

Notes on a Masterpiece

Some academic books are worth knowing about even if one doesn't have the time or inclination to read them. G. E. M. de Ste. Croix's *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World, from the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests* (1981) is one of those, far too massive and dense for even most intelligent laypeople to read but too valuable for them not to know about. It is almost impossibly rich, and deserves to last as long as intellectually curious people exist. For it does what very few historians not only do but are even interested in: it *profoundly explains*—an enormous period of history—rather than simply describes or “plays with texts” to “uncover new meanings” and “reveal contestations” over “discourses” that must then be “problematized” and so forth. It gets straight to the point unpretentiously, determined to make 1400 years of history comprehensible on the basis of a few simple concepts. And what are those concepts? Marxist ones, of course. Class, class struggle, and exploitation. Even if one hadn't read a single other Marxist work, this book would have to convince one of the value of Marxian methods—as it did many mainstream classicists when it was published, who reviewed it rapturously even when they had criticisms.

Since the application of Marxism to antiquity was virtually unknown when the book was published, being considered anachronistic, as if classes hadn't really existed then—a transparently ideological fantasy, but an understandably popular one in a capitalist society characterized by institutional (academic) fragmentation and the subordination of intellectuals to bourgeois habits of thought¹—Ste. Croix has to devote some of the book to analysis of his main concepts. They're fairly intuitive. An economic *surplus* is “that part of an individual's labor of which he does not directly enjoy the fruit himself, and the immediate benefits of which are reserved for others [such as the capitalist, the slaveowner, or the landowner].” The other key concepts are as follows:

Class (essentially a relationship) is the collective social expression of the fact of exploitation, the way in which exploitation is embodied in a social structure. By *exploitation* I mean the appropriation of part of the product of the labor of

¹ As Ste. Croix says, in criticism of historians who reject “all this theoretical stuff, about class structures and social relations and historical method,” “it is a serious error to suppose that unconsciousness of ideology, or even a complete lack of interest in it, is the same thing as absence of ideology. In reality each of us has an ideological approach to history, resulting in a particular historical methodology and set of general concepts, whether conscious or unconscious. To refuse—as so many do—to define or even to think about the basic concepts we employ simply results in our taking over without scrutiny, lock, stock and barrel, the prevailing ideology in which we happen to have been brought up...” (p. 34).

others [i.e., the surplus]: in a commodity-producing society this is the appropriation of what Marx called “surplus value.”

A *class* (a particular class) is a group of persons in a community identified by their position in the whole system of social production, defined above all by their relationship (primarily in terms of the degree of ownership or control) to the conditions of production (that is to say, the means and labor of production) and to other classes...

It is of the essence of a *class society* that one or more of the smaller classes, in virtue of their control over the conditions of production (most commonly exercised through ownership of the means of production), will be able to exploit—that is, to appropriate a surplus at the expense of—the larger classes, and thus constitute an economically and socially (and therefore probably also politically) superior class or classes. The exploitation may be direct and individual, as for example of wage-laborers, slaves, serfs, “*coloni*,” tenant-farmers or debtors by particular employers, masters, landlords or moneylenders, or it may be indirect and collective, as when taxation, military conscription, forced labor or other services are exacted solely or disproportionately from a particular class or classes (small peasant freeholders, for instance) by a State dominated by a superior class.

I use the expression *class struggle* for the fundamental relationship between classes (and their respective individual members), involving essentially exploitation, or resistance to it. It does not necessarily involve collective action by a class as such, and it may or may not include activity on a political plane, although such political activity becomes increasingly probable when the tension of class struggle becomes acute...

Imperialism, involving some kind of economic and/or political subjection to a power outside the community, is a special case, in which the exploitation effected by the imperial power (in the form of tribute, for instance), or by its individual members, need not necessarily involve direct control of the conditions of production. In such a situation, however, the class struggle within the subject community is very likely to be affected, for example through support given by the imperial power or its agents to the exploiting class or classes within that community, if not by the acquisition by the imperial power or its individual members of control over the conditions of production in the subject community.²

² The twentieth-century policies of the U.S. government with respect to Latin America are an excellent instance of both of these examples. When it (or members of its ruling class) didn't simply take control of property and the means of production, the U.S. regularly propped up the ruling classes.

Doubtless some academic would quibble with these definitions, but one could make them more precise and perfectly defensible. The most controversial one would be that of class struggle, since it doesn't refer to class consciousness or explicit *struggle*. The struggle can be, and usually is, only implicit. That seems reasonable to me, in part because people among the exploited classes are constantly resisting or objecting to their position in small or large ways—and so actually the struggle is continually explicit, on an individual level if not a collective one—but also because logically there *is* a struggle, a clash, of interests between the exploiters and the exploited. The former's interest lies in extracting a greater surplus, the latter's in decreasing the size of the surplus extracted.³

On this understanding, Marx's frequently ridiculed apothegm is right: the history of all hitherto existing complex societies is the history of class struggle. In fact, this isn't only because class antagonism (struggle) is present in all of them; more importantly, it's because the class structure is the foundation of institutional structures in general, and thus of the framework within which people live and interact. Why can it be called the foundation? Simply because people in the dominant positions of the class structure directly appropriate—necessarily—a sufficient surplus to ensure their continued domination (i.e., to give them the resources with which to continue their domination), and this means they have the resources to ensure that most other institutions and practices are compatible with or subservient to their power. They are the people and groups with the most wealth and resources, and so, obviously, they are better able than others to dictate what forms society and culture will take. This truism is enough to establish the controversial but utterly obvious Marxian metaphor that the economic structure, or class structure, is society's foundation, the "superstructure" (in a loose sense) being politics, culture, and ideology. —In short, the institutions and people with the most resources have the most influence in determining the forms and content of social life.

Class struggle is central to history in still more ways; for instance, virtually by analytical necessity it has been, directly or indirectly, the main cause of most popular

³ Tellingly, throughout history dominant classes have had a high degree of class consciousness, usually being much more aware of, and prepared to act on, their unity of interest than exploited classes. Just read the publications of business groups in the U.S. during the last hundred years, and think of their highly coordinated public relations campaigns to secure the population's (passive) consent and extract its money. Something similar was the case over two thousand years ago: Xenophon writes of slaveowners being prepared to act "as unpaid bodyguards of each other against their slaves." Ironically, then, the "struggle" has typically been more full-fledged and conscious on the side of the oppressors than the oppressed.

resistance and rebellions. Likewise, the ideologies and cultures of the lower classes have been in large measure sublimations of class interest and conflict. Most wars, too, have been undertaken so that rulers (effectively the ruling class) could gain control over resources, which is sort of the class struggle by other means. Wars grow out of class dynamics, and are intended to benefit the rich and powerful. In any case, the very tasks of *survival* in complex societies are structured by class antagonisms, which determine who gets what resources when and in what ways.

–Duh.

From such reflections as these one should already suspect that materialist class analysis will have to be the basis for any explanation of history. Certainly many other factors must come into play, but class is the fundamental one. It gives societies their overall dynamics and provides most of the context for what goes on in them. In fact, it “discloses the real secrets of history: the springs and causes of human behavior and social change.” The best proof of its value as a historical and sociological concept is its fruitfulness; for it has made possible an immense amount of brilliant scholarship since the nineteenth century, which totally eclipses any other school of thought.

Ste. Croix argues that there are two fundamental differences between the ancient world and the modern: first, the former had infinitely more primitive technology. It didn’t even have the wheelbarrow! Since it was, therefore, enormously less productive than our own world is, some means had to be found—unless everyone was to have to work practically all the time—to extract the largest possible surplus out of a considerable number of those at the bottom of society. So, in order to have cities and aristocratic leisure and so forth, the propertied classes in Greece and Rome had to derive their surplus not from wage-labor, as in capitalist society, but from unfree labor of various kinds. (Nor was wage-labor plentifully available anyway, or very skilled.) This is the second fundamental difference. The ancient world had debt bondage and a kind of serfdom, as we’ll see, but the most important form of unfree labor was slavery—including in agriculture, which is (wrongly) denied by some classicists. It’s true that a large part of production was done by small free producers, mainly peasants but also artisans and traders. Nevertheless, Ste. Croix goes so far as to call the Greek and Roman world a slave-owning society or a slave economy, because it was through slavery that the dominant propertied class—landowners—ensured the extraction of the surplus they needed for their own leisured existence. *This* is the key point, and it is why Marx said slavery was the foundation of the ancient world even though most production—until the later Roman empire—was done by relatively free peasants and some artisans. Incidentally, these classes too were exploited in various ways, as by taxation, military conscription, or forced services exacted by the state.

