

## Diagnosing an Allergic Reaction:

### *The Avoidance of Marx in Pauline Scholarship*

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*Contemporary study of the New Testament and of Paul more specifically shows symptoms of avoidance of basic categories of Marxist analysis such as economic class, class struggle, and mode of production. The result is that discussions of economic and social realities are often so abstract and sanguine as to be misleading – an expression, from a Marxist point of view, of the shadow cast over biblical studies by capitalist ideology.*

The medical metaphor in my title is somewhat misleading. My topic is the remarkable rarity of explicit reference to Marxism or Marxist categories in New Testament scholarship and Paul scholarship especially. But in the following remarks I do not so much offer a single diagnosis as I observe a range of symptoms and propose several possible diagnoses for consideration.

Marxist interpretation of any part of the Bible has been scarce.<sup>1</sup> Even today – when, after the dramatic dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Eastern Bloc in Europe, we might expect the name “Marxist” to appear less inflammatory than before those events – only a few brave Hebrew Bible scholars, notable among them Roland Boer and David Jobling, routinely identify themselves in their work as Marxist critics (Boer 2005; Jobling 2005). Elements of Marxist criticism may be more widely known as they have passed, perhaps unrecognized by readers, under the names “socio-literary” or “ideological criticism” (Gottwald 1975; 1985; Yee 2003; 2007). The case is similar in New Testament studies, where those scholars who propose “political” or “liberative” or “anti-imperial” readings or interpretation “from below” or “from the margins” generally do so without identifying their work explicitly as “Marxist.”<sup>2</sup>

One might ask, So what? After all, Norman K. Gottwald has reportedly observed that there is a high level of “implicit Marxism” in biblical studies, meaning that scholars increasingly give attention to ideology, economic and political realities, and the role of empires and resistance to them (see Boer 2007b: 316). So what difference does it make if such discussions go on without anyone *explicitly* naming Marx or Marxism? The difference, I think, is that unless terms are defined in specific relationship to recognizable categories like those provided in Marxist thought – especially categories like class and mode of production – “social and economic realities” may be discussed in

<sup>1</sup> See Boer 1998; 2003; 2007; Elliott 2011. Soviet-era Marxist scholarship on early Christianity was briefly reviewed (and dismissed) by Kowalinski 1972.

<sup>2</sup> For an exception that proves the rule see West 1999. On materialist or “non-idealist” approaches to the Bible see Kahl 1993, and Lopez 2008: 7-11. Kahl names 1960s Europe as the formative environment for the scholars she discusses. Boer (2010) discusses what appears to be the careful avoidance of Marxist study of the Roman world among New Testament scholars. Perhaps no single scholar has done more to advocate and advance political, counter-imperial, and “people’s history” interpretations of various aspects of early Judaism (including the Jesus movement) and early Christianity than Richard A. Horsley (1997, 1998, 2000, 2004, 2006, 2008) – not only through his own writing but by mobilizing the work of other scholars – yet so far as I know he nowhere describes his own work as Marxist in orientation. “People’s history” was pioneered by British Marxist historians: see the concise retrospective in Crossley 2006: 5-18. Parenti (2003) applies the method to ancient Rome.

such general, imprecise, and vague ways that they may mean very different things to different interpreters, as some of the following remarks may begin to illustrate.

Simply for purposes of contrast I note that thirty years ago Geoffrey de Ste. Croix published a monumental discussion of *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, including the Roman Empire (1981). He explicitly applied Marxist categories and adapted them in thoughtful ways to present a coherent and wide-ranging account. Ste. Croix defined *class* as referring to the pattern of relationships in a society by which human beings are mutually involved in the process of production (whether that involves property or labor relationships); *class struggle* describes the conflict between the exploitation that characterizes those relationships and resistance to that exploitation (Ste. Croix 1981: 31-33). Following and developing Marx's own insights into ancient history (*ibid.*, 23-25, 19-23), Ste. Croix showed that in the Roman world, the propertied class derived the economic surplus that "freed them from the necessity of taking part in the process of production" through exploitation; not through wage labor, as in contemporary industrial capitalist society, but through un-free labor of various kinds, including slavery as well as the expropriation of agricultural labor through taxation (*ibid.*, 39, 133-47). Ste. Croix described Roman imperialism as the extension of class-based extraction and exploitation (*ibid.*, 44; on Roman imperialism, chaps. VI–VIII), and devoted several chapters to the ideology of imperialism as the expression of class warfare.

