

Ancient Socialism

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The author is Emeritus Professor of Classics at the University of Calgary in Canada. He studied in Nottingham during the 1950s. His many writings include notable works on early Greek humorists and satirists.

I dedicate this essay to the memory of Ken Coates, scholarly Socialist and quite the best man I ever knew.

More another time on Marxism and the Classics; just one sample here to kick off. Robert Service's biography of Lenin suggests he 'first learned from Demosthenes how to discern a crack in the wall of an opponent's argument and prise it open'. A nice link here with Ken Coates' last *Spokesman* editorial (no.109), which twice ironically applies the Greek democrat orator's name to David Laws.

Homer's *Iliad* has literature's earliest articulate squaddie. Thersites lambastes Agamemnon for filching the best loot from rank-and-filers who do the fighting and dying, urging his comrades to pack up and go home 'that he may see how completely he depends on the men'. Since the *Iliad* was geared to aristocratic audiences, Thersites – 'ugliest man in the army' – can't win. While Agamemnon stands gob-smacked, Odysseus simply knocks the humpbacked agitator down. But, it is notable that the poet felt bound to include this bolshie private to challenge the Greek army brass.

In the *Odyssey*, though, our hero looms paternalistic. The shepherd Eumaeus confidently expects a retirement pension of land, cottage, and woman from his grateful lord – *mutatis mutandis*, the *Upstairs Downstairs* ethic. Primitive feminism is also adumbrated: Queens Penelope and Arete both wield philanthropic influence over their hubbies.

Property was key, at all levels. For stealing Zeus' fire from heaven for human benefit, Prometheus acquires (notably from

Marxist George Thomson) the nickname 'Patron Saint of the Proletariat'. Pythagoras practised and preached the ideal of common ownership (*koinonia*). Some early Christian communities followed suit. One source for this is the atheistic satirist Lucian (2nd century AD), who also wrote a good deal on the problems of the poor and sins of the rich. Perhaps for this, plus his godlessness, long on the Catholic Index of Forbidden Authors, Lucian was imitated in late Byzantium by Alexios Makrembolites, whose *Dialogue Between Rich and Poor* (1343) defines life as a struggle between the oppressed poor and privileged rich. His particular solution is intermarriage between the classes (a big issue in the early Roman Republic).

All this glosses Engels' *Origins of the State, Family, and Private Property*, also Robert von Pohlmann's still fundamental *Geschichte des antiken Kommunismus und Sozialismus* (1893), which concluded that ancient socialism was one of distribution and not a rearrangement of society, a notion tempered by Aristophanes' comedy *Plutus*, in which the blind god of wealth recovers his sight, sees the wrong people have the money, and redistributes accordingly.

This, along with his *Ecclesiazousai*, which imagines women seizing control of the Athenian Government, may satirise Plato's subversive ideas that the ideal state should be run by a central committee of intellectuals of both sexes. By promoting revolution in Sicily, Plato also anticipated Marx's dictum that the point is not just to explain the world but to change it. He has been modernly labelled both communist and fascist – likewise Sparta with its weird amalgam of military life-style, communal messes and dormitories, and allowing of extraordinary social and financial influence to women. In fact, his *Republic* is basically a utopia for gentlemen paederasts, his *Laws* a repellent Stalinist totalitarianism. Karl Popper rightly judged him an early enemy of The Open Society.

'It is Socrates we need, not Plato.' Thus Richard Crossman (*Plato Today*, 1939). Since Socrates wrote nothing, we can't say just how much Plato puts into his mouth. I tend to agree with I. F. Stone's deprecation (*The Trial of Socrates*, 1988): he was little more than a Hyde Park Corner character, equally adept at soap-box spouting and back-of-the-crowd heckling.

