

A Marxist Classic

Mark Golden

Volume 14, 1984

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt14re01>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Golden, M. (1984). Review of [A Marxist Classic]. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 14, 209–214.

REVIEW ESSAYS / NOTES CRITIQUES

A Marxist Classic

Mark Golden

G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World: from the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests* (London: Duckworth 1981).

"WITH THE REVOLUTION ON my mind, I found it difficult to concentrate on Latin or geometry," wrote Elizabeth Gurley Flynn.¹ Perhaps other rebels have had greater powers of concentration. Despite the role of classical studies in nineteenth-century elite education, when the mastery of Greek and Latin was a distinctive mark of a class that had no need for more practical skills, many Marxists have studied and discussed the ancient world and its modern lessons. Marx himself wrote his doctoral thesis on the Greek atomists Democritus and Epicurus, Engels a Greek poem at the age of sixteen, and both men maintained their interest in antiquity in later life.² American Socialist Labor Party leader Daniel De Leon produced a pamphlet called *Two Pages from Roman History* — admired by Lenin — and named a son Solon. And Marxist scholarship in the classics has been important and influential wherever Marxism has been a major intellectual force in general: in Italy above all, in France, Germany, eastern Europe. Even in the less supportive environments of the English-speaking world there has been worthwhile work with an explicitly Marxist orientation: for example, the books of George Thomson, Benjamin Farrington, and more recently, Perry Anderson in Britain, of A.D. Winspear (who closed out his career in Alberta and British Columbia), and Ellen and Neal Wood in Canada. But there has never been a book like this.

The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World is a monumental achievement. It is extraordinary in size (732 large pages, of which 122 are notes in small print, and 38 an intimidating bibliography); in geographical sweep (Ste. Croix's "Greek world" turns out to mean everywhere that Greek "was, or became, the principal language of the upper classes" [7], not just Greece but virtually the whole eastern Roman Empire; Italy and the western Empire are constantly drawn upon to provide a point of comparison and to supplement gaps in the "Greek" evidence); and in chronological scale (about 1400 years).

¹ *The Rebel Girl* (New York 1973), 63.

² See most recently four articles in *Das Altertum*, 29 (1982), 69-103.

Mark Golden, "A Marxist Classic," *Labour/Le Travail*, 14 (Fall 1984), 209-14

Yet Ste. Croix demonstrates throughout an astonishing first-hand familiarity with the sources for this whole vast period and an equally admirable command of secondary literature. He can discuss minutiae, such as the earliest attested use of *colonus* (251-252) or the correct form of the name of a "real one-horse-town," (647, n. 9) with complete and usually convincing confidence.

Almost as remarkable is the intensely personal tone of this book. We learn that Ste. Croix reveres his teacher, A.H.M. Jones, (8) that he is "ashamed" that he cannot read Russian, (542, n. 7) that he thinks Plato "one of the most determined and dangerous enemies that freedom has ever had," (284) Isocrates "odious," (301) Van Gogh's *The Potato Eaters* (the book's frontispiece) "the most profound and moving representation in art of 'the peasant,'" (209) More importantly, Ste. Croix writes not just as a Marxist but as a committed activist, passionately concerned with political and social issues; he makes no claim to a lack of bias. (31) So he condemns contemporary western economists, (220) modern imperialism, (331, 417) the role of the university in propagating and perpetuating the ideology of the governing class, (411) the propaganda use of the term "the Free World," (418) and male dominance (111) — Ste. Croix was a strong supporter of the movement to open Oxford colleges to women.

The book is divided into two nearly equal halves. In the first, Ste. Croix means to explain Marx's analysis of society in relation to his ancient Greek world, in the second to use that analysis to illuminate its processes of political and social change and the ideas involved in those processes. Since Ste. Croix's views were first put forward in his J.H. Gray Lectures at Cambridge in 1973, there have been numerous attempts to outline Marx's ideas on history and their development. We have seen the "young" and the "old" Marx further subdivided to yield two types of history in the *Grundrisse*

alone,³ "two approaches" to history,⁴ "three models,"⁵ "four histories."⁶ Ste. Croix ignores this recent work, not necessarily from ignorance, (xi) and he has relatively little to say about many of the terms and concepts prominent in it; he concentrates on exploitation, class, and class struggle. Yet circumstances alone should assure that his book plays an important part in the ongoing debate on Marxist historiography. In a book which appeared at about the same time, Anthony Giddens argues that Greece and Rome were not class societies, that Marxism is of little use in the study of the non-capitalist world, and that historical materialism, partly on these grounds, should be rejected as an over-all theory of history.⁷ The success of Ste. Croix's project — and it is a success — is thus, as he hopes, of some importance to "historians of other periods, sociologists, political theorists, and students of Marx," as well as to classicists. (ix)