I recognize that even these definitions are the subject of lively debate among Marxist historians.<sup>3</sup> They are nonetheless useful for drawing attention, first, to the fact that Marxist categories *can* in fact be applied to the world studied by New Testament scholars, with impressive results; and second, to what is therefore the even more remarkable silence – one is tempted to say, the *studied* silence – regarding class and class struggle in New Testament studies. I turn next to a brief inventory of the different forms such silence takes.

### THE SOUNDS OF SILENCE

The first way New Testament scholarship has avoided matters of class has been to practice an embarrassed reluctance to discuss them. That is, scholars sometimes acknowledge Marxism without giving it the sort of serious consideration that might offend polite society. I take as an example the landmark study by Meeks (1983). To his credit, early in the book Meeks recognizes that Marxists "have made important contributions to our understanding of ancient society" – but he never tells us what those contributions might be. Instead, that statement serves only to qualify his larger point that "the Marxist reading" of early Christianity, at least in its "crude popular versions," has been "reductionist" (1983: 3). Meeks never tells his reader whether there is any other kind, leaving the possible impression that *any* Marxist analysis will inevitably be "crude" simply because it is Marxist.

When Meeks later turns to "social stratification" in the ancient Roman world, he helpfully distinguishes class, order (*ordo*), and status, but then immediately declares that the category of "class is not very helpful." This is because "in the everyday speech of popular sociology" it is used imprecisely to refer primarily to income and because, "for Marx, class was determined by relation to the means of production, *yielding only three*: landlords, capitalists, and workers" (1983: 53 [emphasis added]). "None of these definitions [of class] is very helpful in describing ancient society," he continues, "for they lump together groups who clearly were regarded in antiquity as different" (*ibid.*). Note, first, that the one sentence in the book that passes for a summary of Marxist thought is inaccurate. *In modern industrial capitalism*, Marx distinguished capitalists and workers as *two* opposed classes; landowners were not a third class in capitalism but were opposed to the landless serfs who worked the land in a *previous* economic system, feudalism. Marx was very careful to

<sup>3</sup> Boer (2003) offers insightful interaction and critique of de Ste. Croix especially around categories of mode of production and (2010) "un-free labor." On the definition of ideology see Eagleton 2007; Rehmann 2010.

distinguish the different configurations of class struggle related to the dominant means of production in different historical epochs; Meeks doesn't bother. Why not? Because, he says, people in ancient Roman society did not categorize people into just two classes.

That is a remarkable argument. Can one imagine, as an analogy, a sociologist of contemporary U.S. society refusing to use the category "race" because different people use the term differently in everyday conversation, or because we recognize a plurality of ethnic and cultural identities? Meeks does not consider whether a more precise definition of class (such as Marx *actually* supplied) might be useful. Nor does he ask whether the multiplicity of overlapping ways in which people in the first century perceived status might be correlated with deeper dynamics of unequal economic relationships (as Ste. Croix has in fact demonstrated, with encyclopedic detail). Instead, Marx's understanding of class is glancingly mentioned, inaccurately described, and summarily dismissed, within a few lines – and not mentioned again. This approach allows the scholar to appear to extend an undeserved generosity (in giving Marx any mention at all) and simultaneously to remain decorously circumspect (in protecting delicate readers from having to trouble themselves any further about "crude" Marxism).

### THE SURPRISING (AND DISTRACTING) PREEMINENCE OF THE "MIDDLE CLASS"

A second way scholars have avoided a careful analysis of class relations has been to perpetuate a description of the Pauline churches as constituting a "cross-section" of Roman society. In contrast to MacMullen's description (1974: 90) of a "very steep social pyramid" with a few fantastically rich people at the top and the great mass of the people at the bottom, New Testament scholars have more usually affirmed, in between the very rich and the very poor, the existence of a broad and significant "middle class" of artisans, merchants, laborers, and higher-status slaves. If there were "not many" wise, powerful, or nobly-born members of the church in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:26-27), this argument goes, there were at least a few. It follows, at least by implication, that Marxist jargon about oppression and class struggle simply doesn't apply, either to the early churches or to the wider society around them.

