 201) describes, under Domitian, “the spectre of famine now hovered continually before the Greek cities.” So bad was the threat of famine during Domitian’s reign that at least one of his governors notoriously even found it necessary to resort to violence to enforce his edict against profiteering via price gouging. Moreover Domitian issued a general order to promote corn cultivation in order to maintain strategic reserves of grain supplies to feed the Eastern provinces (Rostovtzeff [1957] 1998: 202).

Suetonius (*Dom.* 8.2), though, writes that Domitian “took such care in coercing the city magistrates and provincial governors that never at any time were they more moderate or just.” Ste. Croix (1981: 382), following Suetonius, points out that Domitian was known for his “refusal to allow senatorial governors to plunder their provinces,” and that he was “exceptionally solicitous for the welfare of [his] provincial subjects”—a situation that, while it may not have led directly to his reputation among the Roman upper classes for being a “bad emperor,” surely was “likely to contribute to his achieving that reputation.” Ste. Croix contends that, in spite of the efforts of emperors like Domitian to secure the welfare of the poor, “the emperor’s role [is] above all the reinforcement of the whole social and political system and making it a stronger and more efficient instrument for the exploitation of the great majority” (382-83). Domitian’s interventions to prevent the plunder of the provinces and to curb the governors’ worst excesses, while they seemed to help the poor, were actually a mere means to the end of maximizing tax revenue. Domitian, according to Ste. Croix, was simply playing Machiavellian politics by giving the appearance of siding with the powerless in order to intensify their exploitation all the more. He points out that slaves could be offered some legal protection from the worst excesses of abuse, not primarily for their own benefit, but for their masters’, in order to protect the latter’s investments in their slaves’ labor power. According to Ste. Croix, “similarly, an emperor could express solicitude for taxpayers on the ground that they needed to be protected against greedy officials, *in order to be able to pay their taxes in full*” (383) (emphasis original). Hence, what Domitian gave to the poor with one hand, he took away with the other, thus assuring that they would not fully participate in the improvement of the economic situation that they were witnessing all around them.

Citing Samuel Dickey (1928: 411), Jewett (1986: 122) further points out that “during the first three centuries [of the common era] the general economic status of the laboring classes went from bad to worse.” Even Nicholl (2004: 174), in his rush to defend the characterization of working class people as lazy, greedy abusers of the generosity of the rich, concedes Russell’s point that work was not easily available for manual laborers, who would have composed the Thessalonian congregation. Ben Witherington III (2006: 252) agrees that the plight of the urban poor, as would have constituted the Thessalonian congregation, was severe, as not all cities in the Roman Empire had the provisions for the poor that the capital city Rome itself did—i.e. a plentiful supply of sustenance via the grain dole. As Finley ([1973] 1999: 170-71) points out, prior to the Severi in the third century, the dole was first and foremost for full citizens, meaning that slaves and *libertini* had to wait; moreover, there was little evidence for doles in any cities other than Rome. Ste. Croix (1981: 371) does refer to doles in

<sup>7</sup> It is possible (though, on my estimation, less likely) that the real audience of 2 Thessalonians was not the congregation at Thessalonica, but one elsewhere. Nevertheless, as Jewett notes, 2 Thess. 3:10 provides ample textual/literary evidence for its recipients being a tenement church community, even if not one geographically located at Thessalonica. Cf. Jewett (1993: 33-39).

urban centers outside of the capital city of Rome itself, but points out that they were on a far smaller scale than those in Rome, and reiterates that wealthier citizens were entitled to a much larger portion than the poorer residents who were actually needy. If work was difficult to find for the unproductive members of the Thessalonian community, and sustenance was not readily available for them while they were out of work, then who were they and what was the true cause of their unproductivity?

### *C. Identification and Motivation of the “ἄτακτοι”*

Taking Jewett’s tenement church as the most likely model for the Thessalonian congregation, I conclude that the ἄτακτοι were poor Thessalonians who were not contributing to the agape feast whereby the community ensured the provision of its members’ needs. Reliance on patrons, however, was not their motivation. As Winter (1994: 45) points out, patronage would not even have been an option for the urban poor, as patrons viewed working class people as their inferiors and did not typically establish such relationships with them, but rather with those possessing higher social status (i.e., at least roughly on par with that of the patrons themselves) but simply lacking material wealth. Instead, the unemployed ἄτακτοι had become reliant on their fellow poor who contributed to the agape feast. Perhaps they were looking for work but were unable to find any, or perhaps the existence of the agape feast had tempered the urgency of their search for productive labor. Whether their lack of productivity was a result of their unwillingness to work or their inability to do so, though, the result was the same: their consumption jeopardized the entire agapaic communal social system.