In support of his own class-based interpretation of antiquity, Ste. Croix points out that it was substantially shared by Aristotle. (He also inserts a few jabs at Plato, the anti-Aristotle. “The wildly exaggerated respect which has been paid down the ages to

Plato's political thought is partly due to his remarkable *literary* genius and to the anti-democratic instincts of the majority of scholars. Plato was anti-democratic in the highest degree.") "Like so many other Greeks, Aristotle regarded a man's economic position as the decisive factor in influencing his behavior in politics, as in other fields." Evidently he had common sense. He understood that the rich property-owners (landowners) wanted pure oligarchy and the poor extreme democracy; he preferred the middle layers, who because of their moderate amount of property tended to be moderate in opinions and behavior. (Proto-Marxism.) Interestingly, he remarks that in some oligarchical city-states of his day, the oligarchically-minded take the oath, "I will bear ill-will towards the common people, and I will plan against them all the evil I can." A refreshingly honest oath. Other Greek thinkers, too, understood these categories. Euripides says in one play that there are three kinds of people: "the greedy and useless rich; the covetous poor, easily led astray by scurvy demagogues; and 'those in the middle,' who can be the salvation of the city." Essentially the reason why Aristotle and later thinkers favored a "mixed constitution" in which there is a balance between rich and poor is that this was a way of ensuring a balance in the political class struggle. – Much of what Aristotle says in the *Politics* clearly influenced James Madison and others of our "Founding Fathers," as shown by the proto-Marxism and Golden Mean-ism of passages in the *Federalist Papers*, as well as in correspondence they wrote to each other.

Not only does Aristotle tend to think in terms of class struggle; he even identifies groups defined according to their role in production, namely working farmers, independent artisans, traders, and wage-laborers. And he understands that city-states' constitutions will be of different types according to the relative strength of these different elements. No wonder Marx loved him! It's clear, in any event, that the notion of class is relevant to ancient society and was acknowledged to be so by many thinkers of the time (including even Plato).

Next is a long discussion about why class is not only relevant but more useful than alternative notions like status and "orders" (e.g., citizens, freedmen, the Roman senatorial order, equestrians, and resident foreigners. Orders were very important in the ancient world, as, indeed, in Europe's Middle Ages). Many criticisms can be given of Max Weber's emphasis on status as opposed to class—and of his notion of class itself, which is vague and has more to do with market relations and income than relations of production (which are surely what provide the main explanation for people's market position and income anyway; see Erik Olin Wright)—but Ste. Croix's main one is that Weberian "status groups" and even "classes" have no *organic relationship* with one another, "and consequently they are not dynamic in character but merely lie side by side, so to speak, like numbers in a row." Marxian classes are defined by their relations to other classes; the members of a Weberian class or status group have no necessary relationship to the members of another class or status group as such. It's hard to explain social change on the basis of this static, atomistic and inorganic conception, whereas it's

much easier on the Marxian conception (of irreconcilable interests, antagonistic production relations, and so forth). Of course status groups can be very important to people's lives and the overall character of a society, and even to some political conflicts;⁴ on the whole, though, they're more useful for *description* than *explanation*. This is one of the reasons for Ste. Croix's criticisms of the famous classicist Moses Finley, who had less interest in classes than status groups.

Ste. Croix's discussion of women is much less satisfactory than his discussion of class vs. status, for he argues that women in antiquity constituted their own social class. Which is absurd. To broaden the concept of production so that it includes biological reproduction is to render it almost meaningless. Nor is an economic surplus necessarily appropriated by men, as such, from women, as such. Sure, the latter are dominated and subordinated, but that is quite different from exploitation in the technical sense. The realm of biology shouldn't be confused with the realm of economic production, to which sex is an external consideration, however much women may occupy particular positions in the relations of production (even sometimes *as women*—but then they're exploited as a result of their location in the economic structure, not directly as a result of having vaginas and ovaries).

Let's get to the non-methodological stuff. The leisured, propertied class (almost entirely landed property)—a tiny minority—of course was differentiated into the more or less wealthy, those who owned more or less property and therefore slaves. Some examples: "the owner of a large or even medium-sized farm, worked by slaves under a slave bailiff, or leased out at a rent; the proprietor of a workshop of, say, 20–50 slaves, supervised by a slave manager; the lessee of mines in the Laurium district of Attica, worked by slaves, and similarly supervised by a manager who would himself be a slave; the owner of a merchant ship or two which he hired out to traders or used for trading himself, manning them with slaves..." Lots of slaves. Though also other kinds of unfree labor, as Ste. Croix emphasizes. Greece was actually rather poor, though, as were its great landowners, compared to Persia and later Rome. The great Roman senators of the Empire were astoundingly wealthy; next to them, Greece's aristocrats were petty stuff. The Roman Empire, or rather its ruling class, swam in wealth.

As in many later societies, the landed aristocracy sneered at people who had gained their wealth from trade or manufactures. Leisure was the mark of the gentleman. And these value-judgments were to some degree shared by most of the population: "the ideas of a dominant class (at least if it is not a conquering, alien race)

⁴ But in many such conflicts class interests are very relevant, perhaps in complex ways, even if at first glance they don't seem to be. They frequently are disguised behind, and help determine, the overt issues. See Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* and *The Class Struggles in France*.

are always accepted in some measure by those it exploits, and most of all (as modern experience shows) by those who are near the top level of the exploited and see themselves as about to rise into the ruling class. And most of the words used in Greek to express social qualities and distinctions were heavily loaded with the moral overtones that had always been associated with them [e.g., that being a tradesman was demeaning], so that the poorer Greek would find it hard to avoid expressing himself in the very terms that proclaimed his unworthiness." The very vocabulary that societies use is inflected with class, partly determined by it.

Slavery and forced labor, serfdom, and debt bondage were widespread in the ancient world, the former three usually resulting from conquest (except in the later Roman empire, when serfdom emerged more organically). Athens was unusual in at least one respect: Solon abolished debt bondage in 594 B.C., a truly radical reform. The ancients themselves divided mankind into only two categories, slave and free, but there were in fact many intermediate statuses. Athens made especially intense use of slavery, despite—but also because of—its democracy. That's ironic, but it was because of democracy that the upper class couldn't exploit the humbler citizens to the degree it could in other places, so it had to rely exceptionally on rights-less slaves.⁵ "This [class-based hypothesis] *explains* 'the advance, hand in hand, of freedom and slavery' in the Greek world, noted by Finley but left by him as a kind of paradox, entirely without explanation" (because Finley doesn't like to invoke class). Democracy can cause the intensification of slavery, and slavery can help make possible democracy—for some people. Fascinating!

Why weren't there more slave revolts, if there were so many slaves? Mainly because slaves in each city, and often even in single families and farms and workshops, were largely imported "barbarians" and very heterogeneous in character, coming from South Russia, Thrace, Lydia, parts of Asia Minor, Egypt, Sicily, Libya, etc. They didn't have a common language or culture. "The desirability of choosing slaves of different nationalities and languages was well recognized in antiquity, and it is stressed by several Greek and Roman writers as an indispensable means of preventing revolts." Yes, the old trick of divide-and-conquer, used to fantastic effect by modern capitalists when trying to maintain control over their work force. Most techniques of power are timeless.

Serfdom was much less common than slavery in the Greek world: before the late Roman empire there were only isolated *local* forms of it, for instance the Helots of Sparta, and on temple estates in Hellenistic Asia Minor. (This serfdom on sacred land

⁵ As Ste. Croix says, insofar as democracy gave the poor some power, it "played a vital part in the class struggle by mitigating the exploitation of poorer citizens by richer ones—a fact that seldom receives the emphasis it deserves."

was probably a residue of forms of serfdom that had earlier been widespread in Asia.) “It is essential to realize, however, that these [west Asian] forms of serfdom tended to dissolve as a result of contact with the more advanced Greek and Roman economy (above all, no doubt, when the land came into the ownership or under the control of Greeks or hellenized natives or of Romans), and after a few generations virtually ceased to exist, except as part of very conservative complexes such as temple estates... Until the introduction of the Later Roman colonate, serfdom failed to maintain itself in the Greek world (or in the rest of the Roman empire), and when it disappeared in a particular area, there is no sign that it was re-established.” But in various places, like Ptolemaic Egypt, even some non-serf peasants (who weren’t tied to the land) were subject to very strict controls and supervision. In cases where serfdom disappeared after coming into contact with Greeks and Romans, some of the peasants sank even further, into slavery, whereas in other places they became freer, like if their territory was incorporated into a city.