The influential work of M.I. Finley has made it customary to describe the social structure of the ancient world in terms of status groups, orders, estates — even for some Marxists.⁸ Ste. Croix views these Weberian categories as unhelpful in explaining change, and based on, or in the long run reducible to, class. (45) Class he defines as "the collective social expression of the fact of exploitation," (43) that is, the way in which the appropriation of part of the product of others' labour is embodied in a social system. A particular class is a group of people defined above

³ C. Lefort, *Les formes de l'histoire* (Paris 1978), chapter 11.

⁴ H. Fleischer, *Marxism and History* (New York 1973).

⁵ M. Rader, *Marx's Interpretation of History* (New York 1979).

⁶ W.H. Adamson, *History and Theory Beiheft*, 20 (1981), 379-402.

⁷ *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1981).

⁸ See, for example, R.A. Padgug, *Arethusa*, 8 (1975), 85-117.

all by its objective relationship to the means and labour of production and — an important contrast to the isolated and static categories Ste. Croix rejects — to other classes. A particular individual may belong to more than one class, though “usually membership of one will be much the most significant.” (44) This is perhaps particularly important for women, whom Ste. Croix tentatively and not very satisfactorily considers to make up a separate class.⁹ (99-103) In class societies (such as those of the ancient world), one or more smaller classes control the means of production and so are able, directly or indirectly, to appropriate the labour of the larger classes to exploit them. This fundamental relationship between classes, involving exploitation or the resistance to it, is what Ste. Croix calls class struggle. It need involve “no explicit common awareness of class on either side, no specifically political struggle at all, and perhaps even little consciousness of struggle of any kind.” (57) All that is required is the fact of exploitation.

How does this apply to the ancient Greek world? By far the most important means of production in antiquity was land. Much land was worked by peasants — free smallholders or tenants and their families. These, along with smaller numbers of artisans and small traders, always made up the great majority of the free population and indeed in all likelihood of the entire population until the late third century A.D. But due to the low level of technology they produced barely enough for their own use. Real comfort and the leisure to enjoy it were enjoyed only by the “propertied class” (or classes) who possessed a great deal of land. These sought to exploit their poor fellow-citizens and other free people as landlords and money-lenders, through taxes, con-

scription, and various forms of compulsory services (all of which Ste. Croix discusses in valuable detail). Their success varied; it tended to be greatest wherever and whenever democratic institutions were weakest. But the main source of the surplus which supported them was the people who worked their land — not free wage workers, unskilled, and in short supply, but unfree labour: serfs, debt bondsmen, and especially slaves. Unfree labour played “a fundamental and — in the conditions of the time — an irreplaceable” role in supplying the propertied class with its surplus. (54) And slavery was “the archetypal form of unfree labour.” (173) It is in this light that Greece and Rome were slave societies, (52) though only “in a very loose sense.” (209) that slavery was “an essential precondition of the magnificent achievements of Classical civilization.” (40) And it is for this reason that the class struggle in the ancient Greek world took place primarily between the propertied classes and their dependent labourers, especially their slaves, that the economics and history of slavery are central to an understanding of ancient history as a whole.

This book is not *the* Marxist interpretation of Greek history, Ste. Croix cautions: it is *an* interpretation, though “... there is nothing in this book which Marx himself (after some argument, perhaps!) would not have been willing to accept.” (30) Certainly Ste. Croix’s own conception of class has changed over time; (65) it will be more congenial to some students of Marx than to others — Ste. Croix is curiously closer to recent writers with philosophical interests (G.A. Cohen, W.H. Shaw) than to historians such as Eric Hobsbawm and E.P. Thompson. And Marx himself might sometimes need a lot of arguing. For example, it is surely significant that the famous passage on the French peasantry, which is both a class (as it shares objective economic conditions and interests) and is not (as it has no community and no organization), deals

⁹ See on this subject P. Anderson, “Class Struggle in the Ancient World,” *History Workshop Journal*, 16 (1983), 64-5.

with a period of contemporary history of which Marx had direct experience. Perhaps the fact that consciousness is only rarely an explicit component of class elsewhere in Marx is partly because it was so often impossible to determine, and so was left out of account.