Meeks (1983) and Malherbe (1983) have hailed this description as a "new consensus," beginning in the 1970s, and as an innovation that broke with a more "proletarian" description of the Pauline churches that they attributed to Adolf Deissmann.<sup>4</sup> As Steve Friesen has shown, however (and I gratefully depend on Friesen's work on this and the following point), this history of scholarship is inaccurate.<sup>5</sup> Instead of an "old" and "new" consensus, "there was simply a twentieth-century consensus" among most Western scholars that the members of Paul's churches "represented a cross-section of society, coming mostly from the middle and lower sectors of society, with some members from the higher sectors" (Friesen 2004: 325; 2008: 119). Furthermore, Friesen shows that

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<sup>4</sup> See Deissmann 1908. Meeks and Malherbe attribute much of the alleged "new consensus" to the work of Gerd Theissen, whose early landmark essays are collected in Theissen 1982.

<sup>5</sup> Friesen (2004: 326) suggests that Malherbe, Meeks, and others may have assumed their views constituted a divergence from Deissmann's because they misunderstood his language about the "lower strata." He points out, first, that although Deissmann's language about *die unteren Schichte* is routinely translated into English as "the lower classes," in early twentieth-century German political debate the term *Schichte* (which he translates "strata") did not carry the specifically Marxist connotation of *Klasse*, "class," and was deliberately used as an alternative to the latter term. Second, he suggests that although Deissmann used the phrase to refer to "the entire population of the empire except the small ruling elite," later interpreters like Malherbe (1983: 31) and Meeks (1983: 51-52) erroneously assumed that he meant by the phrase to refer *only* to the lowest strata; they thus mistakenly attributed to him the view that the churches came from "the poor and dispossessed of the Roman provinces" (Meeks 1983: 52).

this “cross-section” portrayal of the apostle’s churches goes back to Deissmann himself,<sup>6</sup> and that it originally served an explicit political agenda: to repudiate a Marxist “proletarian” history of early Christianity that was on the ascendancy early in the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup>

Despite its political agenda, however – or should we perhaps say, because of it? – the cross-section characterization of the Pauline churches has become the reigning consensus. Elsewhere Friesen (2008) surveys a dozen New Testament introductions published between 1904 and 1975 and finds that they generally depict a robust Roman economy and an upwardly ambitious middle class in what we might call boosterish terms. He concludes that “the twentieth-century mainstream consensus on economic issues in the Pauline assemblies was tedious. There was little progress on the topic [of poverty] and little curiosity about it” (2008: 121).

### CHANGING THE SUBJECT

Friesen also points to what I count as a third way New Testament scholars have avoided the topic of economic class: by changing the subject, emphasizing instead the complex interaction of different measures of social status and status inconsistency (on which see Meek 1983: 22-23 and *passim*). Although the increased focus since the 1970s on questions of social status produced some important insights, it also means, Friesen writes, that “economic inequality . . . never gained a foothold as a significant topic of conversation” (2008: 124-25). To the contrary, “our preoccupation with ‘social status’ is the very mechanism by which we have ignored poverty and economic issues.” That is not because our methods are more sophisticated than our predecessors’, however. Friesen argues that social status as currently defined is unmeasurable because it involves the interaction of at least ten variables for which we do not have the sort of comparative data that would allow us to quantify their interaction – even for the small percentage of members of the Pauline churches whom we can name. So why do we prefer dealing with admittedly “impressionistic” generalizations regarding “status inconsistency” over actual economic analysis (such as that carried out by Marxists)? Friesen regards that preference as evidence of “an unacknowledged bias”: “Instead of remembering the poor, *we prefer* to discuss upwardly mobile individuals and how they coped with the personal challenges of negotiating their ambivalent social status” (2004: 332-35). Friesen proposes (and I agree) that we should label this systematic bias “capitalist criticism”: “after all, why should the burden of self-disclosure fall only on the shoulders of Marxist critics?” (*ibid.*, 336).

<sup>6</sup> Deissmann (1957: 241-43) had already emphasized Paul’s greetings to and from “fairly well-to-do Christians,” including sponsors of house churches “who cannot have been poor,” and described the churches as made up of “men and women from the middle and lower classes,” meaning from all but the tiny minority who were spectacularly wealthy: see Friesen 2004: 326-27.