“It was only at the end of the third century A.D. that legislation began to be introduced, subjecting to forms of legal serfdom the whole working agricultural population of the Graeco-Roman world. In outline, leasehold tenants (*coloni*) became serfs, bound either to their actual farms or plots or to their villages and almost as much subject to their landlords as were slaves to their masters, even though they remained technically *ingenui*, free men rather than slaves; working peasant freeholders too were tied, to their villages.” Later in the book he’ll give explanations for this and other changes from the Archaic Age to the late Empire. For now, he’s just describing the whole socioeconomic framework.

As for debt bondage, it is “virtually certain that forms of [it] existed at all times in the great majority of Greek cities.” David Graeber demonstrates the profound significance of debt to the ancient world in his book *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (on which I’ve commented in *Finding Our Compass: Reflections on a World in Crisis*). The consequence of defaulting on a debt in Greek cities might be enslavement or the sale of one’s children. “In Ptolemaic Egypt, there is clear evidence both for outright enslavement for debt and for debt bondage; but in the Roman period the latter seems to have replaced the former. It is difficult to generalize about Greek cities, but it does look as if debt bondage largely superseded outright enslavement for debt during the Hellenistic period.” In early Roman law, the position of the defaulting debtor was even worse. “His creditors might keep him in chains; and ultimately...they might cut his body in pieces and divide the parts among themselves.” Lovely. It was clearly a rosy time to live. “The wealthy Roman regarded a defaulting debtor who had been driven to borrow because of dire need, rather than for some speculative or luxurious purpose, almost as a kind of criminal.” What a surprise, this class prejudice against the poor. In general, the Roman state and its law, like all states (to greater or lesser degrees), was

“an instrument of the propertied classes; for the propertyless, the state ‘couldn’t care less.’”

Hired labor was less common than both slavery and, surely, debt bondage; its first major appearance in antiquity was in the form of mercenaries, though it was probably common at the peak periods of agricultural activity (harvesting, vintage, olive-picking) and may have been used for public works in Greek cities. Artisans, contractors, shopkeepers, and others must have occasionally hired workers too. The position of these wage-earners was considered contemptible. Plato and Aristotle placed them at the bottom of the social scale, and their attitude was shared by pretty much the whole propertied class. For Aristotle, “there could be no civilized existence for men who did not have leisure, which was a necessary condition (though not of course a sufficient condition) for becoming a good and competent citizen, and indeed was the goal (*telos*) of labor, as peace was of war... The overriding necessity for leisure excludes the citizens of Aristotle’s ideal State from all forms of work, even farming, not to mention craftsmanship... The essential fact which, in Aristotle’s eyes, makes the hired man a less worthy figure than the ordinary artisan is not so much his comparative poverty (for many independent artisans are likely to be poor too) but his ‘slavish’ dependence upon his employer.” This attitude has been shared by many elites throughout history, for instance eighteenth-century aristocrats like Thomas Jefferson and all his fellow republicans. The propertyless were supposed to be excluded from voting because of their lack of independence and consequent inability to act and think in a properly “disinterested,” public-spirited republican way. They were essentially appendages of their employer. Interestingly, the “labor republicanism” exemplified by the Knights of Labor in the 1880s (in the U.S.) had a similar outlook, considering wage-labor (“wage-slavery”) to be undignified, unmanly, a kind of degradation that interfered with the rights and duties of citizenship. The conclusion they drew, though, as did many other workers before them, was quite different from that of the classical republicans: wage-labor had to be abolished and a cooperative commonwealth established. “There is an inevitable conflict between the wage-system of labor and the republican system of government,” as one of them said. It seems that only in the twentieth century, when the wage-system had finally unequivocally conquered the Western world, was wage-labor, for the first time ever, seen to be necessary and even good, not degrading. An idea that would have been utterly incomprehensible to all previous ruling classes and most of their subordinates.⁶

⁶ On these topics, see, e.g., Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1992); and Alex Gourevitch, “Wage-Slavery and Republican Liberty,” *Jacobin*, February 28, 2013.

Even Kant, the philosopher who thought of humans as rational animals above all, had the inegalitarian attitude of his contemporaries. As Ste. Croix says, he “wished to confine the franchise to those who were their own masters and had some property to support them. A man who ‘earned his living from others’ could be allowed to qualify as a citizen, in Kant’s eyes, only if he earned it ‘by *selling* that which is his, and not by allowing others to make use of him.’... In a work published four years later Kant returned to this theme...giving four examples of excluded categories which ‘do not possess civil independence,’ such as apprentices, servants, minors and women, who may ‘demand to be treated by all others in accordance with laws of natural freedom and equality’ but should have no right to participate in making the laws.” Such attitudes aren’t *entirely* without merit in the context of the unequal, oppressive, and dependency-producing social structures of his day; but the proper conclusion to draw is that those social structures have to be eliminated, not that the majority of the people shouldn’t participate in civic life.

As I said, public works may have, from time to time, been an important source of employment for unskilled wage-earners, but there isn’t a lot of evidence for this. Contractors (probably hiring general laborers but also using slaves) did most of the work, and they don’t qualify as wage-earners properly so-called. Even in Rome, which must have had the highest concentration of free men, including freedmen, in the whole Graeco-Roman world, there is no evidence for *regular* hired labor of any kind. “A certain proportion of the free poor lived to some extent on handouts provided by wealthy families whose clients they were—thus bringing themselves within ‘the sound section of the populace, attached to the great houses,’ whom Tacitus, in his patronizing way, contrasts favorably with the *plebs sordida*, frequenting (in his picture) the circus and theaters. But the great majority of the *plebs urbana* must have been shopkeepers or traders, skilled craftsmen (or at least semi-skilled artisans), or transport-workers using ox-carts, asses or mules [who weren’t wage-laborers but worked for customers].”

Having discussed *direct individual* exploitation, Ste. Croix turns to *indirect collective* exploitation—as well as the exploitation (mostly of peasants) by landlords and mortgagees that took the form of rent or interest. He mentions that Marx anticipated his distinction between the two kinds of exploitation when he wrote, in *The Class Struggles in France*, of the French peasants of his day that “Their exploitation differs only in *form* from the exploitation of the industrial proletariat. The exploiter is the same: *capital*. The individual capitalists exploit the individual peasants through *mortgages* and *usury*; the capitalist class exploits the peasant class through the *State taxes*.” It occurs to me that the exploitative function of taxes isn’t true only of peasants and the poor in old times; to some extent it applies even to our own day. Insofar as the poor and middle classes don’t get a useful return on their taxes, they’re effectively being exploited. (Surplus is being taken from them without an equivalent being given back: hence, exploitation.) However much of the money they give to the government that goes to paying for wars, interest

payments on debt to the rich, corporate welfare, etc. rather than to improvements in public education and transportation, roads, environmental protection (for their children at least), social insurance and so forth amounts to a kind of exploitation. It is indirect, publicly sanctioned, collective exploitation.

Taxation in Greek cities before the Hellenistic period may often have been quite light, “if only because the lack of anything resembling a modern civil service made it difficult if not impossible to collect small sums in taxes profitably from poor people (that is to say, from the great majority of the population), without the intervention of tax farmers, who seem to have been very unpopular with all classes... The total burden of taxation certainly increased in the Hellenistic and Roman periods,” especially in the Later Roman empire, when it fell most heavily on the peasantry, who had least power to resist. As in our own day and throughout history, the rich had a much greater chance of escaping or minimizing payment than the poor.

So, what was the situation of the peasantry? Before delving into it Ste. Croix gives a beautiful tribute to these poor people, the vast majority of humanity in most periods of history, that I can’t help quoting:

To my mind, the most profound and moving representation in art of “the peasant” is Vincent Van Gogh’s *The Potato Eaters*... As Vincent himself said, in a letter to his brother Theo, written while the picture was still being painted, “I have tried to emphasize that those people, eating their potatoes in the lamplight, have dug the earth with those very hands they put in the dish, and so it speaks of *manual labor*, and how they have honestly earned their food. I have wanted to give the impression of a way of life quite different from that of us civilized people.” ...The quality that impresses one most about Van Gogh’s peasants is their endurance, their solidity, like that of the earth from which they draw just sufficient sustenance to maintain life... The Potato Eaters are poor, but they are not evidently miserable: even if the artist shows infinite sympathy with them, he depicts in them no trace of self-pity. These are the voiceless toilers, the great majority—let us not forget it—of the population of the Greek and Roman world, upon whom was built a great civilization that despised them and did all it could to forget them.