Socrates did, though, hang out with one notorious group of dissentients: cobblers. Eric Hobsbawm's *Uncommon People* (1998) expatiates on the political radicalism of 19th century shoe-makers. They were, in fact, soul and sole-mates of their classical antecedents. Socrates hung out in their workshops, discussing contemporary issues; places denounced by the

orator Lysias as the known haunts of ‘troublemakers’. Cicero similarly ranted in Rome where there were 300 attested shoe-makers organised into a guild or rudimentary trade union, such ‘colleges’ being routinely clamped down upon by Julius Caesar and the emperors because of their potential for unrest. Just as Athens had offered some basic medicare for the poor, so individual emperors (notably Nerva and Trajan) extended publicly-funded charities as palliatives, a policy lavishly followed by Byzantine rulers. Laudable to a point, they did not silence the opposition: as Dionysius of Halicarnassus (1st century BC historian) observed, this kind of institutional philanthropy served to increase dependence, keeping the lower orders in their place. Lucian frequently used cobblers as paradigms of the politically percipient poor, vociferous advocates of class struggle. With the advent of Christianity, shoe-makers acquired a pair of radical new saints, Crispin and Crispian, martyred after setting up philanthropic business in (one version) Faversham, Kent, charging only such money as a customer could afford. Such practices evoked a largely bad Byzantine press. ‘Being a cobbler, he was of no social significance,’ sneered the historian Agathias at one; other writers castigated them as ‘the most stupid and ignorant’ individuals in Constantinople, all doubtless a tribute to their practical radicalism. The monk Theodore of Studion offers a rare counter-laudation, based on the doubtful premise that St Paul was a shoe-maker, perhaps recognising that, in the context of pagan Rome, Paul himself was a dangerous radical. Hobsbawm sadly notes a falling-off of revolutionary shoe-making in the 20th century.

The liveliest iconoclast in Plato’s Athens was Diogenes, who famously lived in a tub (or wine-cask) – the founder of Cynicism (from the Greek for ‘dog’), often dubbed ‘the philosophy of the proletariat’. Apart from his celebrated stunts (public defecation/urination/masturbation) designed to prove the relativity of societal values, he tried to break down Greek parochialism by proclaiming himself a citizen of the world, coining the word ‘Cosmopolitan’ – an embryonic ‘Workers of the World, Unite’..

Derided for their long hair and scruffiness, Cynics became notorious in the Roman Empire as itinerant agitators, persuading slaves to run away and workers to down tools. Despite slavery – Marx made this point – co-existent free workers could and did take industrial action. Bakers, builders, and mint workers were the most militant, with one such strike even winning contractual sick benefits.

The later Roman Empire experienced a growing gulf between city and country life. Urban militancy was offset by peasant revolts, notably the ‘Bagaudae’ in Gaul (Ken Coates’ colleague at Nottingham, also my old

professor, Edward Thompson – EA, not EP – wrote the definitive accounts of these), and the Donatists in North Africa.

Reflecting on the Spanish Civil War, Orwell desponded over the obliteration of ancient slaves' names, concluding, 'I can think of two. The rest have gone down into utter silence.' Yet literary and epigraphic texts have preserved thousands. Naturally, Spartacus is one of Orwell's two (Epictetus the other). Thanks to Marx's encomium (*Letter to Engels*, 1861), 'a capital fellow, a true proletarian,' Spartacus became a communist icon (Rosa Luxemburg, Khatachurian's ballet, etc.), evoking novels by, for example, the Marxist Howard Fast (from which the Hollywood film) and Arthur Koestler, the latter's roughly reviewed by Orwell.

I long ago (*Classical Journal* 62, 1967) pieced together the scrappy hostile ancient sources. One says he insisted on equal division of all loot, and banned his followers from using gold and silver. Nothing new here. Spartacus was the last in a line of slave uprisings. Eunus in Sicily had promised social reform. Aristonicus in Asia a Sun City where all should be free, inspired by the Greek philosopher Blossius, former ideological coach of Tiberius Gracchus, radical People's Tribune lynched by a senatorial mob.

Both the Athenian Democracy and Roman Republic were slave-based and excluded women. But it is not enough to condemn and leave them at that. In Marx's words, they were an exemplary 'childhood of humanity'. Patterns were more kaleidoscopic than regular. Greeks apparently saw no paradox in the island Chios' reputation as the birthplace of both democracy and slavery. Athens, for instance, had a police force comprised of *slave* Scythian archers. In Rome, slaves could buy their freedom, after which they were upwardly mobile, frequently attaining high rank at imperial courts. Aristotle may have proclaimed that women were inferior beings without souls, but Plato deemed them equal to men, save in physical strength – compare and contrast what Rosa Luxemburg and Alexandra Kollontai had to put up with. Women played major roles in literature, mythology, and religion. Egypt had one female pharaoh, Byzantium several ruling empresses. Graeco-Roman history abounds in women pulling the strings.