<sup>7</sup> Deissmann was active in an ecclesiastical campaign to blunt the advance of the Marxist Social Democratic Party in Germany in which Karl Kautsky was prominent. Friesen observes (2004: 327) that “Deissmann’s major statement on the social status of the early assemblies was written for the 1908 meeting of a politically oriented Lutheran organization,” the Evangelisch-sozialer Kongress, which had as one of its goals “to stave off the dramatic advances of the Marxist Social Democratic Party in Germany.” As Friesen summarizes the majority of addresses at that Congress, including the comments of the presider, Adolf von Harnack: “the social description of Paul’s assemblies was intertwined with a determined effort to deny a need for structural change in German society .... Most of them maintained that the gospel could transform the lower classes without disrupting the status quo because the gospel brought inner enlightenment and peace to individuals .... Social stratification was not a problem, [dissenting voices] were told, and poverty was not important. The churches simply needed to do a better job of caring for the souls of individuals in order to win back the hearts and minds of the German working class” (2004: 330-31). Theissen (1993: 3-8) offers a similar history.

### THE CULTURAL-ANTHROPOLOGICAL MODEL OF A “LIMITED GOOD” SOCIETY

A fourth way of avoiding discussion of class is to deny its relevance outright. In their social-scientific discussion of “religion, economics, and politics” in the environment of Paul’s churches, Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch observe that in the New Testament period, “neither religion nor economics had a separate institutional existence, and neither was conceived as a system on its own, with a special theory of practice and a distinctive mode of organization . . . Nowhere do we meet the terminology of an economic ‘system’ in the modern sense. There is no language implying abstract concepts of market, monetary system, or fiscal theory” (Malina and Pilch 2006: 393).

All this appears true enough, at face value; but it begs the interpretive question. *Why* should “the terminology of an economic ‘system’ in the modern sense” be the criterion for our understanding of what qualified as the economic dimension of ancient life? If the ancients did not theorize “economics” in such narrow terms as came to prevail in the nineteenth century – when economics came increasingly to be defined as an autonomous field of professional, “scientific” study, properly isolated from any interaction with social, political, or ideological dimensions of life – then is it simply to be ignored by the contemporary interpreter as if it did not exist?<sup>8</sup>

Nor is this rather peculiar observation sufficient reason why, among the many cultural “reading scenarios” offered in their *Social-Science Commentary*, Malina and Pilch provide no entries for *poverty* or *class*. The depiction of an idealized model of “Mediterranean” or “peasant society” (they use the terms interchangeably)<sup>9</sup> should not derail the investigation of actual economic and political realities, which existed whether or not the ancients theorized them in modern, abstract ways.<sup>10</sup> (I note that Malina and Pilch do not hesitate to discuss “alternative states of consciousness” simply because the ancients didn’t speak that way.) Furthermore, even as a high-altitude theoretical construct, their model of “Mediterranean society” fails to account for the abundant data from the Roman world. Their observation that economic relations were “embedded” in kinship systems might be valuable for an ideal description of traditional village society, but does not account for urban society in the Roman Empire, where “kinship” could be manufactured (through adoption); or for the Roman imperial economy, which Senators and emperors were able enough to describe in terms of systematic extraction of wealth from the provinces.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to the approach taken by Malina and Pilch, the challenge of a Marxist approach is to be far more comprehensive and less reductionist than this purported “cultural-anthropological” approach in defining and understanding “economics.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> I owe this insight to Roland Boer, who refers to Wallerstein 2011: 261-4.

<sup>9</sup> Crossley (2009) observes that “Mediterranean” also appears interchangeable with “Middle Eastern” in a number of social-science studies – yielding not only imprecision but also allowing for egregious stereotyping of contemporary “Middle Eastern culture” as well.

<sup>10</sup> Malina and Pilch conclude that “ancient Rome elites [*sic*] did not have an idea of juridical relations among various peoples. Instead Roman statesmen dealt with other peoples in terms of good faith based on the analogy of patron-client relations. *Rome was patron, not holder of an empire*; it wanted persons to behave like clients” (2006, 393 [emphasis added]). But that conclusion would have come as a surprise to Cicero, Caesar, or Augustus, who spoke frankly enough about the empire Rome held.

