

# ○ THE ACTUALITY OF KARL KAUTSKY

## ON MATERIALIST RECONSTRUCTIONS OF ANCIENT ISRAEL AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY

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In Karl Kautsky's search for the origins and sustained strength of that 'colossal phenomenon' called Christianity, he delves back to make the first Marxist reconstruction of the social and economic context in which the Bible arose. His *Foundations of Christianity* is, in other words, a Marxist reconstruction of the economic history of ancient Israel, the Ancient Near East and early Christianity. For all its flaws, the great value of the book is that it begins what is still an unfinished project. For me, the enticement is to take that project further. In doing so, I focus not on the flaws in his reconstruction, but rather on the questions that are still important now. So I begin with the troubled use of unreliable ancient texts like the Bible for the sake of historical reconstruction, an issue that is still very much at the centre of biblical scholarship. If they are chronically unreliable sources, then what historical use (if any) do they have? Secondly, I engage critically with Kautsky's reconstruction, seeking insights that are still pertinent today. I am particularly interested in his use of the narrative of differentiation, in his discussion of modes of production, especially his argument for a slave mode of production in both the Ancient Near East and the Hellenistic world, in what a new reconstruction in Kautsky's spirit might look like (what I call 'the sacred economy'), and in the problem of transitions between modes of production. Third, I pick up an argument he shares with his sometime friend and comrade, Rosa Luxemburg: if early Christianity was a communist movement, then what sort of communism was it? Yet, Kautsky's interest was much wider than Christian communism, for one of his projects was to recover a much greater tradition of socialist thought and practice, one that predates Marx and Engels' 'modern' socialism. Christian communism becomes an important moment in this longer tradition. At this point I bring in his *Thomas More and His Utopia* (Kautsky 2002 [1888]) as well as *Communism in Central Europe in the Time of the Reformation* (Kautsky 2002 [1897]). Finally, I develop the further the argument that it was and remains a powerful political myth: it probably never existed, but that only enhances its mythical status.

I must admit that when I first opened Karl Kautsky's *Foundations of Christianity* (2001 [1908]). I was expecting a dated and doctrinaire materialist polemic against Christianity. After all, the book is a century old, being first published in 1908. Even more, Kautsky often comes across as one of the scholastics of Marxism, a lesser intellect who followed in the path laid out by the founders. As one who had met the 'old man' himself during his stay in England from 1885 to 1890 and who had become a good friend of Engels before his death in 1895, he seemed like an apostle whose job it became to consolidate and develop what Marx and Engels had laid down. The image I had was a Marxist scholastic, an urbane and civilised politician (with the dreadful taint of having voted for war credits in the Reichstag in 1914, although he did change his mind later) whose writings were too voluminous to have the desired depth.

By contrast, *Foundations of Christianity* is well worth a read, for although Kautsky could have used fewer words, there are a good number of insights that pay some consideration. The great value of that work, for all its flaws, is that it begins what are still unfinished projects, namely a Marxist reconstruction of the social and economic context in which the Bible arose

and the effort to reconstruct a longer history of communist thought and action that pre-dates Marx and Engels. As for the first, it is nothing less than a reconstruction of the history of ancient Israel, the Ancient Near East and early Christianity. As for the second, he argues for the crucial role of religion in these pre-Marxist forms of communism, however incomplete they may turn out to be. While Kautsky raises some of the crucial questions in these projects, his book is only a (somewhat flawed) beginning. In other words, Kautsky's text is full of enticement, since in its incompleteness and false paths it beckons one to go further – which is precisely what I will do on more than one occasion.

Yet, why did Kautsky want to reconstruct this history? Here I can let him speak for himself:

Whatever one's position may be with respect to Christianity, it certainly must be recognized as one of the most titanic phenomena in all human history... Anything that helps us to understand this colossal phenomenon, including the study of its origin, is of great and immediate practical significance, even though it takes us back thousands of years (Kautsky 2001 [1908]: 1).<sup>1</sup>

How is it that a phenomenon such as Christianity arose? What were the economic, political and social conditions in which it began? And how are we to understand the texts that Christianity and Judaism regard as sacred? It is less a case of trying to understand the enemy better, or indeed, like Gramsci, to learn something from the first and most enduring global movement; rather, in the act of rewriting or recasting that history, Kautsky both challenges the received histories of Israel and the church and opens up new possibilities from that history. In other words: rewrite history and you rewrite the possible paths of the future.