Again, the insistence on the essential role of unfree labour, of slavery in particular, in producing the surplus for the propertied class is a brilliant resolution of an old debate. Slavery has always been a crucial concern of Marxist historiography. But Engels and some successors much exaggerated the numbers of ancient slaves and the extent to which they were involved in production. More recent writers have stressed the ideological effects of slavery over its economic function. Some have even shifted their focus to free labour.¹⁰

Ste. Croix reasserts the economic primacy of slavery and the extraordinary importance of the opposition between wealthy masters and slaves in historical explanation. In doing so, however, he must ignore or explain away several passages in which the class struggle is said to have been between creditors and debtors in the ancient world (*Marx-Engels Werke*, v. 23, 149-50), between rich and poor citizens (*MEW*, v. 4, 373, 481; v. 8, 560) or small and large landed property (*MEW*, v. 28, 439) at Rome. Isn't it possible that these expressions are not simply careless, that Marx's ideas were not merely (or not only) confused or changeable, but rather complex? So the "French neo-Marxist" (549, n. 16) J.-P. Vernant has sought to distinguish the "fundamental contradiction" — which corresponds to a society's specific mode of production — from the "principal or dominant contradiction," which indicates the social groups in conflict at any particular time.¹¹ In the Greek

world, these generally correspond to the opposition between masters and slaves and between rich and poor within the free citizen community respectively. For Ste. Croix, this is "mere phrase-making, and conveys no useful idea." (63) Yet there is evidence that Marx and Engels did sometimes make a distinction between latent or hidden class conflict (or class antagonism) and open class struggle.¹² Vernant's is a valuable attempt to apply this distinction to the ancient world.

Finally, it is odd that Ste. Croix feels free to ignoremetics (resident foreigners) on the grounds that they were not citizens of the cities they lived in and therefore did not normally own land. (95) Some were nonetheless very wealthy, and from the exploitation of slave labour at that: the family of the speechwriter Lysias owned the largest slave workshop we know of in classical Athens. And all were subject to a head tax, a form of exploitation from which citizens were exempt. Their citizenship is surely less relevant than their important economic role.

These quibbles will not affect Ste. Croix's standing as an enthusiastic and able theoretician. But it is not theory itself which primarily engages him: one major criterion he offers for judging his book is its success in practice, "the fruitfulness of the analysis it produces," (31) especially in explaining "what happened in history" on a large scale." (47) This is the book's main contribution to the study of the ancient world, to the history of the Roman Empire above all.

Despite Ste. Croix's expertise in the area, his treatment of what happened in Greece in the fifth and fourth centuries, "the great age of Greek democracy," (283) is disappointingly skimpy (only 17 pages) and uncertain. Surprisingly, in view of his interest in unfree labour, the

¹⁰ So now E. Wood, "Marxism and Ancient Greece," *History Workshop Journal*, 11 (1981), 3-22.

¹¹ *Eirene*, 4 (1965), 5-19 and *Myth and Society*

in *Ancient Greece* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ 1980), 1-18.

¹² See D.R. Gandy, *Marx and History* (Austin 1979), 109-17.

class struggle he stresses here is that between rich and poor citizens (and even then he uncharacteristically passes over a number of relevant passages from Xenophon's *Hellenica* and Plato's *Gorgias*). This is a struggle waged essentially on the political plane, for control of the state. "If in a Greek *polis* the demos could create and sustain a democracy that really worked, like the Athenian one, they could hope to protect themselves to a high degree and largely to escape exploitation." (287)

Ste. Croix appears unsure just how to relate this conflict to slavery. At one point, he argues that the strength of Athenian democracy required that slaves be squeezed harder than ever; (141) at another, he says, "slaves may have been better treated in a democracy (at Athens anyway) than elsewhere." (600, n. 6) At any rate, slavery plays no real part in his narrative. And in fact, if the class struggle between the free rich and the free poor did indeed result in an increased reliance on slavery, it is class divisions within the citizen body which figure as the most important factor in *economic* change in this period as well as in *political* developments. (We are reminded of Vernant's "principal or dominant contradiction.")