<sup>11</sup> In the early second century Aelius Aristides sought to launch his rhetorical career by praising such extraction, though he was shrewd enough to describe the conquered continents as “offering up” their wealth to Rome. He described the continents surrounding the Mediterranean as continuously “offering [Rome] in full measure what they possess”; the profusion of produce from India and Arabia suggested that “the trees in those lands have been stripped bare .... If the inhabitants of those lands need anything, they must come here [to Rome] to beg for a share of what they have produced” (*Panegyric on Rome*). In the first century, the author of the Apocalypse condemned Rome for such extraction (Rev. 18:1-24); and from the third century comes the declaration that “the cities are set up by the state in order ... to extort and oppress” (a Talmudic saying cited by MacMullen 1974: 34).

<sup>12</sup> Another insight owed to Roland Boer (personal communication).

In his textbook on “the New Testament world,” Malina goes even further (2001). Under the banner of “cultural anthropology,” he describes “the first-century Mediterranean world” as one in which the terms *poor* and *rich* were not expressions of “‘class’ or economic rank at all.” He declares that most people in this world “worked to maintain their inherited status, not to get rich” (Malina 2001: 97). This, too, begs the question: How, then, should we account for the amply documented individuals who considered the acquisition of exorbitant fortunes a matter not only of personal ambition but of the destiny of the “best people”? In the world Malina describes – the world of *peasant* honor – such people simply did not exist: “the honorable persons would certainly strive to avoid and prevent the accumulation of capital” (ibid.). By definition, then, those persons who in fact accumulated vast amounts of capital could only have been what Malina calls “the dishonorable rich,” those “beyond the pale of public opinion” (ibid., 98). But this again begs the question: On what grounds should we categorize the rich, who are prominently named in countless monuments and inscriptions as benefactors of their cities, as “beyond the pale of public opinion”? Why are they not an integral part of the “world” Malina seeks to describe? The avaricious elite who actually shaped the material conditions in which the rest of the population lived simply vanish from discussion: They have no place in the only “New Testament world” in which Malina has any interest. “Peasants consider all persons in their society as ‘equal,’” he writes; but he does not even attempt to substantiate that generalization, let alone explain how such purported egalitarianism relates to the competition for honor (Malina 2001: 99). The facts that honor and shame could function as the motivating sanctions within the fundamentally unequal relationships of the patronage system, as evidenced in contemporary criminal syndicates as well as among the ancient Roman elite, or that patronage-clientage was a chief mechanism by which village-based agricultural production could be harnessed to the extractive schemes of Roman imperialism, are here ruled out of discussion.<sup>13</sup> In reality, however, there were not two different worlds, that of the bucolic village of peasant equals somehow living their own lives far from the madding rush of urban and imperial politics. There was one world, and in it, village-based agriculture was expropriated through mechanisms of inequality that favored the grotesquely rich.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, because he never mentions actual material realities like daily caloric intake, living space, and life expectancy, Malina can declare that “we simply cannot get any idea” what New Testament authors might have meant when they referred without further qualification to “the poor” (ibid.). He knows, of course, that plenty of New Testament passages describe the poor as suffering hunger, thirst, indebtedness, physical incapacitation, or dispossession, but these characterizations point us not to structural dynamics in an actual economy (since, according to Malina’s logic, the ancients were incapable of the concept, and thus it cannot play any role in our analysis) but to “some unfortunate turn of events or some untoward circumstances” (ibid., 100). Poverty, on this account, is always accidental and by definition temporary. “The poor would not be a permanent social standing” – that is, a *class* – “but a sort of revolving category of people who unfortunately cannot maintain their inherited status. Thus day laborers, peasants, and beggars born into their situation were not poor persons in first-century society” (ibid.).<sup>15</sup> – Unless, one wonders, they

<sup>13</sup> To confine ourselves to recent scholarship on the context of Romans, Reasoner (2007) discusses the use of pejorative terms like “weak” or “shameful” as designations by the economically powerful of the powerless; Jewett (2008) discusses honor and shame as crucial values of exploitative Roman imperialism. Herzog (1994) discussed the Roman expropriation of the wealth produced by Galilean agriculture as the necessary context for understanding Jesus’ parables. Hanson and Oakman (2008) offer an accessible discussion of the unequal and exploitative aspects of Galilean society.