The lot of the ancient peasant wasn’t much more pleasant than it’s been at any other time in history. I won’t go into detail, but some indication is given by the fact that, similar to the case in medieval Europe (regarding the protection afforded by exploiting lords), being subject to a landlord could actually be *preferable* to owning land if the landlord could provide protection against the depredations of officials and soldiers—“always a terror to the peasantry in the Roman empire.” Rents were paid in money or in kind, though sometimes in labor services, which were in addition to the irregular

services occasionally demanded from tenants. If one wasn't a tenant but owned land, one may have had to deal with mortgages and foreclosures and so on. And then there were the famines, when, ironically, it was often only in the *cities* that food was available. (This reminds me of the manufactured famine in the Ukraine in the early 1930s, when Stalin's Five-Year Plan extracted so much grain out of the countryside that millions of peasants starved. Timothy Snyder has some disturbing descriptions in *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (2012).) Landlords in cities sometimes hoarded grain to sell it at high prices, which contributed to starvation in the countryside. Again, there are modern parallels, with respect to European imperialism in India, Africa, and China, which Mike Davis recounts in *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (2002). Of course these modern semi-manufactured famines were far more horrifying than anything likely to have happened in antiquity.

"The characteristic unit in which peasant life was organized was the village... Many [villages] were situated inside the territory of some city; and some belonged to a handful of absentee landlords, or even entirely to a single proprietor, to whom the villagers paid rent. On the other hand, there were also villages of freehold peasant proprietors... Some villages, at least in Syria and Asia Minor, had what appears to have been a democratic form of organization, headed by a general meeting of the villagers; and—strange as it may seem—it looks as if this democratic form of organization may actually have survived in some villages, in parts of Syria at any rate, after all the genuinely democratic elements had perished from the constitutions of the cities throughout the [Roman] empire." In the Later Empire these villages were taxed very heavily, paying their taxes to collectors appointed by the local city. —Peasants, in short, were largely at the mercy of the powerful, who could regularly act with virtual impunity.

At this point in the book Ste. Croix shifts to discussing the change in the *forms of exploitation* that happened slowly during the first three centuries A.D. A very important topic, which explains the eventual enserfment of most of the free working agricultural population of the Roman empire. The change happened all over the Graeco-Roman world but in varying degrees and at very different speeds in different areas. It has to do with the fate of slavery. In the late Roman Republic a series of foreign wars and civil wars had provided an abundant supply of cheap slaves for Mediterranean slave markets, but from the Augustan Principate (beginning in 30 B.C.) onwards there was a period of relative peace. As a result, "the number of slaves that were simply *appropriated from outside the Graeco-Roman economy, or brought within it by purchase*, soon begin to decline." (His italics.) To keep replenishing the slave population, therefore, it was necessary to encourage one's slaves to breed. This hadn't been done very much before because it tended to *lower the rate at which they could be exploited*, since the female slaves bearing children would of course be occupied, for a time, with things other than work, and would often even die in childbirth. As for the children, the many who didn't live to

an age at which they could give a good day's work would be a dead loss to the master. For other reasons too, masters had preferred simply to buy new slaves coming in from foreign wars and discourage their breeding. But with fewer such imported slaves during the Principate (and the greater cost of those who were imported), slaveowners now resorted to breeding them, which had momentous consequences for the economy: in brief, it imposed a greater burden on the economy, because of the *lower rate of profit from slave labor*. This, in turn, would be likely to cause the propertied class to *increase the rate of exploitation of the humbler free population*—as the Roman ruling class now did, by degrees.

Hitherto slaves had frequently been housed in sex-segregated barracks, but now, to encourage them to breed, it was desirable to establish them in conditions conducive to the rearing of families (which itself made it harder to exploit them). It's not surprising, therefore, that as early as the last century B.C. we find evidence of slaves settled as virtual tenants of agricultural plots, with their own families. They were still technically slaves, but from the economic point of view they were tenants and could even own slaves of their own. Gradually slavery declined in such ways as these. Leasing lands as opposed to managing them oneself (overseeing one's slaves, etc.) became more common, in part because large landowners after the Republic were more likely to own widely diffused plots of land all of which they could hardly manage themselves. But even if they didn't own so many plots, it was still easier and less time-consuming simply to lease land to tenants (sometimes thousands of them) who would do the necessary productive work. These tenants were most often *coloni*, tied down by debts to their landlords, such as rent in arrear that gave an excuse for the landlord to make the conditions under which the tenant used his land more burdensome (which the tenant would still find preferable to being hauled off to debtor's prison). So, on the whole, the condition of slaves gradually improved somewhat and that of peasants throughout much of the Roman empire declined (at different rates). Finally towards the end of the third century A.D., "as part of the great reform of the system of regular taxation introduced by Diocletian," these agricultural workers became *legally* bound to the soil. In fact, not only leasehold tenants but virtually *the whole of the agricultural population* in the Roman empire was tied to the land on a hereditary basis and thus entered into serfdom (or quasi-serfdom in the case of peasant freeholders, who were tied not to a particular farm or plot but to their village). The reason for these legal changes was to facilitate the increased exploitation of the peasantry, primarily through taxation but also forced services and military conscription.

This legal reorganization "was of course seen by its authors as necessary, in the common interest of all, for the very preservation of the empire, imperiled as it was now, as never before, by 'barbarian' threats, by the increased power of Persia under the Sassanids, and by internally destructive rivalries for control of the imperial power. However, the propertied classes were determined to maintain, and were able to

maintain, their dominance and their economically privileged situation... The great reorganization was therefore primarily for the benefit of the propertied classes as a whole; and for them, or at any rate their upper crust, it worked wonders for a time." He'll return to these topics later in the book, when he discusses the decline of the Empire.

As all this was going on, barbarians were settling the empire to an enormous extent, a fact that from a *cultural* point of view may have contributed to the decline of Rome but from an *economic* point of view must have helped preserve it for a while. Those who were brought in after capture by or surrender to Roman generals probably became mere tenants or *coloni* (often of imperial estates), whereas most who entered the empire by voluntary compact got to own their own land. The beneficial economic effect of these barbarian settlements "becomes immediately obvious when we realize that all those in which the settlers became mere tenants, and (if to a less extent) the majority of those involving freeholders, provided *both recruits for the army and an adult workforce, the cost of producing which had not fallen upon the Graeco-Roman economy.*" The barbarian settlers therefore helped compensate for the lower profits from slavery.

Despite the decline of slavery, it's necessary to emphasize "the universal and unquestioning acceptance of slavery as part of the natural order of things, which during the Principate still pervaded the whole of Greek and Roman society—and of course continued in the Christian empire just as in earlier times. Slavery continued to play a central role in the psychology of the propertied class. [As Marx said, ideologies tend to linger long after the social conditions that birthed them have evolved to new ones.] And here I would refer again to what I said earlier about debt bondage: every humble free man must always have been haunted by fear of the coercion, amounting to slavery in all but name, to which he might be subjected if he ever defaulted on a debt to a rich man—including the payment of rent, of course."

Ste. Croix's comments on "the military factor" in the Roman empire are worth quoting, at least some of them. Needless to say, military considerations were highly relevant to Rome's downfall. Here are a few salient points:

1. From the second quarter of the third century onwards pressure on the frontiers of the Roman empire became much greater and tended to go on increasing, and the defense of the frontiers therefore became a matter on which the empire's survival rested.
2. In the circumstances of the time, the necessary standing army had to be raised largely from the peasantry.
3. In order to provide sufficient recruits of strong physique and potentially good morale, it was therefore essential to maintain a reasonably prosperous and vigorous peasantry.

4. On the contrary, as land, during the early centuries of the Christian era, became increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few owners (throughout most of the West and also, to a less extent, over a large part of the Greek East), the condition of a substantial proportion of the agricultural population became more and more depressed, until before the end of the third century most working peasants were subjected to forms of serfdom or quasi-serfdom...
5. *Socially* and *militarily*, this process was very harmful, since the peasants became increasingly indifferent towards the maintenance of the whole imperial system, most of the burden of which fell heavily upon them; and the morale (and probably the physique) of the army deteriorated, with the result that much of the empire disintegrated by stages between the early fifth century and the mid-seventh.
6. The maintenance of a relatively prosperous peasantry, sufficiently numerous to provide the large number of recruits needed for the army and willing to fight to the death in defense of their way of life (as the free Greeks and the early Romans had been), might have made all the difference and might have preserved the unity of the empire very much longer.

As he says, "the attitude of the peasantry in both Eastern and Western parts of the Roman world during the Later Empire was extraordinarily passive and indifferent." Sometimes peasants even joined the barbarian invaders. Karma, Rome.

We'll return to the fall of Rome later on, at the end of the book.

