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review of *The Struggle over Class: Socioeconomic Analysis of Ancient Christian Texts*

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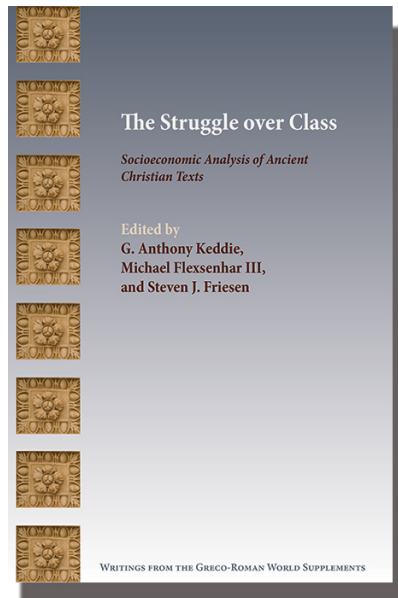
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G. Anthony Keddie, Michael Flexenhar, and Steven J. Friesen, eds.

The Struggle over Class: Socioeconomic Analysis of Ancient Christian Texts

Writings from the Greco-Roman World Supplement
Series 19

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Most of the essays in *The Struggle over Class*, Anthony Keddie writes in the introduction to the volume, were first presented at SBL Annual Meetings in 2016 and 2017. The contributions critically and constructively assess the ways in which the category of class has been utilized in the study of ancient Christian texts. The volume is divided into five parts treating (1) Pauline Epistles, (2) Synoptic Gospels, (3) the Gospel of John and the Acts of the Apostles, (4) apocalyptic literature, and (5) patristic literature. With the exception of part 3, each section is followed by a critical assessment. The various contributors disagree significantly about how class ought to be defined and in their assessments of the utility of the concept; in doing so they provide a revealing snapshot of where the guild of biblical studies currently stands on what has historically been a contentious issue.

The introduction by Keddie outlines five approaches to the study of class in antiquity: the gradational approach divides populations into stratified levels based broadly on income; the Marxist approach defines class in terms of ownership of the means of production and exploitation: those who own the means of production hire those who do not to perform productive labor that is not remunerated at a rate in accordance with its real value; the Weberian approach defines class in terms of “differentials of privilege” and opportunities in life (17); the Bourdieusian approach understands class to entail “a system of objective determinations” in which economic capital is monopolized by dominant groups who promote systems of evaluation and social praxis (*habitus*)

that justify and naturalize the differential access to economic resources from which they benefit; and intersectional approaches analyze class as it is linked to systems of sociopolitical inequalities including “gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, citizenship, age, and ability” (31). The introduction does an excellent job of providing basic definitions and parameters to situate the essays that follow, which is not to say that there are no surprises in store.

The first essay of part 1, by Cavan Concannon, argues that “a return to traditional class analysis is [not] a useful step forward” (54); building on the work of Jacques Rancière, Gilles Deleuze, and Bruno Latour, Concannon prefers not to think in terms of classes, the ideological construction of which entails the condensation of “difference and multiplicity into discrete and essentialized identities” (59); the notion of ever-shifting assemblages and networks of persons, places, and objects is proposed as a more viable alternative. In the second essay, Caroline Johnson Hodge notes that class analysis is too blunt an instrument to account for the “complexity of power dynamics in the household” (78). Due to “its ability to analyze the larger structure, [and] the micro-movement of individual action, as well as the ways these are mediated by subjects, [feminist analysis] presents an integrated and flexible approach ... [for] analyzing power and agency among subordinate members of the household,” including women and slaves (88). Apparently collapsing the categories of class and status (97, 104, 115), Alan Cadwallader argues that the “basic class division” in Mediterranean antiquity was that between slave and free; that said (Cadwallader continues), interpreters must reckon with a complex variety of legal arrangements governing slaves, including Roman legal codes and the local norms of cities and provinces. Jennifer Quigley argues that class analysis must be augmented by *theo-economics*, “an intertwined theological and economic logic in which divine and human beings regularly enter into financial transactions with one another” (123). In Paul’s letter to the Philippians, Christ is regarded as a financial profit that might be acquired as the result of material and symbolic transactions. A critical response by Philip Esler rounds out part 1.