<sup>14</sup> Compare Alain Badiou’s repudiation (2008: 38-39) of the ideological assertion of two different worlds, one where capitalism produces wealth and another where – paradoxically – misery prevails, as the result of the moral or cultural deficiency of the poor. Instead Badiou insists: “there is only one world.”

<sup>15</sup> Malina precludes any consideration of class or class struggle: further, “you will find no capitalist or communist work ethic in the New Testament. Nor will you find any program of ‘social action’ aimed at the

constituted the very group referred to throughout the New Testament simply (and, to Malina, inscrutably) as “the poor”! Malina’s peculiar reticence is all the more striking when we observe that, even without the benefit of sophisticated “economic” models, classical historians have found sufficient evidence to name the poor in the first century straightforwardly as a “class” (e.g., MacMullen 1974: 88-120).

### THE POLITICS OF “EXASPERATION”

One last form of what James G. Crossley has called a general “hostility to Marxism” in New Testament studies (1998, 9) is the refusal of Marxist categories as morally repugnant. I take as an example a review of my own book (Elliott 2008), in which I made use of a Marxist understanding of ideology to read Paul’s letter to the Romans. In an otherwise insightful, appreciative, and helpfully critical review, a colleague declared my use of Marxist categories “especially exasperating” because of his own experience

teaching in various countries that have been laid waste by communism, countries in which the poor were certainly not better served by any form of Marxist government than by capitalism or democracy, countries in which, in fact, Christianity was banned, oppressed, persecuted, and martyred by Marxist governments (Witherington 2009).

I won’t quarrel here with this scholar’s experience or perceptions but I question what seems to me a remarkable double standard. As a matter of fact, the poor have *also* been ill served by *anti*-communist governments; Christian “delegates of the word” have been arrested, tortured, and “disappeared,” on an industrial scale, also by nominally Christian, “democratic,” pro-capitalist, U.S. client regimes in Central America in the 1980s. Should we repudiate any of the methods of what Friesen calls “capitalist criticism” because of that sordid history? – And why doesn’t that question enter the calculation? There are as many democratic Christians who abhor U.S. imperialism as there are Western Leftists who repudiate Stalinism and the Shining Path (Eagleton 1996: 195; Crossley 1998: 13-14). Why, then, should we accept a single stark alternative: *either* embrace the ideals and ideology of democratic capitalist nations (ignoring the actual effects of their policies) *or* side with the devastating actions of nominally Marxist centralized governments (whatever their relation to Marxist concepts and principles)? Does my use of a tool of Marxist criticism necessarily mean that I have (“exasperatingly”) chosen the wrong side?

This sounds less like analysis than like a test of loyalty. I am reminded of feminist activist Florynce Kennedy’s response to a heckler who shouted at her, “what are you, a lesbian?” She answered, “what are you, my alternative?” My point is that we are *not* limited to narrow, false dichotomies. But why do we act as though we are?

### TOWARD A DIAGNOSIS

I turn at last to consider some possible explanations for what I suggest is a fairly systematic avoidance of Marxist analysis.

One overused answer is that Marxism – or indeed *any* political interpretation – is simply inappropriate to the New Testament writings because they are fundamentally *religious* or *theological* texts.<sup>16</sup> The argument is, in its own way, reductionistic (as rightly seen by Meeks 1983:

redistribution of wealth *or anything of the sort*” (2001: 97, emphasis added). It is surprising to see other social-science interpreters discuss Marxist historians alongside Malina’s views without observing tensions between them (for example, Oakman 1996).

<sup>16</sup> This was a point of remarkable agreement in a staged “debate” between John Barclay and N. T. Wright at the 2008 Society of Biblical Literature. Ironically, the two names routinely intoned over this verdict, Karl Barth

3!). Moreover, it appears, from the point of view of a Marxist critic like Frederic Jameson, to be “something worse than an error: namely, a symptom and a reinforcement of the reification and privatization of contemporary life” that is “the tendential law of social life under capitalism.” Rather, Marxist interpretation insists that “there is nothing that is not social and historical – indeed ... everything is ‘in the last analysis’ political” (Jameson 1981: 20). At the very least, the fact that a political reading *can* be carried out, often with surprising insights, shows that the insistence on maintaining a “pure” textual preserve for theological privilege is arbitrary.