Now for Part 2, which is less descriptive and more explanatory. He begins with "the age of the tyrants" in Greece, between the mid-seventh century B.C. and the late sixth. Many Greek cities, which had been dominated until then by hereditary aristocracies, experienced a new form of personal dictatorial rule, by the so-called tyrants. "When the rule of the Greek tyrants ended, as it usually did after quite a short period, of a generation or two, hereditary aristocratic dominance had disappeared, except in a few places, and had been succeeded by a much more 'open' society: political power no longer rested on descent, on blue blood, but was mainly dependent on the possession of property (this now became the standard form of Greek oligarchy), and in many cities, such as Athens, it was later extended in theory to all citizens, in a democracy." A fundamental change, which isn't hard to explain in terms of class struggle. The classes at issue were, on the one side, the hereditary ruling aristocrats, who were mainly the principal landowners and entirely monopolized political power; on the other side, at first, everyone else, the "demos." Some of the latter were quite prosperous, but more common were the well-to-do and middling peasants, who are often called "the hoplite class" because they provided the heavy-armed infantry of the Greek citizen armies. They owned a moderate amount of property. Below them were poor peasants, artisans, shopkeepers, petty traders, and wage-laborers.

What happened, then, is typically that the demos or some section of it revolted against oppression and exploitation. At some point a capable leader emerged who seized the semi-crisis for his own benefit, and after whom the old secure days of aristocracy were over. Solon and Peisistratus were *good* examples of tyrants, in Athens. A considerable proportion of the hoplite class must have given support to the tyrants, but they also came to power by means of mercenary forces or outside intervention (e.g., by Persia or some other Greek city-state). –Once again, Aristotle understands the significance of the class struggle. He contrasts traditional kingship with tyranny: the former “came into existence for the purpose of helping the better classes against the demos,” whereas tyrants arose “from among the common people and the masses, in opposition to the notables, so that the demos should not suffer injustice at their hands... The great majority of the tyrants began as demagogues, so to speak, and won confidence by calumniating the notables.” Good old-fashioned materialist common sense, depressingly opposed to the current postmodern obsession among historians with “complicating old narratives” etc., an obsession they don't realize is nothing but an aid and comfort to the ruling class and is so widespread just because it can get through institutional filters by distracting from class struggle. If intellectuals are successful, it's because they don't challenge the powerful. (There are always a few exceptions, like Howard Zinn—people who bypass the approved channels and speak directly to the public.)

After the tyrants came the great age of Greek democracy in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. Ste. Croix actually says that so-called tyranny was a necessary phase in the development of many Greek states, because “institutions suited to maintaining in power even a non-hereditary ruling class, let alone a democracy, did not exist (they had never existed) and had to be created, painfully and by experience, over the years” —and so in this sense “tyranny” helped pave the way for democracy, a new phenomenon on the world stage (at least among thoroughly civilized societies). Democracy came to exist in scores of city-states, not only Athens; it involved majority vote of all male citizens, even the propertyless—an extraordinary fact. Recall that even in the U.S. it took until the mid-nineteenth century for such democracy to be well established. “The great aim of democrats was that their society should achieve as much freedom (*eleutheria*) as possible... Since public debate was an essential part of the democratic process, an important ingredient in democratic *eleutheria* was freedom of speech.” Of course there was also equality before the law.

As in modern times, democracy was born through struggle on the part of the unpropertied or less propertied. For centuries, “economic distress often drove the impoverished to attempt revolution, with the aim both of capturing control of the state and of effecting some kind of reallocation of property—most frequently in the form of a redistribution of land or the cancellation of debts.” The propertied, too, were wont to attempt revolution, on the side of oligarchy. These “revolutions” were most likely to be

successful when an outside power was called in by the revolutionaries, such as Athens (to help install democracy) or Sparta (to install oligarchy).⁷ It seems, incidentally, that Athens in the fifth century was possibly the only example in history of an imperial power that sought to create or strengthen *democracy* in the areas it dominated, and allied not with the upper class but the middle and lower. Athens suffered from less overt class warfare in this period than many other *poleis* did because of its stable and secure democracy; but you can see how bitterly the rich resented democracy and its leaders (whom they often called “demagogues”) in the writings of Plato, Isocrates, Xenophon, and others.

“In the political sphere, democracy barely held its own in the fourth century [the 300s B.C.], and in many cities outside Athens the class warfare which had already become widespread in the last quarter of the fifth century became more acute... Oligarchic and democratic leaders had no hesitation in calling on outside powers to help them gain the upper hand over their adversaries.” That’s incredible: the fiercely independent Greeks were willing to subordinate their independence to class advantage! Violent civil strife sometimes broke out between the classes. Tyranny, which had become rare, began to occur again, suggesting an intensification of class strife. “Rich and poor would regard each other with bitter hatred, and when a revolution succeeded there would be wholesale executions and banishments, and confiscation of the property of at least the leaders of the opposite party.” Many among the propertied classes wanted there to be a Greek crusade against Persia, since they thought this might provide land and a new hope for people who could no longer make a living at home. – This reminds me of what U.S. historians like Frederick Jackson Turner have argued: the vast, relatively empty Western lands in nineteenth-century America alleviated class tensions in the East, by drawing away millions of potentially rebellious immigrants and giving them new opportunities. Apparently the same useful function of land was recognized in ancient Greece. (And think of the Nazi obsession with *Lebensraum*. Again, it could lessen class conflict: one shouldn’t have oppressed and oppressors packed together too tightly.)

By the time of Philip II of Macedon, Alexander the Great’s father, the oligarchically minded all over Greece gave (treasonous) support to his conquest of their cities, because they understood he would be much more sympathetic to oligarchy than democracy. And indeed, the League of Corinth that he and Alexander organized prohibited redistribution of land, the cancellation of debts, the confiscation of property, and the altering of city constitutions. (America’s Founding Fathers, likewise, did what

⁷ “In the early fourth century, Xenophon in particular always takes it for granted that when there is a division within a city on class lines, the rich will naturally turn to Sparta, the demos to Athens.”

they could to prevent their elitist and rich-coddling Constitution from being altered, by making the process of amendment extremely cumbersome.)

So, the Hellenistic era. And then the suzerainty of Rome. In the early Hellenistic period the lower classes (especially among the city-dwellers, less so the peasants) may still have played an important part in the life of their *polis*, but very soon “there developed all over the Greek world a tendency for political power to become entirely concentrated in the hands of the propertied class. This development, or rather retrogression, was still by no means complete when the Romans took over, in the second century B.C. The Romans, whose governing class always detested democracy, intensified and accelerated the process; and by the third century of the Christian era the last remnants of the original democratic institutions of the Greek *poleis* had mostly ceased to exist for all practical purposes.” Athenian democracy was effectively destroyed by the Macedonian Antipater in 322/1 B.C. after Athens had risen up against Macedon’s rule and been defeated. The next fifty years were full of oligarchies, uprisings, blockades, and constitutional changes; after further vicissitudes the Roman general Sulla sacked Athens in 86 B.C., against “heroic and futile resistance” by the demos. In general, though, the Romans and the Hellenistic kings didn’t treat the Greek cities they dominated in an overly oppressive manner. The kings, at least, rarely even formally limited political power to a small class, feeling obliged to support democracy because it was so well established by tradition.

Nevertheless, after the fourth century B.C. there were several common oligarchic methods of subverting democracy. The first entailed control of the city Assembly by royal officials, magistrates, and the like. Another, from a more long-term perspective, was the gradual abolition of the popular courts (like the one that convicted Socrates), on which in a full Greek democracy all citizens were entitled to serve. The Romans sometimes made constitutional changes to limit democracy, but more often simply supported the local rich and encouraged them to take control of political life. As they were only too happy to do. As usual, therefore, it was the rich who were most inclined to be traitors or semi-quislings, or to cooperate in the subordination of their land to an overlord, because that was a way to protect their property and power.

Ste. Croix anticipates a later discussion when he says, “The most significant result of the destruction of Greek democracy was the complete disappearance of the limited measure of political protection afforded to the lower class against exploitation by the propertied, which became intensified in the early centuries of the Christian era and was one of the prime causes of the disintegration of a large part of the Roman empire between the fifth and seventh centuries [A.D.]” He also remarks that “modern historians [characteristically] have shown little concern with this aspect of the disappearance of democracy; and when they have noticed the disappearance at all, their interest in it has usually been submerged by attention to the supersession of ‘city-state’ or ‘republican’ forms of government (which of course may be either democratic or

oligarchic) by the monarchy of the Hellenistic kingdoms or of the Roman Principate.” *Political forms* matter more to most historians and other academics than *social content*. Doubtless it takes a little digging to unearth the class content behind political and social forms, but such content is, after all, the most important thing, which largely explains the rest.