I have organised my analysis as follows. After a brief synopsis of his argument, I focus on the troubled use of unreliable ancient texts like the Bible for the sake of historical reconstruction, an issue that is still very much at the centre of biblical scholarship. If they are chronically unreliable sources, then what historical use (if any) do they have? At this point I bring Kautsky into conversation with a major current debate in biblical scholarship over this issue. Secondly, I engage critically with Kautsky's reconstruction, seeking out both problems and insights that are still pertinent today. I am particularly interested in his use of the narrative of differentiation, in his discussion of modes of production, in what a reconstruction in Kautsky's spirit might look like, and in the problem of transitions between modes of production. Third, I pick up an argument he shares with his sometime friend and comrade, Rosa Luxemburg; if early Christianity was a communist movement, then what sort of communism was it? Yet, Kautsky's interest was much wider than Christian communism, for one of his projects was to recover a much greater tradition of socialist thought and practice, one that predates Marx and Engels' 'modern' socialism. Christian communism becomes an important moment in this longer tradition. At this point I bring in his *Thomas More and His Utopia* (Kautsky 2002 [1888]) as well as *Communism in Central Europe in the Time of the Reformation* (Kautsky 2002 [1897]). If Thomas More is the first modern socialist with a deep religious motivation, then the various revolutionary movements during the Reformation are other moments in religiously inspired communism. Like Christian communism, they dip into what I want to call the myth of primitive communism, but they are also incomplete anticipations of the full communism of Marx and Engels. In this respect he draws close to Ernst Bloch's *Atheism in Christianity* (Bloch 1972; 1985, vol. 14).<sup>2</sup> Although Kautsky

is far more interested in historical reconstruction, he shares an interest in the utopian possibilities of Christianity, albeit without Bloch's irrepressible enthusiasm. Above all, Kautsky manifests a fascination with distinctly religious forms of communism.

## **TEXT, HISTORY, CONTEXT**

In his effort at historical reconstruction, what interests me most is Kautsky's argument that the Bible is a cultural product of a distinct socio-economic context and history. It seems to me that such an argument is possible within a Marxist framework in which culture, economics, society and so on are inter-related parts of a whole. Thus, the Bible does not provide factual data about the supposed 'events' of which it speaks; it is instead the product of a culture (or cultures) within a social and economic formation. Let us see how he gets to this point.

*Foundations of Christianity* is an ambitious book, beginning with the person of Jesus in both pagan and Christian sources. Carefully assessing the information in light of New Testament scholarship of his time, Kautsky argues that around this everyday rebel a whole cluster of super-human stories grew, stories that became the New Testament. Needless to say, he wants to cut through the mythical and legendary accretions and offer a historical materialist analysis. That analysis focuses initially on the reconstructing the economic, social and political context of Jesus within the slave mode of production of the Roman Empire, invoking some key Marxist points concerning the technological limits of such a mode of production and the reason for its breakdown. From there, Kautsky tracks backwards to offer a history that runs from the origins of Israel through to the early Christian movement. Here again he reconstructs the underlying social formation, arguing that it was another form of the slave mode of production. The final section comes back to Christianity, where he expands on the famous argument concerning early Christian communism, where it fell short and how it was subverted in the later history of the church, only to carry on a half-life within monasticism. But what this reconstruction does do, quite refreshingly, is break with the linear narrative assumptions of so much historiography which still falls under the spell of moving from origin to close. At another level, Kautsky's arrangement makes more sense, for his concern is Christianity, particularly how it arose and how it became a worldwide movement. In this light, the logical point at which to begin is the figure of Jesus of Nazareth. From there he can spread his analysis in order to seek the economic and social context, the pre-history and post-history of the Jesus-event itself.

## **THE SLIPPERINESS OF SACRED TEXTS**

There is, however, a preliminary question. When he comes to the socio-economic reconstruction of ancient Israel he bumps up against an old and persistent problem: 'It is impossible to outline a picture of ancient Israel with any certainty, given the scarcity and the unreliability of the sources that have come down to us... Basically we are reduced to hypotheses when we try to form an idea of the course of the development of Israelite society' (Kautsky 2001 [1908]: 151). So also with the Christian sources regarding Jesus which manifest a 'complete indifference to the truth' (Kautsky 2001 [1908]: 19). However much he falls away from this point, resorting to the treacherous terrain of biblical narrative too often in his search for a historical core when all else fails, it echoes loudly in present day debates in biblical criticism. If we take the Hebrew Bible, some would grant far greater credence to the reliability of the biblical material (e.g. Dever 2001;

Day 2004; McKenzie 2000), while others argue that it is entirely useless for such a reconstruction, and anyone who relies upon it produces pseudo-history in the shape of rationalist paraphrase (Lemche 1988, 1998a, 1998b; Thompson 1992, 1999; Davies 1995). And these are all critical biblical scholars and not some fundamentalist variety that takes the Bible as the inerrant ‘word of God’.