As the economic analysis cited above suggests, work was simply too difficult to come by for all able-bodied women and men in the Thessalonian congregation to find employment that would allow them to contribute to the agape feast whereby the community was fed. This inability to find work, then, points to a serious problem in the tenement church model, which can be elucidated with reference to a modern counterpart, viz., the principles of socialism described especially in the works of Marx and Lenin. The situation at Thessalonica presented two dilemmas, one for the ἄτακτοι and one for its productive members. The ἄτακτοι, dependent on the agape feast for survival, could either abstain from it to preserve its viability but see their own needs go unmet, or eat and thus threaten the feast’s viability and thus the entire community’s survival. Meanwhile, the community experienced what Habermas describes as a rationality crisis, whereby the communal structure of their social system (which I characterize as an instance of lower or first phase communism) provided insufficient problem-solving possibilities for the problems that assailed them. Their options, then, were either to allow the ἄτακτοι to join the feast and undermine its sustainability, or bar them from it, thus reneging on a foundational principle of their agapaic communalism.

Except in rare circumstances, the poor (such as the Thessalonian ἄτακτοι) typically cannot bring down entire social systems. Why, then, did the author of 2 Thessalonians describe the ἄτακτοι in such pejorative terms? An author who was a member of the Thessalonian community, after all, surely would have been keenly aware of the social circumstances leading to systemic unemployment described above. I venture deep into the territory of so-called “historical imagination” to offer one possible answer to this vexing question. In describing the ἄτακτοι, the author uses the curious term “περιεργαζομένους,” referring to behavior that is either intrusive or meddling. Scholars favoring an eschatological explanation of the unproductivity and disorderliness of the ἄτακτοι understand this περιεργαζομένους to be their engaging in a form of apocalyptic street preaching. It is possible that those who, for structural reasons, were unable to secure work, became discouraged by the futility of their search for gainful employment. Having abandoned that search, then, they devoted themselves to the task of spreading their community’s message publicly, thereby (at least in their own minds) providing some valuable service with some benefit (albeit an intangible one) to their community and the rest of its members.

The ἄτακτοι may have spent their days wandering around rather than looking for paying work and, in doing so, been doing something that they themselves understood to be work. Nevertheless, the rest of the Thessalonian community had no use for the alleged contributions of these members who functioned and envisioned themselves as ideological workers. Their lack of material contributions (e.g., food, or the means to acquire some, to share at the agape feast), combined with an insistence that they were in fact contributing something valuable to the community's efforts, would easily then have been a constant source of tension between the ἄτακτοι and the ἀδελφοί (2 Thess. 3:6, 14). Mere talking, whether in the form of street sermons about a coming apocalypse or of revolutionary rhetoric unbacked by concrete action, was of no value to the Thessalonian community; hence, the author of 2 Thessalonians used the *paraenesis* at 2 Thess. 3:10b to rebuke those who engaged in such a hustle in the community's regime and demanded that it be recognized legitimately as a contribution to the community that vested them with a right to a share of its meager provisions. Notably, though, on this speculative historical reconstruction, systemic unemployment (rather than apocalyptic expectation) remains the root cause of the unproductivity of the ἄτακτοι, even as their disorderliness and meddling may have manifest themselves in ways similar to those proposed by scholars favoring eschatological over sociological explanations for their περιεργαζομένους. The author of 2 Thessalonians was likely aware of both the structural unemployment of the ἄτακτοι and their unproductive wandering; of the two problems, though, the latter is the one for which the community had a response in its cognitive stock of ideas, whereas for the former they had none.

### III. THE FIRST RULE OF SOCIALISM AND ITS LIMITS: RATIONALITY CRISIS AT THESSALONICA

Lenin ([1917] 1943: 78) echoes 2 Thess. 3:10b in his *State and Revolution*: "He who does not work, shall not eat." His reference to this principle of socialism comes in the context of a discussion of Marx's ([1875] 1966: 20) *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, in which Marx points out that this rule typifies a first phase of communism. According to Marx,

What we have to deal with here is a communist society, not as it has *developed* on its own foundations, but, on the contrary, just as it *emerges* from capitalist society; which is thus in every respect, economically, morally, and intellectually, still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges.