Likewise, when reading primary sources, you should always keep in mind the class background, agenda, and prejudices of the author(s). When Cicero and other ancient thinkers praise republicanism and so forth, or exhort jurists in a court of law to heed “the welfare of the state, the safety of the community, and the immediate interests of the Republic,” you should know that by “republic” they mean the propertied few. Class is the prism through which they, and all of us, view the world, because it (i.e., access to resources, and to particular types of resources) predominantly shapes our experiences and judgments and aspirations.

The lower classes resisted the slow crushing of democracy, though in the long run without success. Demonstrations were organized in hippodromes or amphitheaters, sometimes in the presence of the Roman emperor; as a consequence of such activities, the imperial government was very leery of allowing any sort of combination or association among the lower orders in the Greek East. Not even fire-brigades or mutual benefit societies were always accepted, because their activities might become political. There were also riots, involving the lynching of some detested official or the destruction of a local magnate’s house for some cause like his refusing to distribute grain during a famine. –Thus does the ruling class reap what it sows.

The book isn’t focused on Rome as such but only insofar as it participated in the Greek cultural and linguistic world. Even so, Ste. Croix devotes a chapter to Rome for its own sake, so to speak. It begins with an illuminating discussion of the much-vaunted Roman genius for law, which turns out only to have been for civil law, not criminal or constitutional law. It certainly wasn’t a society “ruled by law”; even in the Principate (established by Augustus), not to mention the later Dominate, it was ruled much more by arbitrary power and discrimination on the grounds of social status and class. But its extraordinarily detailed civil law did hold property rights to be sacrosanct—which explains why Roman law was rediscovered and revived during Europe’s late-medieval transition to capitalism. Human rights are meaningless to capital, indeed a positive hindrance, while property rights are the be-all and end-all. Another interesting (though predictable) relation to the present is that the Romans shared the penchant of the U.S.’s rulers—and the rulers of every other imperial power in history—to justify their war-making in terms of *defense*. According to Cicero—“in whom we often find the choicest expression of any kind of Roman hypocrisy”—it was only by “defending their allies” that the Romans became “masters of all lands.” In fact, as one historian has said, “the peculiar Roman conception of defensive war...covered the prevention and elimination

of any *potential* menace to Roman power.” Hm, reminds me of the Bush II administration’s doctrine of preventive war, to justify invading and destroying Iraq. – There are only a few ideological tricks in the bag of the oppressors, so they have to keep reusing the same ones from time immemorial. (Whatever one may say about Bush and his cronies, *original* they were not.)

The Roman Republic was just as riven by class conflict as the Empire and the Greek *poleis*. In part, it took the form of conflict between Patricians and Plebeians, dating from the Republic’s very beginning in 508 B.C. These terms denoted orders, not classes, but, as always, there was a close relation between status and class. Truistically, “the Patricians were able to gain access to, and ultimately to monopolize, political power at Rome *because* they were by and large the *richest* families—in the mainly agrarian society of early Rome, the *largest landowners* above all.” There are always exceptions here and there, but the generalization is broadly true. The Plebeians were more heterogeneous, some of them even rich, but their goals were typically to lessen both political oppression and economic exploitation (as we would call it today). In 494 B.C. they were able to create the institution of the *tribune* to advocate for them. I won’t go into detail, since the history is easily accessible in popular books. The main point is that, in the long run, the “conflict of the orders” succeeded only in replacing the patrician oligarchy by a patricio-plebeian oligarchy that differed very little from the previous one in outlook and behavior. The governing class was thus broadened somewhat, as often happens in history—the social and economic discontent of the excluded masses gets suppressed while the richest among them are granted entry into the ruling elite⁸—and the influential position of its members came to be based even

⁸ Think of the modern European “bourgeois revolutions.” They didn’t immediately do much to end the oppression of workers and peasants (although sometimes the peasantry did benefit from the attacks on feudalism), but they did succeed in extending political representation to the hitherto excluded bourgeoisie. I recall a passage from a paper I wrote on the Russian Revolution: “The duality between the [worker-oriented] Petrograd Soviet and the [bourgeois-oriented] Provisional Government [between February and October 1917] points up the tension in every anti-*ancien régime*’ revolution between, on the one hand, the impoverished and semi-impoverished masses, including (certain sections of) the peasantry, the petty-bourgeoisie and the workers, and, on the other hand, the bourgeoisie or the ‘respectable classes’ who are striving for representation in the autocratic government. The latter groups tend to desire only political and legal reforms in the mold of liberalism, while the former desire something like a social revolution, including universal suffrage, radical democratization, and social equality. For example, in *The World Turned Upside Down* (1984), Christopher Hill notes with regard to the English civil wars of the mid-seventeenth century that *two* revolutions occurred: ‘The one which succeeded established the sacred rights of property (abolition of feudal tenures, no arbitrary taxation), gave political power to the propertied (sovereignty of Parliament and common law,

more on wealth rather than their status as patricians. It's clear, in any case, that Rome was never anything like a democracy.

As you know, the Republic succumbed to civil wars and Julius Caesar and finally the Empire. How can all this be explained? Ste. Croix starts by mentioning the *populares*, like the Gracchi, Catiline, Cadius, and Caesar, who were opposed by the *optimates*, like Cicero. The latter, of course, favored oligarchy and didn't want concessions made to the "starving, contemptible rabble," the "dregs of the city," the "indigent and unwashed," the "dirt and filth" (as Cicero said). The former, while not really democrats, took a more populist stance, advocating debt relief, distribution of grain to the poor, agrarian

abolition of prerogative courts), and removed all impediments to the triumph of the ideology of the men of property—the protestant ethic. There was, however, another revolution which never happened, though from time to time it threatened. This might have established communal property, a far wider democracy in political and legal institutions, might have disestablished the state church and rejected the protestant ethic.' The Levellers, the Seekers, the Ranters, the Diggers, and other such radical groups represented the revolution that might have happened. Similarly, in revolutionary France after 1788 a tension continually displayed itself between radical democracy and 'responsible' representative government. The same conflict flared up in 1848, when the French workers and bourgeoisie fought together against the monarchy—although, more accurately, it's always the workers (and petty-bourgeois) who do the actual fighting—only to part months later, when the bourgeoisie allied itself with the aristocracy in crushing a threatened popular revolution. A similar phenomenon was evident in Russia in 1905, with the workers fighting alongside the bourgeoisie though each distrusted the other. And in 1917, first the bourgeois revolution—exemplified by the establishment of the Provisional Government—triumphed, and then the popular revolution did, exemplified by the events of Red October, which were supposed by millions to have finally established the principle of soviet democracy. [They didn't; the Bolsheviks turned out to be just another elite that suppressed economic democracy, this time in the name of 'socialism.' Stalinism was the long-term consequence.] Generalizing, it's evident that in some cases the popular revolution fails, which may result in a narrow parliamentary government, limited suffrage, and a liberal social order conducive to the development of capitalism, while in other cases (e.g., Russia in late 1917, China in 1949, and perhaps certain Latin American countries for a few years before the return of capital-based authoritarianism), the popular revolution 'succeeds'—at least it appears to, temporarily—resulting in the suppression of landowners and capitalists. In 1917, the masses had the resources, the numbers, the circumstances, and the (ultimately traitorous) leaders to succeed, whereas in France in the 1790s they didn't (because industrialization had not yet begun, urbanization was in its infancy, etc.)." See, among many others, Christopher Read, *From Tsar to Soviets: The Russian People and Their Revolution, 1917–21* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: A History of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1996); and Roy Medvedev, *The October Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

reform, and defense of democratic elements in the constitution. “The *populares*, then, served as leaders of what was in a very real sense a political class struggle: a blind, spasmodic, uninformed, often misdirected and always easily confused movement, but a movement with deep roots, proceeding from men whose interests were fundamentally opposed to those of the ruling oligarchy...” Also relevant to the class struggle and civil wars was the fact that Rome was a great imperial power. Enormous wealth flowed to Rome’s elite as a result of its rapacity and plundering abroad. As with modern imperialism,⁹ the majority of the population received little direct benefit from the conquests, and in some cases was harmed. As one historian says, in the Late Republic the senators and equestrians—i.e., the nobility—who profited from the empire

did not use their newly acquired wealth for any economically productive purpose; they spent it either on luxury goods or on the acquisition of land. Their demand for luxuries encouraged a one-way traffic of imports into Italy, which provided employment for provincial craftsmen and profits to merchants both provincial and Italian. Their acquisition of land led to the pauperization of many of the Italian peasantry. The Italian lower classes lost rather than gained by the empire. Many of them lost their land and were recompensed only by cheap corn if they migrated to Rome, or meager pay in the army.