A second possible answer is that the events of 1989–90 proved Marxism to be hopelessly obsolete, disproven, and thus irrelevant for interpretation. The verdict that with the triumph of Western capitalism we had arrived at the “end of history” was especially popular in the months just before Sept. 11, 2001; now pundits have slipped back into the reassuring Manichaeic tropes of a potentially endless “clash of civilizations.” This is not the occasion for debating that proposition (see Fukuyama 1992 and Huntington 1998; in opposition, Achcar 2002 and Chomsky 2003). I simply want to observe (what I think the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* document on a daily basis) that the consummation of human history in the triumph of capitalism is not all it’s sometimes cracked up to be. More importantly, we must distinguish Marxist *historiography*, Marxist (or neo-Marxist) *philosophical theory*, and Marxist *politics* (and, prominent Marxists would argue, distinguish Marxist politics from the centralized totalitarian capitalist states that claimed the Communist mantle in the last half of the twentieth century: Therborn 2008: 116ff). Especially in the present moment, the relevance of Marxist criticism should be measured by its explanatory power – not least, its impressive capacity to account for the effects of actually existing capitalism (see, among other diagnoses, Klein 2007; Davis 2007; Harman 2010).

A third, more compelling answer points us to the political economy of biblical studies within the contemporary Western academy. Time allows me only to mention historical studies (cited by Friesen 2008) that correlate the development of twentieth-century Fordist industrial capitalism and its need for an educated professional-managerial class with the emphases of twentieth-century higher education (including biblical studies). Notable among these is Wallerstein’s observation that through the creation of history and economics as isolated, autonomous academic disciplines, the Western world “studied itself [and] explained its own functioning, the better to control what was happening” (2011: 264). As Friesen summarizes the point, “higher education taught future professionals to accept and to overlook economic inequality” (2007: 125-27). If that was the general direction of the humanities, it was manifest in the “capitalist criticism” of the New Testament as well, in which economic analysis is avoided, poverty is ignored, and oppression and class conflict are virtually unmentionable (Friesen 2004: 331-37, 357).

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and Reinhold Niebuhr, were both far more aligned with socialism than their contemporary fans usually acknowledge or allow. The long famine of social-scientific approaches to the New Testament between the 1920s and the 1970s is usually attributed in part to the influence of Karl Barth and dialectical theology after World War I. The formidable resistance shown to any social-scientific or “sociological” approach to Paul by his theological defenders, a resistance often waged in Barth’s name, has determined the course of subsequent twentieth-century scholarship or, put more forcefully, has impeded its progress (See Crossley 1998: 3-5; Theissen 1993: 9-13). As John Cort summarizes the conundrum presented by “Barth the ambiguous”: “The Christian could be, *should* be, socialist, but not *religious* socialist: the old distinction without a difference” (Cort 1988: 207-13). Niebuhr’s own turn from avowed Marxism to a more pragmatic Christian Realism never involved an explicit renunciation of socialism, only of the (officially pacifist) socialist parties on offer, but the turn was sufficient to signal “the epitaph of organized Christian socialism in the United States” (*ibid.*, 276-77). From the 1960s on his heritage has been disputed by “left” and “right Niebuhrians”—the latter insisting that Christian Realism required a robust militarism and endorsement for capitalism, even over Niebuhr’s protests (see Dorrien 1995, chap. 4).

A number of scholars have offered complimentary analyses in their trenchant criticisms of postcolonial literary criticism as a “safely” post-revolutionary enterprise (Ahmad 1992; Eagleton 1996; Gandhi 1998);<sup>17</sup> of “religious studies” as a discipline segregated from sociopolitical history (Asad 1993; Fitzgerald 2003; Shedinger 2009); and of biblical scholarship as the post-enlightenment project to insulate the Bible from secular criticism by surrounding it with an aura of cultural privilege (Moore and Sherwood 2011). Similar pressures in postcolonial theological studies have been analyzed by Keller 2005<sup>18</sup> and, in liberation theology, by Petrella 2008.<sup>19</sup> All these analyses point toward the cultural climate in which New Testament scholarship is carried out.

