

Editorial: The Marxism Issue

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One of the values of Marxist approaches to texts is that they enrich analysis by expanding beyond the narrow confines of so many ways of reading such texts. Instead of the reductionism typical of literary interpretations, which feel that the task has been done when the literary workings of a text have been explored, a Marxist reading regards this as but the first step, for now the most interesting questions arise: what are the social and political dynamics of such a text? What are the economic implications? Or the ideological and cultural? The same could be said for textual critical concerns, or what passes for historical analysis, or indeed theological readings. The articles gathered in this issue illustrate precisely such an enrichment, an expansion of interpretation in which the overlapping and complex realities of texts become the focus. That they are all concerned with the New Testament indicates the ferment underway in that sub-discipline of biblical criticism.

Neil Elliott's "Diagnosing An Allergic Reaction" investigates the systemic avoidance of the promise and possibilities of Marxist analysis of the New Testament. His concerns are the matters of economic class, class struggle, politics and economics, investigating the ways biblical scholars empty such terms of any meaning when they speak of class and economics, or even deny their validity at all. This may take the form of postulating a "middle class," of discussions over "status," of denying the relevance of socio-economic analysis, of accusations of moral unacceptability. Elliott closes by offering a diagnosis of this allergy among New Testament scholars to Marxist approaches.

In the second article, Giovanni Bazzana outlines the contours of language ideologies – indebted to sophisticated Marxist understandings of ideology – within the context of linguistic anthropology. This approach offers a way of analysing language as a dialectical social practice in which language simultaneously re-inscribes socio-political structures and, as a creative activity, reshapes those structures. The advantage for biblical critics is that linguistic ideology offers a mode of dealing with texts that are often radically removed from their contexts.

Larry Welborn's article on 1 Corinthians 15 engages with Louis Althusser's dialectical approach to causality as a way of moving past the very mechanistic and expressive models of causality that continue to dominate studies of early Christianity and its context within a Greco-Roman environment. Welborn argues that in imperial Rome the way in which the self as represented may be understood in terms of Guy Debord's still highly pertinent insight concerning the "society of the spectacle." How to show the value of such an approach? Welborn analyses 1 Corinthians 15:30-32, focusing on the spectacle metaphor used by Paul in relation to Dio Chrysostom's eighth discourse.

In a careful study of 2 Thessalonians 3, Joe Bartlett discusses a text that continues to be a flashpoint of debate between conservatives and socialists. The text, "anyone unwilling to work should not eat," was used by the new government of the USSR after the October Revolution of 1917, while it is also regularly invoked by conservative opponents of welfare and unemployment benefits. It all turns on what one means by those unwilling to work. Are they the owners of capital who do no work and rely on the labour of others, or are they the ones at the bottom of the socio-economic pile, those who supposedly refuse to work and prefer the dole? Bartlett argues against interpreters who see 2 Thessalonians as Pauline, proposing that the Thessalonian church was made up of the marginalised, those who were susceptible to the perpetual threat of economic crisis in the Roman Empire of the late first century. In other words, they belong to what is called (by Marx and Engels), first-phase communism. Due to shortages in work, these people relied for the basics of life on the agape feast, a reliance that threatened the economic existence of the community itself. As a result, the church was forced to give up its principles in terms of what may be called "bourgeois right." The

outcome is that conservatives misuse the text, while socialist invocations of the text risk the precariousness of that type of communism. Bartlett closes by arguing for a Permanent Revolution, never resting content with minimal achievements.

Lance Richey returns to a foundational text in Marxist, materialist readings of the New Testament, with a study of Fernando Belo's *A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark*. Richey seeks to determine the "actuality" of a text that produced many waves when it was published, but which has since languished in obscurity. This is a shame, he argues, since the insights into the socio-political context of the gospel and the way it (and other religious texts) negotiates such a context are very much worth retrieval. The key to Belo's interpretation, suggest Richey, is the category of mode of production, within which the gospel should be understood and which it systematically challenges. In many ways, Belo's text anticipates the spate of anti-imperial readings of the New Testament, in which the text gives voice to subversive currents. The difference is that a Marxist approach like that of Belo provides a distinct richness to such an approach that requires sustained reconsideration in our own time.

Jonathan Bernier closes out this issue with a tight reading of the tensions and debates over Christological models in the early centuries of Christianity. These models he designates as "personified divine attributes," "exalted patriarchs," "principal angels," "messiah," and Jesus as the embodiment of "divine agency" – which over-rides and absorbs the others. In order to make sense of this process (apart from furious debates among white-bearded bishops with imperial troops on hand), Bernier makes use of Fredric Jameson's model of literary analysis. Jameson's well-known distinction, between political (immediate textual interaction and local events), social (class and ideology) and historical (mode of production) levels, becomes a method for understanding texts as imaginary resolutions of real social and economic contradictions. In this light, the struggles over Christology may be understood as the ideological struggles very much involved with the long and troubled transition from the dominance of one mode of production to another.

In closing, allow me to invite you to peruse the collection of book reviews, as well as mention the increasing number of submissions which the journal now receives, in its ninth year of publication. We see this as a sign of both the increasingly important role the journal plays in debates, as well as the wealth of innovative work that is underway. Body text.¹



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¹ endnote