Much of the Italian peasantry in this era was impoverished by military conscription, which took them away from their productive activities; at the same time, the rich were getting richer and dispossessing the poor from their land. Discharged veterans had little or no property to support them when they returned home. Being as short-sighted as the oligarchs of the twenty-first century—who are only destroying their power in the long run by increasing it in the short run—the senatorial government refused to give even the poorer legionaries land. “Consequently the loyalty of discharged veterans, and of soldiers who knew they would otherwise be left without means on discharge, was deeply engaged to commanders [like Marius and, later, Caesar] who could be relied upon, in the teeth of senatorial opposition, to make land grants available to their veterans... This gave the commanders irresistible strength.” (It was Augustus who finally prepared the ground for a permanent standing army; and he and Tiberius ended conscription, though it returned later.) What happened, then, were the civil wars, between generals each with his own private army. Octavian—Augustus—was the final victor.

This is the kind of thing that happens when the rich get too rich and are given too much license to do as they want. They dismantle or ignore rules that aren’t in their

⁹ J. A. Hobson’s *Imperialism* (1905) gives a good analysis, much of which applies to our own day.

short-term interest, which inevitably causes a gradual disintegration of social bonds, of any kind of social compact, public-spiritedness, and the very fabric of society. Privatization destroys public goods, thus ultimately destroying society itself. Class polarization increases, and with it social discontent and instability, which creates opportunities (in certain historical contexts) for political and military adventurers. This is especially the case if savage imperialist practices have inured soldiers and commanders (and politicians, etc.) to war, such that they may visit war upon their own society. A gifted military commander or politician may emerge to break the stalemate, the polarization, between the classes and partially rescue society from its dysfunction; Gramsci's "Caesarism," as with Caesar himself or Augustus or Mussolini or Hitler, can step into the breach and cut the Gordian knot (to mix metaphors) by means of violence or terror and dictatorship. The propertied class remains on top, but concessions are given to the masses for the sake of preserving the social and economic order. What's amazing, with respect to Rome, is how durable Octavian's Caesarist intervention was, enabling Rome to last several centuries longer! The man was obviously a political genius.

Machiavelli describes an important aspect of the emperor's role well. As Ste. Croix says, "Augustus and many of his successors would have applauded the fascinating passage from the *Discourses on the First Decade of Livy*, in which Machiavelli recognizes the necessity, in a state containing over-powerful *gentiluomini* of the kind he so detested (bearing a striking resemblance to the Roman landed aristocracy), for a monarch with 'absolute and overwhelming power,' to restrain the excesses of 'the powerful.'" The essential role of the emperor, like that of modern presidents and prime ministers, was "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," a role that necessitated regulation and reining-in of the upper class's savage instincts. In the Later Empire, when barbarian incursions became more frequent, the emperor had to step up the exploitation and extract more taxes by making serfdom *de jure*, not only *de facto*. This also, combined with the regime's life-and-death situation, necessitated the emperor's assumption of even more autocratic power than before (though still to some extent disguised by the legal fictions and institutionalized tactfulness of which Augustus had set the precedent, to avoid offending the Senate).

Ste. Croix's chapter on "the class struggle on the ideological plane" has some interesting passages, although, because it deals with mere ideology, it's less fruitful than the other chapters. It starts out with a consideration of the very great importance of sheer terror and violence in keeping the propertied in power—tactics that the Romans perfected. The Greeks were more humane, doubtless in part because they didn't have a vast empire to control. More interesting are the intellectual and ideological tricks that the ancients—and all ruling classes—(have) used to justify oligarchy (usually without admitting to themselves that what they're justifying is oligarchy). Probably the most

universal one, from antiquity up to the twentieth century and our own day, is the Platonic argument that only those people intellectually qualified and trained for ruling should have power; others, while doubtless performing essential social and economic functions, should stick to their (subordinate) calling, so to speak, and not irresponsibly interfere with governance. As Noam Chomsky likes to remind us, this ideology was shared by liberal American intellectuals like Walter Lippmann and Edward Bernays, who helped found the public-relations industry (a euphemism for the propaganda industry, as it was more honestly called in the early twentieth century). “The bewildered herd” should stay out of the way and consent to being governed by “a specialized class whose interests reach beyond the locality” (Lippmann). These ideas aren’t always articulated, because they don’t sound very democratic, but of course nearly everyone who participates in governing believes them. Their plausibility is another question entirely, which at least partly has to be answered in the negative. Certainly some training is required to govern, in some cases some specialized knowledge, etc.; but when you reflect on how well and “disinterestedly” the powerful in history have carried out their “sacred obligation” to rule benevolently, you begin to doubt the soundness of the argument. If anything, the powerful have usually been more self-interested and short-sighted than their subjects, who, when they get the chance—as with the contemporary movement called “participatory budgeting”—regularly determine the proper priorities of government far more effectively than the rich and/or powerful do.

The Greek notion of *natural slavery* wouldn’t be accepted by most of the elite now, at least not without modification, but it isn’t far from the Social Darwinism that the rich love. It’s hard to imagine many of the privileged not agreeing with Plato that “those who wallow in great ignorance and baseness” *belong* as slaves, or rather as the lower classes. (Ironic that the great ignorance and baseness has usually been on the side of those who call others ignorant and base.) “Some people are born weak,” etc. Class privilege manufactures such ways of thinking, because people are born to rationalize. While the idea of natural slavery wasn’t widely accepted for very long, slavery itself was rarely questioned in antiquity—at least according to surviving records. Even Christians didn’t question it, with a few marginal exceptions. (As always, an ideology is adapted to material realities. It would have been odd if most Christians had questioned such fundamental institutions as slavery and serfdom.)

Nor were the ancients (at least the “respectable” ones whose writings survive) prone to questioning the rights of property. “It is property that confers rank,” Ovid said. The Elder Seneca said, “It is property that raises to the rank of senator, property that differentiates the Roman *equus* from the plebs, property that brings promotion in the army, property that provides the qualification for judges in the forum.” Cicero thought the primary function of a state was to protect private property rights. And there are other examples. The Jews were different, because of their different

socioeconomic context (the provinces, the countryside)—and for Jesus it was a positive evil to have a lot of property, which could prevent someone from getting into heaven—but such radical ideas were partially cast off as Christianity migrated from the *chora*, the countryside, to the *polis*, the Graeco-Roman city. Later, it was only among the *heretical* Christian thinkers that private property was condemned. I'll copy here some thoughts Ste. Croix inserts after his long discussion of early Christians' obsessive persecution of each other, because the points he makes are good Marxist ones:

I doubt if a better means could have been devised of distracting the victims of the class struggle from thinking about their own grievances and possible ways of remedying them than representing to them, as their ecclesiastical leaders did, that religious issues were infinitely more important than social, economic or political ones, and that it was heretics and schismatics (not to mention pagans, Manichees, Jews, and other "lesser breeds without the Law") upon whom their resentment could most profitably be concentrated... [They were taught that] their real enemies were those enemies of God and his Church who, if they were not suppressed, would endanger men's immortal souls and bring them to perdition. "Heretics" and "schismatics," as well as "unbelievers," were an entirely new kind of internal enemy, invented by Christianity, upon whom the wrath of "right-thinking people" could be concentrated, for in paganism the phenomena of "heresy" and "schism," as well as "unbelief," were inconceivable: there was no "correct" dogma in which it was necessary to believe in order to avoid anathema in this world and damnation in the next, and to secure eternal life; and there was nothing remotely resembling a single, universal Church. We may reflect by contrast upon the good fortune of the mass of Greeks in the Classical period, who had no such beliefs instilled into them, to prevent them from recognizing who their real internal enemies were, and to persuade them that democracy was a useless if not an impious aim, since "the powers that be are ordained of God" [as St. Paul said].

You see here how this sort of dogmatic religion was, perhaps, the first ideology to fulfill a function like that of nationalism, fascism, and Nazism later: it distracted from real issues, fabricated pretend internal and external enemies, and was therefore ultimately embraced by power-structures. *Always* the masses must be divided in order to be conquered.