The discussion of the attitudes of rich and poor toward Philip of Macedon is similarly unsatisfactory (compare the conflicting comments on the views of wealthy Athenians on pages 298 and 299), and that of political class struggle in the Greek cities of the Hellenistic era is excused in a footnote. (617, n. 65) Much more valuable is the account of the destruction of Greek democracy in the Roman period, ascribed to the joint efforts of the Greek propertied classes and the Roman conquerors. (306-326, 518-537) It is tempting to conclude that Ste. Croix's interest in the Greek world in the narrow sense waned as his work went forward.

Certainly it is in his extended account of the disintegration of the Roman Empire that Ste. Croix is best able to combine

class struggle in both its ancient forms, between slaves and masters and between groups of free citizens, into a coherent and compelling argument. (226-259, 453-503) Slavery (Ste. Croix insists throughout) was the most efficient form of extracting surplus labour in the ancient world. But only when slaves were plentiful and thus cheap — readily available as captives in war. In the late first century A.D., the Roman Empire ceased to expand; the supply of slaves grew smaller; and breeding, a more expensive way to maintain the slave population, became more important. The result: "the propertied class cannot maintain the same rate of profit from slave labour, and, to prevent its standard of living from falling, is likely to be driven to increase the rate of exploitation of the humbler free population — as I believe the Roman ruling class now actually did, by degrees." (231) By the third century, the peasant population was gradually being degraded into tied serfs, *coloni*, with little legal and almost no political recourse against increased exploitation by rich individuals or the state they controlled; the "curial class," the lower levels of the propertied class itself, was under attack as well. A citizenry so oppressed could have no reason to support the social system. The barbarians invaded; the mass of the population did not fight, or defected; the Roman Empire declined; in the fifth century, the western Empire fell.

This argument is open to debate at a number of points: Ste. Croix may underestimate the continuing extent of the slave trade and the apathy of the elite itself in the face of external threats, and overstress the decline of Rome at the expense of the rise of its hostile neighbours. (After all, the Roman Empire survived for a very long time, perhaps in part because its fundamental class struggle between its propertied class and their slaves involved only a minority of the population.) But I think it does show "how a Marxist analysis on class lines

can help to *explain*, and not merely to *describe*, a historical process" in the ancient world. (453) A major accomplishment.

So rich a mix of exact scholarship and fierce conviction does not always make for easy reading. *Obiter dicta* on other scholars are often unnecessarily harsh, (cf. 597, n. 3) and the continual polemic against the early (and later) Christian churches, though often justified, unnecessarily tasteless (note in particular the use of Hitler against St. Augustine [634, n. 87]). The style is sometimes forbidding: a not untypical sentence on p. 454 contains four qualifications, which in turn require two explanatory footnotes. Secondary sources sometimes seem to be cited at undue length. ("I cannot begin to give a bibliography" he writes [582, n. 20], and then does so for 15 lines.) Ste. Croix's concern for detail approaches the antiquarianism he reproaches in others: it is pleasant to be told that a 70-cubit dragon exorcised by Paul the Simple was perhaps larger even than the one the bishop Donatus needed eight oxen to remove, (408) but the information adds

little to our understanding. Indeed, irrelevant material intrudes everywhere. Ste. Croix's earlier book, *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* (London 1972), included 47 appendices; here, such digressions appear in the text itself. It is rather fitting that the final paragraph of the text is a discussion of the city of Edessa in Turkey which Ste. Croix admits he has "no legitimate reason for mentioning. . . ." (537) Nevertheless, the organization of the book (thanks in part to a concise summary, [1-7] frequent cross-references, and an excellent index) is clear, the argument powerful, the mass of evidence often overwhelming.

On several occasions, Ste. Croix promises to treat topics in more detail at some later time. (227; 599, n. 29; 606, n. 31; 609, n. 2) Written when he was nearing 70, these words are still more impressive evidence of Ste. Croix's energy and commitment. His contributions will of course be welcome; but in one important respect they are unnecessary. *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* already assures Ste. Croix a prominent place among students of Marx and of ancient history alike.