Lenin ([1917] 1943: 81-82) further explains:

In its first phase, or first stage, communism cannot as yet be fully mature economically and entirely free from traditions or vestiges of capitalism. Hence the interesting phenomenon that communism in its first phase retains "the narrow horizon of bourgeois law.

That "narrow horizon of bourgeois law" is the distribution of consumer goods on the basis of work performed, irrespective of a person's actual needs (or, for that matter, the availability of work). That is, within the lower phase of communist society, workers maintain an equal right to proceeds from social labor; this equal right, however, is in actuality unequal. As Marx argues, "equal right here is still in principle—bourgeois right," as social inequality persists:

[O]ne worker is married, another not; one has more children than another, and so on and so forth. Thus, with an equal performance of labour, and hence and equal share in the social consumption fund, one will in fact receive more than another, one will be richer than another, and so on.

As Marx and Lenin point out, only in a higher phase of communism, in which productive forces have increased sufficiently to provide adequately for all workers' needs regardless of labor input, can that

other famous Marxist slogan be hung from the rafters: “From each according to his [*sic*] ability, to each according to his [*sic*] need” (Marx [1875] 1966: 21, 22).

The agapaic communalism of the Thessalonian congregation bears many of the hallmarks of the lower phase of communism that Marx and Lenin describe, and the troubles described in the *paraenesis* of 2 Thessalonians seem to point to a serious limitation of that lower phase. The Thessalonians were, effectively, attempting to create a commune (i.e., a small communist society) within the boundaries of a setting beholden to thoroughly bourgeois class interests—viz., the Roman Empire. Thus, their attempts at creating a communist society, however small and self-contained, were subject to the economic forces of that bourgeois setting. In their case, these economic forces included one of the most typical symptoms of the cyclical nature of the bourgeois mode of production—viz., high unemployment. Even though the inability of the ἄτακτοι to secure gainful employment was through no fault of their own, the devastating effects that their lack of productivity had on the rest of the community were nonetheless the same: The social system that the Thessalonian congregation had built for itself was on the brink of collapse.

What is the use of a principle such as “anyone unwilling to work should not eat” when unwillingness is not the barrier to finding work? Even in Lenin’s later formulation, “he who does not work, shall not eat,” provisions must be made for those who are *unable* (either due to a physical inability to work or due to the lack of availability of employment), but not *unwilling*, to work. Marx ([1875] 1966: 19) points out that, from the total product of social labor, must be deducted “*funds for those unable to work, etc.*, in short, for what is included under so-called poor relief today” (emphasis original). Moreover, this deduction comes even before the distribution of consumables to the workers of society according to the principle spelled out in 2 Thess. 3:10b (and later in Lenin’s root principle of socialism). A communist society (such as the agapaic commune at Thessalonica) is, at this stage, still emerging from a capitalist or bourgeois one, and still bears the economic vestiges of that bourgeois society. Hence, the inequalities inherent in the remnants of “bourgeois right” (according to which only those who work are afforded the guaranteed right to the means of life) will ensure that shortages and poverty will persist just as they did under the bourgeois system.

The situation at Thessalonica regarding unproductivity and eating meets the criteria for what Habermas calls a rationality crisis. As noted earlier, Habermas takes as his starting point the systems-theoretic concept of crisis, on which problems arise that cannot be solved from out of a social system’s cognitive stock of ideas. To this, however, Habermas (1975: 3) adds a social component that is necessary to speak of a crisis proper:

[O]nly when members of a society experience structural alterations as critical for continued existence and feel their social identity threatened can we speak of crises. Disturbances of system integration endanger continued existence only to the extent that social integration is at stake, that is, when the consensual foundations of normative structures are so much impaired that the society becomes anomic. Crisis states assume the form of a disintegration of social institutions.

In his discussion of a classification of possible crisis tendencies, Habermas observes that “crises can arise at different points [within a social system]; and the forms in which a crisis tendency manifests itself up to the point of its political eruption—that is, the point at which the existing political system is delegitimized—are just as diverse” (45).<sup>8</sup> In the case of the Thessalonians’ situation, the crisis began in the economic system (in the form of high unemployment and insufficient job prospects for

<sup>8</sup> NB Habermas’s taxonomy here of possible crisis tendencies, which he charts as follows:

<u>Point of Origin</u>	<u>System Crisis</u>	<u>Identity Crisis</u>
Economic System	Economic Crisis	—
Political System	Rationality Crisis	Legitimation Crisis
Socio-Cultural System	—	Motivation Crisis

those who were out of work) and spread quickly, first to the political and then to the socio-cultural system of the community.