Opening part 2, James Crossley offers an overview of the ways in which notions of class have been either utilized or avoided, in part due to national-ideological conflicts over Marxism and Communism in the twentieth century; liberal Protestantism tended to promote reconstructions of early Christianity in which “it should appeal to the working classes but should not be seen as a revolutionary proletarian movement with the aim of restructuring society” (168). The Synoptic Gospels offer ample evidence of class conflict, even if Jesus’s own brand of apocalyptic expectation “was never realistically going to do much about political power or transform the world in any obvious way” (179). Alicia Batten argues that class (defined in terms of role within a system of production and relation to exploitation) and status (defined in terms of [1] political-legal designation and [2] prestige) should not be played against one another; rather, the two factors interact. The Gospel of Mark features class-based political satire: Herod, wealthy but lacking masculine self-control, serves a gruesome banquet in which John’s head appears on a platter (Mark 6:17–29), while Jesus, although not rich, feeds five thousand with “bread and fresh fish” (6:30–44).

Drawing from Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Keddie develops the notion of class *habitus*, referring to a set of dispositions “conditioned by economic position but ... ultimately determined by conscious and unconscious cultural practices that link individuals with broader cultural collectivities” (211). Keddie shows that the Gospel of Matthew utilizes distinctions between elite and nonelite burial practices as a means of portraying the Pharisees as “nouveau riche who go too far in flaunting their wealth and status” (227). In his response, Zeba Crook rejects class as an analytical tool for antiquity because he sees no evidence of “class consciousness” in the texts; he prefers the categories of status (defined in terms of honor) and stratification, although recognizing the need to attend to issues of “economic injustice” and the social structures that perpetuate unequal distributions of resources.

Part 3 includes a stand-alone essay in which Christina Petterson notes two definitions of class, referring to (1) (objective) “access to means of production” and the socioeconomic organization of society into ruled and ruling classes, and (2) (subjective) “a collective consciousness defined over against a class enemy” (255). Petterson finds evidence of class struggle in Acts, whose author “identifies with the [overmastering] view of slaveholders” (260) while minimizing the voices and agency of slaves: “while the text is not a story *about* class struggle, it is a product *of* class struggle” (263). By reinterpreting bread, water, and labor in symbolic terms, the author of the Gospel of John exposes his own “ruling class perspective” (266).

In part 4, Lorenzo DiTommaso quickly dismisses the value of class analysis for the study of ancient apocalyptic literature on the grounds that “the capitalized market economy and industrialized means of production that are necessary to the modern notion of class consciousness have no analogues in premodern contexts” (301). DiTommaso insists that “the prime function of apocalyptic speculation [is] to preserve, reinforce, and valorize group identity” (307), Rev 18’s tirade against the Roman trade in luxury items notwithstanding. Emma Wasserman problematizes readings of apocalyptic literature as “anti-imperial and politically subversive” (313), pointing to the ways in which Jewish apocalyptic texts “imagine a cosmos that is organized, unified, and justly ruled” within a hierarchized “cosmopolitical order” in which empires such as the Seleucids are understood as subordinate to the authority of the god of Israel; consequently, the “violent, monstrous kingdoms [of apocalypses] are construed as carrying out the will of heaven” (325); Paul espouses a similar view in 1 Corinthians. Steven Friesen notes that “class is normally defined in a way that makes it ineffective for the analysis of ancient economies” (348 n. 3) and as a remedy proposes three categories that are applicable to the study of antiquity: the *surplus accumulation* [or “extractor”] *class* own land and business interests that allow them to accumulate large surpluses and exert inordinate control over the mechanisms of government and religion; the *surplus generation class* includes those whose labor generates a surplus, much of which is extracted by members of the extractor class; the *underclass* is marginally involved in production and derives little benefit from economic activity. Friesen shows how Roman ideologies legitimizing extraction and exploitation are demystified (or *remystified*) when Roma is portrayed as a prostitute in the book of Revelation, while kings, wholesalers, and shippers are criticized for trading in luxury goods

(Rev 17–18). In her response, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza advocates a feminist, intersectional analysis labeled *kyriarchy*: “a theory of structural power that articulates multiple intersecting and interacting structures of power and domination” (367) of which class is one, alongside gender, race, ethnicity, and colonialism.