At its height, from Pericles to the Macedonian conquest, Athens was a soviet of adult male citizens meeting in regular session at 10-day intervals plus special ones as needed. The quorum was 5000, probably – demographics are uncertain – a high proportion of the eligible population. No problem filling the Assembly (Ecclesia) for emergency meetings. Regular ones might need the slave police whipping them in with red-paint-

daubed ropes (hence our ‘roping in’ and ‘whips’). For obvious time and travel logistics, urban attendance (but not always interests) prevailed over rural. There was usually one dominating individual. Pericles (thanks to Thucydides’ write-up and Plutarch’s biography) is the most famous, but even he was pilloried by the comic playwrights (hence his ineffectual attempt to muzzle them) and once voted out of office. Since most Athenian sources (Herodotus notably excepted) were anti-democratic, popular orators such as Cleon were dismissed as ‘demagogues’. The Assembly had an attractive reputation for heckling down uninformed speakers on specific business. Viewed both in hindsight and at the time, mistakes were made. The Sicilian invasion looks the worst now. A decision to slaughter the rebellious Mitylenians was revoked at a recalled session in which Cleon was worsted by the otherwise unknown ‘ordinary’ citizen Diodotos. Apart from Assembly attendance pay (a small sum, but incentive for the poor), political offices were unpaid, the holders being called to account at the end of their year – term limits, as at Rome, being integral – and liable to fine or execution if found guilty of fiddling. Another expedient was Ostracism, the 10-year exiling of the politician deemed the biggest pest, without loss of property or reputation – obscure individuals often apparently voted for themselves to get a ‘name’.

Even Plato conceded that, Socrates’ execution apart – we could add the religious prosecutions of a few other philosophers, for example, Anaxagoras and Diagoras, blots on the Democracy’s talismanic slogan ‘Parresia’ (freedom of speech) – the Assembly behaved ‘with moderation’. Above all, it did not misuse its plenipotentiary power by granting itself all manner of indefensible and unaffordable perks.

The Roman Republic was as confused as the American one, whose Founding Fathers looked admiringly back to it through Plutarch’s rose-tinted glasses (full story in Meyer Reinhold’s *Classica Americana*, 1984; for some suggestive Roman-British comparisons, see Ferdinand Mount’s *Full Circle: How The Classical World Came Back To Us*, 2010). Through occasional general strikes (‘secessions’), remarkably lacking in violence, Rome evolved from monarchy to a theoretical People’s Republic in 287 BC when resolutions passed by the Plebeians-only council became binding on the entire population, this class’ interests also protected by the Ten Tribunes whose veto powers could bring government to a halt. In practice, this did not happen. Conservative-minded Romans of all classes continued to respect the prestige of the Senate, and obstinately kept re-electing members of a close-knit aristocratic family circle. Officers of state (and religion) were annually (term limits and no pay long applied to all civilian

and military positions) elected by a variety of *Comitia* (from which our dread 'Committee'), organised respectively on the basis of income, class, and geography – this last did something to reduce urban-rural imbalance. To Rome we owe among other things the word 'proletarian' and (139 BC) introduction of the secret ballot. Cicero, the most articulate champion of the system – for which no legions were willing to fight in the last pre-imperial century of civil wars between usurping generals – banged on about the need for *Concordia Ordinum* (Social Harmony).

Further Reading (in addition to items mentioned in the text):

Dawson, Doyne, *Cities of the Gods: Communist Utopias in Greek Thought* (1992)

Ferguson, John, *Utopias of the Classical World* (1975)

McCarthy, George E., *Classical Horizons: The Origins of Sociology in Ancient Greece* (2003), plus many cognate books on Marx and antiquity

Ste Croix, G. E. M. de, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (1983, 2nd ed. 1997, misleading title – comports much on Rome and Byzantium)

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