The *paraenesis* at 2 Thess. 3:6-15 (and, in particular, vv. 10 and 14) is a manifestation of precisely the sort of “political eruption” that Habermas notes is inherent in social/systemic crises. Habermas’s own discussion focuses primarily on crisis tendencies in late capitalism, in which input crises in the economic system (i.e., insufficient inputs of labor and capital) are rare (Habermas 1975: 45); nevertheless, the preceding analysis of the situation at Thessalonica indicates that it began as just such a disturbance. This insufficient economic input, then, led naturally to insufficiencies in economic output (i.e., consumable values). Because the Thessalonian congregation was a tenement church, composed of structurally vulnerable urban poor people, the members of that community experienced the overreliance of the unemployed upon the agape feast (and, especially, their jeopardizing the viability of the feast) as a threat to the entire community’s social identity. Thus the disturbances of input and output in the economic system erupted into a full-blown crisis in the political system.

On Habermas’s (1975: 46) account, “[o]utput crises [in the political system] have the form of a *rationality crisis* in which the administrative system does not succeed in reconciling and fulfilling the imperatives received from the economic system” (emphasis original). In a social system organized according to the principles of first-phase communism, the imperatives received from the economic system are, as Marx notes, to secure workers’ equal rights to the proceeds of social labor. Nevertheless, in a system characterized by “bourgeois right” rather than true equal rights (i.e., one in which all members of society have their needs met), not only can equal rights not be guaranteed by the steering apparatuses of the political system, but neither can the provision of the most basic goods necessary for survival. When economic disruptions occur (as they inevitably do) in the bourgeois/capitalist system from which first-phase communism emerges, whose vestiges it retains and with which it remains entangled, that communist society is uniquely susceptible to crises, as it cannot resolve such disruptions without resorting to regressive (i.e., bourgeois rather than communistic) administrative decisions that run contrary to its own communal identity. This is precisely the situation in which the members of the Thessalonian tenement church found themselves.

As Habermas (1975: 47) observes, “[a] rationality deficit in public administration means that the state apparatus cannot, under given boundary conditions, adequately steer the economic system.” Among the boundary conditions given within the Thessalonian community, as within other first-phase communist societies, was its characteristic agapaic communalism. The Thessalonians could not resolve the economic disturbances they were experiencing while simultaneously maintaining their community’s foundational political character and restricting themselves to administrative decisions from its political system consistent with that communal character. Consequently “[t]he rationality crisis is converted into the withdrawal of legitimation by way of a disorganization of the state apparatus” (46). In the case of the Thessalonian congregation, the disorganization of the agape feast—the apparatus by which the community provided for the needs of its members—threatened the community’s material viability and core identity and, along with that identity, its members’ confidence in its chances for survival. (No wonder, then, that some embraced apocalypticism as a means of maintaining hope that their community would overcome its challenges.) This withdrawal of legitimation, then, results in a social disintegration whereby the socio-cultural system does not produce a sufficient output of either legitimation for the political system or motivation to perform (i.e., to work) in the economic system (48). Given Spicq’s semantic analysis of “ἀτάκτως” and its emphasis on disorder rather than mere idleness, we should understand the unemployed described in 2 Thess. 3:6-15 as victims of the disorder to which the term refers, rather than instigators of it, even if their difficulty (and perhaps complete inability) in finding employment did result in a loss of willingness to continue seeking it.

Unfortunately, we do not know whether or how the Thessalonian congregation resolved the crisis to which the *paraenesis* at 2 Thess. 3:6-15 was intended as a response. Nevertheless the situation as I have reconstructed it is instructive in a practical way, in that it reveals a serious vulnerability in first-phase communism—viz., that it is still at the whim of capital and the crises and contradictions thereof. Because communism in its first phase retains the narrow horizon of bourgeois law and bourgeois right, such crises and disruptions remain inevitable, and the risk is ever-present that they might threaten the very survival of these nascent communist societies. Even if the crisis to which 2 Thess. 3:6-15 alludes does not presume a zero-sum economy, it certainly presumes an economy characterized by scarcity rather than abundance. Many of us, particularly leftists in solidarity with marginalized people, want to believe that a group of poor people like the ones who gathered at Thessalonica can come together, pool their resources and, in doing so, make things work and provide for the needs of everybody in the assembly. Some even hold out such a hope as an article of faith. Nevertheless, the reality of structural poverty is that things often do not work out for the best for the poor, even despite their own best efforts. That reality may, in fact, be one of the most important lessons of 2 Thessalonians and its legacy.