In part 5, Michael Flexsenhar notes how Tertullian advises, harangues, and cajoles wealthy women in an attempt to have them marry or remarry within the church, whose pool of eligible males consisted of the less affluent, rather than marrying wealthier non-Christian men: “In this way, gender relations were also a form of class relations; controlling women was a pivotal form of property exchange in Tertullian’s church” (386). Jaclyn Maxwell shows that, although Gregory of Nyssa “is emphatic about the equality of all humans and the requirement to care for the economically poor,” in effect he advocates a system that unequally allocated prestige based on wealth: by displaying “voluntary humility” and “deliberate poverty” through the avoidance of overt displays of wealth and donating funds to the church, the wealthy become “poor in spirit” (echoing Matt 5:3) and are accorded prestige for doing so, an avenue of honor-capture not open to those who are *actually* poor. I note that Maxwell adduces an example of a phenomenon described by Pierre Bourdieu (2006): the criteria by which prestige is allocated may represent economic capital in a mystified form (i.e., ideologically displaced so as to render their basis in economic capital less obviously recognizable). In the response to part 5, Daniëlle Sloopjes notes that the term *class* is often used without a precise definition. The response—and the volume—closes with a quote from G. E. M. de Ste. Croix: those who engage in class analysis must define the term, and its value should be assessed based on its “clarity and consistency, the extent to which it corresponds with the historical realities to which it is applied, and its fruitfulness as a tool of historical and sociological analysis” (431).

As this chapter summary already makes clear, the positions of the various contributors vary widely in terms of how class is defined, how its utility is assessed, and the extent to which it is constructively engaged. Rather than detracting from the volume, however, the plurality of approaches, taken together, tends to highlight and sharpen the methodological issues at stake. In order to provide a potentially useful point of reference for readers, I attempt to synthesize the multiple perspectives into an accessible format in table 1 below. The table incorporates elements of a Marxian understanding of class, supplemented by a multivariate, intersectional analysis (per Johnson Hodge and Schüssler Fiorenza). Expropriation (per Bang 2012; Boer 2015) and age are included, even though they receive scant attention in the volume. The table is intended to provide a flexible template for economic analysis to which elements could be added or removed to serve the particular needs and interests of researchers and students who would like to pursue issues raised in the volume. In conclusion, the volume is highly recommended for all who are interested in economic approaches to the early Jesus movement; it will serve as an indispensable guide to the topic of class for years to come.

Table 1. Some elements of a multivariate economic analysis, including class

	Class ^a ("objective")	Status, ^b types 1 and 2	Class- ification (subjective/ ideological) ^c	Stratification ^d	Ethnicity/ geographic region ^e	Gender ^f	Age ^g	Sources of income
means of extraction	expropriation	(1) socio- political- economic identifier	"rich"/"poor, " etc.	high/middle/ low	expropriator/ expropriated (e.g., untaxed/ taxed)	gender- based economic roles and legal rights	minority, majority, old age	wages, rents, gifts, etc.
	exploitation	(2) prestige		ES/PS 1–7	legal/ political/ economic rights		relation to labor/ produc- tion	
	labor performed			decile, percentile, etc.				
	relation to means of production							

References consisting of a last name without date refer to an essay in the book under review; those including dates refer to items listed in the bibliography below.

a. For expropriation and exploitation as two forms of economic extraction, see Boer 2015.

b. Status may be subdivided into two types, referring to (1) social-political-economic identifier (e.g., husband, wife, merchant, soldier, senator, etc.) and (2) prestige. For a view on the relation of prestige to economic capital, see Bourdieu 2006. Type 1 status ought not to be played against the category of "class"; it is rather a prerequisite to assigning a class category. Marx presupposes the importance of type 1 status indicators in economic analysis, even if he does not theorize them as such (see, e.g., the quotation in Petterson 254). For the distinction between two types of status, see Batten 188–92 and Blanton 2017, 78–80.

c. Keddie 2018 demonstrates that classifications such as rich/poor can involve ideological attempts to mobilize constituencies; Petterson explains the "objective" ("class-in-itself") and "subjective" ("class-for-itself") distinction.

d. ES = "economic scale" (Longenecker 2010); PS = "poverty scale" (Friesen 2004); Keddie 5–8; Crook 239–42. It is integral to economic analysis to compare levels of wealth; this however does not substitute for a discussion of the politico-economic relations that generate such differentials.

e. See, e.g., Hollander 2022; Keddie 2022.

f. See esp. Johnson Hodge, Schüssler Fiorenza, and Flexsenhar.

g. Relations to labor and the means of production change over the life course.

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