Okay, now for the final chapter in the history: the decline and fall of Rome. Ste. Croix begins with the gradual whittling away of the legal rights of the poorer classes, from the first century A.D. to the third. In 212 Roman citizenship was extended to nearly all the free inhabitants of the empire, but this meant very little; it was probably mainly an excuse to tax them more. Citizenship had come to mean less and less as a

new set of social and juridical distinctions had arisen that were more important; and these distinctions were, on the whole, class distinctions. “For all practical purposes the constitutional rights to which an inhabitant of the Graeco-Roman world was entitled by at any rate the early third century depended hardly at all upon whether he was a Roman citizen, but, broadly speaking, on whether he was a member of what I shall call ‘the privileged groups’: namely, senatorial, equestrian and curial families,¹⁰ veterans and their children, and (for some purposes) serving soldiers.” The people below the privileged groups were the lower classes, who possessed little or no property; and, except for veterans and soldiers, who were of unique importance to the empire (its ruling class) and so were worth protecting, the privileged groups had by the third century become almost identical with the propertied class, i.e., those who could live in relative leisure off the proceeds of their property.

There were several differences between the two groups. For one thing, according to the “dual penalty system” the privileged received lighter punishments, for example decapitation instead of crucifixion, burning to death, or being eaten by animals. They were exempt from flogging and from torture (which was frequently used in court), and it was easier for them to avoid imprisonment pending trial. Evidence given in court by members of the lower classes was accorded less weight than that of their social superiors. And so on. These kinds of inequalities are of course almost universal in history, and very much present in our own society. (Higher rates of incarceration of black males for nonviolent crimes than white males, etc.) More pertinently, the legal differences mentioned show it was becoming easier to exploit the humbler free people than it had been in the past—and, again, exploiting them was also more necessary, because the elite was becoming more directly dependent for its surplus on the free or quasi-free people than the (diminishing number of) slaves.

It was expedient to develop these new, largely class-determined distinctions because Roman citizenship, on which earlier privileges had been based, had, by its gradual extension, long ceased to be a class-specific thing.

The fiscal burdens of the Roman state began to get severe in the reign of Marcus Aurelius, between 161 and 180 A.D., because of ever more barbarian irruptions and the necessity to defend Rome. It was around this time that financial pressures on the curial order—to which belonged smaller landowners than senators—began to ruin some of its lower members. Public services of all kinds were demanded of them, which they couldn’t afford. Their decline is shown by the fact that in the late fourth century the emperors even made it permissible to flog them mercilessly, sometimes to death. The richer ones might be able to finagle their way into the senatorial ranks—in part to avoid

¹⁰ The curial order consisted of the members of the city Councils and their families, who eventually became a hereditary local governing class.

these dreaded floggings—but the situation of the poorer ones deteriorated. Exploitation and the class struggle thus worked their way up into the elite itself, and started to polarize it. Eventually the *curiales* “were reduced to little more than minor local officials responsible for tax-collection and the performance of other public duties,” with very little real power.

“The whole process brings out admirably the complete control exercised over the whole Graeco-Roman world by the very highest class, of senators and equestrians—who had merged into a single order by at least the beginning of the fifth century. There were now more grades within the senatorial order... The utter lack of any kind of real power below the highest class left even men of some property and local distinction helpless subjects of the great... The screw, having already been tightened at the bottom of the social scale by landlords and tax-collectors about as far as it would safely go, and indeed further, had from the later second century onwards (as the situation of the empire became less favorable), and regularly during the third, to be put on the curial class, as the only alternative to the increased taxation of the really rich, which they would never have endured.” More and more polarization as the top tenth of one percent gets ever richer. –Wait, that sounds familiar...¹¹

Edward Gibbon called the process of disintegration of the Roman empire “the greatest, perhaps, and most awful scene in the history of mankind.” He was wrong—that distinction surely belongs to the transport of millions of Africans to the Americas, as W. E. B. DuBois thought—but the opinion is understandable. (The collapse of Rome, however, will seem as nothing compared to the collapse of the present world-system in the coming century or two.) The tearing apart of first the Western Empire and then the Eastern, by the Arabs and many others, coincided with an intensification of horrors by the Roman overlords, including the much more frequent use of torture and mutilation, not to mention extortionate taxation of the lower classes. Corruption was rampant; poor men accused of crimes rotted in Roman prisons for months even before the trial happened. (Luckily that kind of thing never happens anymore! Oh, wait...) Civil wars between rival claimants for the throne broke out at the time of the barbarian invasions, and plagues had disastrous consequences for the population. And the innumerable wars! Meanwhile, to quote an anonymous ancient author, “the houses of the powerful were crammed full and their splendor enhanced to the destruction of the poor, the poorer classes of course being held down by force. But the poor were driven by their afflictions into various criminal enterprises, and losing sight of all respect for the law, all feelings of loyalty, they entrusted their revenge to crime. For they inflicted the most severe injuries on the empire, laying waste the fields, breaking the peace with

¹¹ See Peter Coy, “The Richest Rich Are in a Class by Themselves,” *Business Week*, April 3, 2014.

outbursts of brigandage, stirring up animosities; and passing from one crime to another they supported usurpers.”

The huge army and civil service became a “fearful burden” on the Graeco-Roman economy, sucking up more and more surplus from the peasantry above all. In addition, from the second decade of the fourth century onwards the new economic burden of a large body of clerics, monks, and nuns appeared. There were probably hundreds of thousands of them by the mid-fifth century. Most of these clerics had been withdrawn from production and so couldn’t be exploited by the upper class or contribute financially to the maintenance of the state. The Church itself, which became fabulously wealthy, was given much money by the state and by offerings of the faithful—and the Church was economically unproductive, a giant parasite. The incomes of bishops were sometimes larger than that of any provincial governor. “The staffing of the Church absorbed far more manpower than did the secular administration [of the empire] and the Church’s salary bill was far heavier than that of the empire.” (On the other hand, the Church did give perhaps a quarter of the income of its endowment to charity. So that was useful.)

I’ll quote the book’s last paragraph:

I hope it is now clear how I would explain, through a class analysis, the ultimate disintegration of a large part of the Roman empire—although of course a Greek core, centered above all in Asia Minor, did survive for centuries [as the Byzantine empire]. I would keep firmly in view the process of exploitation which is what I mean primarily when I speak of a “class struggle.” As I see it, the Roman political system (especially when Greek democracy had been wiped out) facilitated a most intense and ultimately destructive economic exploitation of the great mass of the people, whether slave or free, and it made radical reform impossible. The result was that the propertied class, the men of real wealth, who had deliberately created this system for their own benefit, drained the life-blood from their world and thus destroyed Graeco-Roman civilization over a large part of the empire¹²... That, I believe, was the principal reason for the decline of Classical civilization. I would suggest that the causes of the decline were above all economic and social. The very hierarchical political structure of the Roman empire, of course, played an important part; but it was precisely the propertied class which in the long run monopolized political power, with the definite

¹² Speaking of draining life-blood, see Steve Johnson, “Capital gobbles labour’s share, but victory is empty,” *Financial Times*, October 13, 2013. As the wealthy get richer and richer, aggregate demand shrinks, which leads to economic stagnation and crisis. Ultimately, perhaps, revolution.

purpose of maintaining and increasing its share of the comparatively small surplus that could be extracted from the primary producers. By non-Marxist historians this process has normally been described as if it were a more or less automatic one, something that “just happened.” ...[As Peter Brown says,] “Altogether, the prosperity of the Mediterranean world seems to have *drained to the top*” (my italics)—Brown is speaking of the fourth century, and he has just mentioned that in the western part of the empire, in that century, the senatorial aristocracy was “five times richer, on the average, than the senators of the first century.” ...If I were in search of a metaphor to describe the great and growing concentration of wealth in the hands of the upper classes, I would not incline towards anything so innocent and so automatic as drainage: I should want to think in terms of something much more purposive and deliberate—perhaps the vampire bat. The burden of maintaining the imperial military and bureaucratic machine, and the Church, in addition to a leisured class consisting mainly of absentee landowners, fell primarily upon the peasantry, who formed the great bulk of the population; and, ironically enough (as I have already explained), the remarkable military and administrative reorganization effected by a series of very able emperors from the late third century to the end of the fourth (from Diocletian and Constantine to Theodosius I) succeeded in creating an even greater number of economically “idle mouths” and thus increased the burdens upon an already overburdened peasantry. The peasants were seldom able to revolt at all, and never successfully: the imperial military machine saw to that... But the merciless exploitation of the peasants made many of them receive, if not with enthusiasm at least with indifference, the barbarian invaders who might at least be expected—vainly, as it usually turned out—to shatter the oppressive imperial financial machine. Those who have been chastised with scorpions may hope for something better if they think they will be chastised only with whips. [A reference to a verse in the Old Testament.]

Such is the story of the Roman empire, and of human history.