#### IV. MUDDYING (AND, ONE HOPES, CLEARING) THE WATERS OF HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

My analysis of the situation at Thessalonica is not without its challenges, even among others with historical-materialist commitments. Most notably, Ste. Croix, in his description of ancient class struggle, “waste[s] little time on the so-called ‘communism’ of the earliest Apostolic community” and denies that any tradition of Christian communism (such as the agapaic communalism described by Jewett) ever existed. Instead, on his view, such early Christian communalism, if it ever existed, was limited to the first generation of Christians in the wake of Jesus’s crucifixion, and then promptly disappeared until the rise of monasticism in the fourth century. Moreover, even if such primitive communism did exist as described in the Acts of the Apostles, it was incomplete with regard to ownership and entirely unrelated to production. He concludes that later references to such communalism are merely idealizations, and not evidence of actual historical practices (Ste. Croix 1981: 433). Ste. Croix focuses his remarks about early Christians on the fact that, on his view, their ideas about property were shaped by social forces beyond their control. He argues that the early Christians’ ideas about property differed markedly from Jesus’s own—e.g., those found in Mk. 10:17-27 (= Mt. 19:16-26 = Lk. 18:18-27) and Lk. 6:24—because the class struggle dictated that, if Christianity was to survive, it was necessary to downplay those aspects of it that were hostile to the propertied classes and, in particular, those aspects that were hostile to property ownership *per se* (426-27). Moreover, Ste. Croix does not consider even Jesus himself, opposed though he may have been to the institution of property, to be a revolutionary in any real sense. Although Jesus’s ministry and teaching occurred in the context of Roman client kingdom of Galilee, he himself had very little contact with Roman imperial power until his arrest, trial and crucifixion (430). Hence, Ste. Croix argues, opposition to that imperial power was in no way the focus of Jesus’s movement.

As Boer (2010) argues, though, Ste. Croix’s analysis overlooks too much evidence and oversimplifies too much of the evidence for which it does account. Boer points to a thriving tradition of early Christian opposition to private property, most notably including the third century church father Origen, who saw wealth as evil. As Boer points out, Origen refused to allegorize the Gospel texts condemning wealth, as most of his contemporaries did; moreover, he advocated that priests renounce property altogether and that nobody pray for material benefits (Boer 2010: 120). In addition to these major figures cited by Boer, John Cort’s (1988) study extensively catalogs an opposition to private property that was pervasive throughout many communities in the earliest generations of the Christian church. There is, moreover, ample evidence in the New Testament itself that opposition to private property persisted throughout the apostolic period—e.g., Acts 2:42-47, 4:32-37 and 5:1-10. Ste. Croix, as Boer illustrates, seemed not quite to know how to fit into his

analysis figures like Origen, Basil and other early Christian opponents of property, and thus dismisses them too quickly as outliers or exceptions in order to move along to figures who fit better into the narrative that he is trying to construct (Boer 2010: 121). In addition to Boer's examples of early Christian theologians who do not fit neatly into Ste. Croix's narrative, Jewett's proposal that the tenement church was a viable model of Christian congregations as early as the middle of the first century likewise militates against Ste. Croix's argument that early Christians quickly abandoned Jesus's teachings about property. The greatest shortcoming of Ste. Croix's account is that he conceives of early Christianity far too monolithically. As Boer (2010: 133) points out, the biblical texts themselves are contradictory with regard to many of the issues that Ste. Croix discusses. Moreover, the entire consensus in Christian origins has shifted in recent years toward the view that diversity, rather than unity, characterized early Christianity immediately after Jesus's death. Ste. Croix's insistence on a linear narrative does not do justice to this radical diversity in the early Christian church.