More is involved than self-censorship or personal reticence among contemporary academics, of course. In 1988, Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman described a “propaganda model” of the “political economy of the mainstream media” (see Chomsky and Herman 2002). I suggest that their model works as well to describe the various ideological apparatuses that shape our perceptions of what may be thought, written, taught, and learned in higher education and biblical studies in particular. Their “propaganda model” includes the instruments of “flak,” with which I would identify the systematic, well-funded efforts of organizations like Fox News (where Glenn Beck notoriously fulminated against churches that taught “the social gospel” and against the insidious liberation theology of President Obama), David Horowitz’s “Freedom Center” (which polices “liberal” thought on university campuses), and the Institute for Religion and Democracy (which has mounted devastating pressure campaigns against faculty members at church-affiliated institutions of higher education as well as progressive church organizations).<sup>20</sup> I suspect a number of teachers in religious-studies and theological classrooms could recount episodes in which the effects of such “flak” mechanisms were felt.

<sup>17</sup> Ahmad writes that such developments have served “to domesticate, in institutional ways, the very forms of political dissent which those movements had sought to foreground, to displace an activist culture with a textual culture, to combat the more uncompromising critiques of existing cultures of the literary profession with a new mystique of leftist professionalism, and to reformulate in a postmodernist direction questions which had previously been associated with a broadly Marxist politics” (1992: 1; compare Eagleton 1996: 205). Gandhi (1998) discusses the particular dilemma faced by postcolonial critics from decolonized nations who find positions in first-world academia—where they may be valued more as emblems of an institution’s commitment to (ethnic) “diversity” than of social revolution.

<sup>18</sup> Keller wonders whether postcolonial theory has a place only so long as it can be adapted “to relativize any revolutionary impulse, to dissipate the political energy of transformation, to replace active movements of change with clever postures of transgression” (2005: 103).

<sup>19</sup> Petrella asks whether the profusion of “contextual” liberation theologies and the focus on identity and hybridity serves to obscure the fundamentally determinative fact of economic deprivation. He argues that liberation theologians around the world share a single material context – the poverty of the majority of the world’s people—and a single theological context – the failure of liberation theologies to deal successfully with that material reality. Despite their profusion, contextualized theologies remain “powerless to face the spread of zones of social abandonment. They’re powerless because the upsurge of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality as organizing axes for liberation theology has blurred the fact that material deprivation, that is, the deprivation that comes from one’s class standing in society, remains the most important form of oppression” (2008: 80-81). In too much liberation-theology *writing*, he protests, global *economic* marginalization “recedes from view while the *theological* exclusion” of one or another group “comes to the forefront .... Helping people become theologians is given priority over helping people lift themselves from social misery. Obviously, a class choice has been made”: the result “is not a theology of liberation, it is a theology of inclusion for the middle class” (*ibid.*, 95-96).

<sup>20</sup> The IRD was founded in 1981 by neoconservative theologians and provided initial funding by conservative foundations and, in 1985, by the U.S. Intelligence Agency. The Institute’s website is [www.theird.org](http://www.theird.org); a brief introduction to its antagonistically conservative agenda is provided by Political Research Associates at [www.publiceye.org/magazine/v20n1/clarkson\\_battle.html](http://www.publiceye.org/magazine/v20n1/clarkson_battle.html) (accessed Nov. 1, 2009).

The question facing biblical interpreters is whether we will acquiesce in those pressures or resist them – but the first step is to name them. As President of the Society of Biblical Literature, years ago Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1988) called members to a politically engaged scholarship; she has renewed that plea by calling for cooperation in liberative efforts across boundaries of denominational and religious affiliation, across the divide between “believer” and “unbeliever” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999; 2007; 2009) in a collaboration similar to what Roland Boer has called “the worldly Left” (Boer 2007a). That plea, I contend, is not only appropriate to our present situation but may also allow us to attend to an important dimension of Paul’s own work. However we may construe the adequacy or inadequacy of his own practice, he named as the horizon of his apostleship a priority that he claimed to share with the other apostles in Jerusalem: “to remember the poor” (Gal 2:10). Marxist criticism offers the analytical tools that allow us to take that horizon seriously in our exploration of Paul and the early Christian movement.

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