Likewise, Ste. Croix overlooks a large body of evidence regarding the revolutionary, anti-imperial spirit of early Christianity. His observation that Jesus had little contact with the Roman Empire prior to his arrest quite misses the point: Exile and conquest were arguably the most formative cultural memories of Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries; Rome was no aberration, but rather the latest in a long line of foreign powers (e.g., Egypt, Babylon, Assyria) who had subjugated the Jewish people and lands. As Richard Horsley (2008) attests, a profound awareness of empire and a strong tradition of resistance to it in all of its incarnations are clearly attested throughout both testaments of the bible. S. K. Eddy (1961) likewise demonstrates a well-established tradition of Jewish anti-imperial resistance in the centuries prior to the Jesus movement; such resistance movements would have constituted a significant part of the context in which Jesus and his movement were active. Moreover, as Ste. Croix (1981: 44) points out, the imperialism that Jesus and his Galilean contemporaries experienced was an indirect form of exploitation that did not require direct involvement in controlling the means of production. Ste. Croix's implication that Jesus would have been aware of Roman imperialism only as a presence far in the background of his everyday experiences is thus implausible. As the various resistance movements contemporary with Jesus (e.g., brigands, apocalyptic prophets and popular messiahs) clearly attest, Roman imperial power was a force with which first century Jews were well acquainted, even if they rarely saw or interacted with any human representatives of that power. Much recent historical Jesus research, synopsized in Boer (2010: 116), has likewise emphasized the politically revolutionary character of his teachings and the movement he founded.

If it can be established that Jesus likely was self-consciously a political revolutionary, then what should we make of Ste. Croix's claim that whatever revolutionary zeal we might attribute to him was nevertheless quickly lost, perhaps even by the very first generation after Jesus's death? First, given the diversity of early Christianity even in the immediate aftermath of the sudden loss of its founder, it is important to acknowledge that, in some cases, Ste. Croix's narrative is true. Even so, we need not understand early Christianity entirely in this way; as a diverse movement, some of its strands (e.g., the tenement churches) appealed to the outcasts and marginalized members of society; such movements, unlike those trying to appeal to elites, would have thrived on an emphasis on Jesus's more socially radical teachings. His stance against property surely would have had broad appeal for those who had little or none of it, even if it would have been a stumbling block for others who had much. While Christianity began to change to fit its various local contexts from its outset, an early Christianity that was entirely removed from the actual teachings of Jesus would be nearly incoherent. As volumes like Horsley (1997), Horsley (2004), and Borg and Crossan (2010) demonstrate, even Paul—notorious for his “pro-establishment” reputation, as Boer (2010: 128) puts it—continued Jesus's tradition of anti-imperialism and social radicalism. Boer points out that the synoptic gospels that depict Jesus as a revolutionary are themselves dated to the 70s or 80s, showing that the politically radical aspects of Jesus's message were alive and well, and formatively

important, for at least some Christian communities well into the second half of the first century. The Book of Revelation, a product of the early second century, is clear in its anti-imperial focus (even if not clear in much else!).

Along with Ste. Croix, Moses Finley's ([1973] 1999) historical-materialist analysis complicates the question of the context of 2 Thessalonians. Finley, unlike Ste. Croix, does not want to discuss the ancient economy in terms of class at all, but rather in terms of status. He points out that the ancients had no concept of the economy as a separate sphere; hence, any attempts to analyze it as such are inevitably and hopelessly anachronistic. The ancients, of course, engaged in economic activities and even wrote (and, we can safely surmise, talked) about them, but did not conceive of the economy as a separate sphere of society. Whereas Ste. Croix analyzes the ancient world in terms of class, property and exploitation, Finley observes that the ancients themselves thought instead primarily in terms of social status. Hence, the question of property ownership (because it is the primary determining factor of class, an economic rather than social distinction) is of little significance for Finley's analysis.

Clearly, though, as described above, property ownership was tremendously important both to Jesus himself and to many communities of his earliest followers. Finley's concern is that we avoid anachronistically describing ancients in terms that would be foreign to them; in the case of the early Christians and property, though, no such anachronism is at work. They did explicitly describe their attitudes toward property and, in many cases, they defined themselves and their communities' foundational principles in terms of those attitudes toward property. Even so, though, it is not clear that Finley's principle is truly on solid footing methodologically. Scholars often must describe the subjects whom they study in terms that those subjects themselves would find foreign, would refuse to endorse or, in some cases, would even explicitly reject. Thus, modern scholars should in no way take his point (viz., that ancients did not understand, write or speak about a separate economic sphere) as a proscription of their doing so. If, as Ste. Croix argues, the concepts of property, class and exploitation can help us understand the ancient world, then those concepts are fair game to apply to it, irrespective of its inhabitants' attitudes toward or understandings of those descriptions. Ste. Croix (1981: 45) argues further that Finley's preference for understanding the ancient world in terms of status functions ideologically to render his descriptions of it innocuous to modern readers. Applying the concept of class, on the other hand, threatens our *status quo* in ways that Finley's category of status does not. Readers who eschew neutrality in favor of recovering liberative readings of biblical texts clearly should prefer Ste. Croix's approach because of its capacity to disrupt our own *status quo*.

Although the respective analyses of Ste. Croix and Finley are wanting in some respects, their ideas taken together shed light on why the tenement community at Thessalonica understood the economic deprivation that they were experiencing as a form of persecution. Finley is correct that ancients (like the first century Thessalonian Christians) had no sense that the various spheres of their society were separate, as we often conceive of them today. As Ste. Croix (1981: 33) explains, the poor laborers at Thessalonica would have experienced the collective, impersonal, systemic exploitation of imperialism. That exploitation and its material consequences would have been conducted by the hands of forces that, as Ste. Croix observes in the case of Jesus, remained outside of their direct purview or experience. Boer (2010: 140) advocates "an Althusserian approach in which each domain [of society] is semi-autonomous," "stressing ... the 'semi' over against the 'autonomous'"—an understanding that places primary emphasis on the interconnection of the various spheres of society. Such an approach to understanding ancient societies is useful for understanding the plight of the Thessalonians: Having no concept of economics as a separate sphere of society, they naturally described their exploitation and the ensuing community-threatening crisis, using the conceptual vocabulary that they had available to them—viz., that of persecution by

spiritual enemies. They, in other words, had a consciousness of the fact of their exploitation, even if they would not have described it in those terms.

Several historical data align to support the plausibility of placing 2 Thessalonians within the socially revolutionary tradition of the Jesus movement and early church: First, the authorship dates of the synoptic gospels are close to that of 2 Thessalonians, demonstrating the existence of contemporary socially revolutionary, anti-property Christian sects. Moreover, recent scholarly work that excavates a politically radical Paul supports the hypothesis that a community that he founded could likewise fall within a similar socially revolutionary tradition to those within which the synoptic gospels originated. Finally, Jewett's tenement church model is particularly well-suited for a community that falls into such a tradition. I am convinced by Jewett's argument that the congregation at Thessalonica was a tenement church, composed of poor and marginalized residents of that Roman imperial city, locked into a fierce struggle to survive both as individuals and as a community. Nevertheless, Jewett's argument is open to the charge that it is not probative. That is, while it establishes that such tenement churches likely did exist, it may not suffice as evidence that the Thessalonian congregation itself was such a church. The cumulative evidence, though, points strongly in favor of the plausibility of such a reading of 2 Thessalonians. First, Jewett's own argument establishes the likelihood that such communities did exist in the first two centuries of the Christian church. Second, his rhetorical analysis regarding the enforceability of 2 Thess. 3:10b establishes the plausibility that the Thessalonian community was one such community. Finally, then, the analysis of Ste. Croix's shortcomings above successfully erects a plausibility structure for early Christian opposition to private property, into which the *paraenesis* at 2 Thess. 3:10b can be placed. Given the convergence of these historical data, I conclude that reading 2 Thessalonians as an artifact of an early Christian agapaic commune composed of marginalized, urban poor people is epistemically warranted.

## V. CONCLUSION: REFLECTIONS ON PRAXIS

I have now laid out a plausible account of the social context of 2 Thessalonians and, in particular, its *paraenesis* regarding work, on which unwillingness to work likely was not the real problem at all. At the very least, it is clear that conservative uses of the passage to chastise the poor for their supposed greed, laziness and "entitlement mentality" do not fit its original social context. Conservative users of 2 Thess 3:10b remain free to ignore such concerns as the social context in which the text was produced and use the text however they see fit, all differences with its author's agenda notwithstanding. They may, for example, place primacy on their own ideological commitments (as in the case of the Conservative Bible Project) or adhere instead to a naïve "plain sense" reading of the text (even as such a tactic functions only to mask rather than name the ideological commitments that they inevitably do bring to bear on the text). Nevertheless, those politically conservative readers for whom authorial intent or agenda are hermeneutically significant must acknowledge that, if my historical-critical reconstruction is correct, then, insofar as that authorial intent is concerned, their appropriation of 2 Thess. 3:10b is an illegitimate usurpation of it.

As Jewett (1993: 37) points out, enforceability was the key to 2 Thess. 3:10b's rhetorical effectiveness: "The sanction must be enforceable for the regulation to be effective. This means that the community must have had jurisdiction over the regular eating of its members." Notably, this enforceability must have encompassed provisions for the needs of the members of the community, and not merely the withholding thereof. While the passage's author may have had in mind (albeit unfairly) that the ἄτακτοι were abusing the congregation's social safety net, the hypothesis that the congregation was a tenement church that was characterized above all by its commitment to care for all its members communally is incompatible with current attempts to press the passage into the right-wing ideological service of undermining popular support for similar social safety nets in our own society. Far from being incompatible with what are now considered to be "liberal Christian"

notions of social justice (as conservatives like Glenn Beck and the translators of the Conservative Bible Project insist), the passage in fact presupposes a strong commitment on the part of the entire community to social justice and care for all.

In his discussion of early Christianity, Ste. Croix (1981: 439-40) theorizes about why the movement effected so little positive change in Roman society. He argues that early Christians focused too much on individual, and too little on institutional, relations, and that they failed to appreciate that the former are conditioned by the latter and that the latter are ruled by different criteria from the former. Throughout the history of Christianity, Ste. Croix argues, its adherents have only ever deplored class conflict in principle (when they have deplored it at all), but never in practice; even from the movement's inception, nothing barred its adherents from utter political conformity. Ste. Croix is, I sadly report, correct that the Jesus movement effected very little lasting change in its society's material relations. Nevertheless, many parts of that movement (including, according to a large body of scholarship, that which can be traced all the way back to its founder) were focused on effecting society-wide revolutionary change throughout the Roman Empire, and evidence abounds that various strands of the movement, including those established by Paul, retained that focus for several generations after Jesus's death. One feature of the early Christian attempts at communalism, to which Ste. Croix draws attention, is a likelier candidate for being the cause of those attempts' eventual failure: They focused primarily on communal consumption; none was sufficiently concerned with production or changing the mode thereof.

Moreover, as Ste. Croix himself notes, whatever communalism they achieved was incomplete, even with regard to consumption (433). The incompleteness of the communism achieved in agapaic communal congregations like the one at Thessalonica rendered those communities particularly crisis-prone, even in spite of the fact that they were founded with sincere commitments to revolutionary change. In the cases of both the Thessalonians and the Soviets, the historical lesson for leftists today is the same: No change in economic order can be successful unless adopted on a large scale. The incomplete (or first phase) communism, for which revolutionaries must inevitably settle in the absence of such larger-scale revolution, remains especially susceptible to crisis; hence, while internal strengthening may serve a useful purpose on the road toward a successful revolution, it cannot come at the expense of postponing Permanent Revolution for too long. The Thessalonian community attempted to achieve something somewhat akin to socialism in one community (and only a partial form of socialism at that), and the results were no better for them than they would be 1,900 years later for the Soviet Union with its implementation of Socialism in One Country.

What can leftists learn from 2 Thess. 3:10b and its use by socialist theorists like Lenin? Whatever use that the passage holds for leftists derives primarily from its being a stark reminder of the precariousness of revolutionary efforts every step of the way. The collapse of the Soviet Union led to bold declarations that "there is no alternative" to the hegemony of neoliberal deregulation, capitalist globalization and the expansion of so-called "free" markets. The global crisis of capitalism that began ca. 2007 has since led to a reconsideration of that "TINA" thesis; nevertheless, if leftists do hope to provide feasible alternatives, they must look critically at their own historical shortcomings and realistically assess the challenges that face them, lest they repeat the mistakes that led to premature declarations of their permanent demise two decades ago. Additionally, as Jewett (1994: 86) notes, recovering the socially radical tradition of 2 Thessalonians holds the potential to awaken "'dangerous memories' of Christian solidarity" (and, I hasten to add, solidarity across religious and secular boundaries) that can remedy the social pathologies of Western individualism. Moreover, Jewett writes:

The Pauline Love Feast could stimulate the contemporary church to develop viable forms of economic cooperation, new ways to integrate the sacraments into revitalized forms of potluck meals, and new strategies for the "under class" in American cities to begin coping

together since the patronage system of governmental aid has become so alienating and unreliable.

Finally, then, a socialist like me can hope that an examination of the historical circumstances that gave rise to the rhetoric of 2 Thess. 3:6-15, along with those circumstances' modern analogues and the rhetoric's own shortcomings, can motivate revolutionary socialists to commit to the pursuit of nothing less than the complete revolution that, alone, can realize the project of the primordial Jesus movement, the Thessalonian Pauline community, revitalized contemporary communal Christian congregations and modern socialists alike—viz., providing the means of life “to each according to his [*sic*] need” and safeguarding all members of society from the structural vulnerability that threatens access to those means.

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