Let me say a little more about this very contemporary and heated debate in biblical studies, for it sets the context of Kautsky’s own scepticism regarding the biblical text as historical evidence. At the moment when a (largely conservative US-based) status quo had been achieved in historiography of the Hebrew Bible – the assumption being that we could in fact come up with some history from the monarchy of David and Solomon onwards (although no earlier) – a group of biblical scholars who would later be dubbed the minimalists (I prefer to call them simply critical scholars) thoroughly disrupted the consensus. They challenged the interpretations of the scarce pieces of archaeological evidence, the heavy reliance on some very shifty biblical texts, the tendency to rationalist paraphrase of those texts, and the construction of an ancient ‘Israel’ that was really a castle in the clouds. What can we say about the Hebrew Bible? Well, it was probably written and collated very late, most likely in the Hellenistic era (after 331 BCE when Alexander the Great conquered the near East). The mythical and legendary narratives, which run right through the monarchies and the exiles at the hands of the Assyrians and the Babylonians, and even to the so-called restoration after the exile, have little if any historical basis. They are nothing more than the various elements of a comprehensive political myth (to use a phrase I have explored elsewhere (Boer In press)) that did excellent service at the time of the only real independent Jewish state under the Hasmoneans (165–63 BCE).

It is a curious debate all the same, for it is by no means new. Indeed, Kautsky would feel quite at home within it, for it is a debate that has bedevilled modern biblical historiography for at least a century and a half. The only difference is that the current wave of critical scholars is the most sceptical of the lot. All that can be said for certain, they argue, is that there was a Persian province called Yehud in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Further, the texts we have are a fanciful production from that period. In fact, it seems as though the ‘minimalists’ of today have taken Kautsky’s comment to heart: ‘Bible criticism by Protestant theologians has already shown that a great deal of it is spurious and fictitious, but tends far too much to take as gospel truth everything not yet proved to be obviously counterfeit’ (Kautsky 2001 [1908]: 151). Kautsky is referring to the German biblical scholars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, whose work he knew rather well. But what critical scholars like Philip Davies, Niels Peter Lemche and Thomas Thompson have done is challenge what has ‘not yet proved to be obviously counterfeit’, seeking to show that it too is spurious and fictitious. If we shift perspective, it would seem that these critical scholars are the heirs of Kautsky’s own welcome scepticism regarding the reliability of the Bible for historical reconstruction.

It is, however, a tough standard to set oneself, and Lemche and Thompson have admitted to me that every now and then they slip and refer to given dates and events of earlier scholarship. For instance, the exile of the people of Judah in 587 BCE by the Babylonians has been such a staple of Hebrew Bible scholarship that Lemche has at times referred to it, and yet he has argued strenuously that such an exile is largely the product of literary imagination.

So also Kautsky: for all his comments regarding the spurious and fictitious texts, when he has nothing else to rely upon he resorts to biblical texts to back up a point. As a few examples

among many, there is the citation of Genesis 12:3 regarding Abraham's wealth (Kautsky 2001 [1908]: 158), or Ezekiel 27:17 concerning the trade of Tyre (Kautsky 2001 [1908]: 161), or Isaiah 5:8-9 and Amos 4:1-2 on the question of class struggles in ancient Israel, or indeed the offer of a paraphrase of the conquest of Canaan in the 12<sup>th</sup> century BCE (Kautsky 2001 [1908]: 173–174). And on it goes. In the end he wants it both ways, showing scepticism regarding the text and then using it to back up his argument. Too often he resorts to a rationalist paraphrase of the text, at times backing up his reconstruction with quotations from biblical scholars who themselves resort to the same practice.

### **THE BIBLE AS A CULTURAL PRODUCT**

I have, however, not been entirely fair to Kautsky, for he is trying to approach the biblical texts from a very different direction. In a nutshell, he argues that although we can find very little concerning specific events or details concerning characters such as Jesus, we can learn 'very valuable things about the social character, the ideals and aspirations' (Kautsky 2001 [1908]: 32) of both early Israel and the primitive Christian communities. The point applies particularly to ancient texts such as Homer or the Bible.

This solution to the relation between biblical texts and history is as disarmingly simple as it is missed by biblical scholars focused on questions of history. The texts are not more or less reliable sources of evidence for historical 'facts' and events; rather, they are products of a culture that has a complex relationship with its social and economic context. They give voice to all manner of cultural expectations, hopes, fears and beliefs. But let me extend Kautsky here, since it is a valuable point: biblical texts are historical, then, but in a different sense than is often assumed to be the case. We cannot simply debate whether the text may refer to something that actually happened or not; history cannot be read off the texts. Rather, as a collection of cultural products, the texts respond to, block out, seek alternatives to, and are saturated by the images and metaphors of the contexts from which they arise. And that context is unavoidably economic and social. In other words, we need to shift gear and move away from the search for explicit historical events – the exile to Babylon, the return from exile, the kingdoms and battles of David, Solomon and so on – and focus on the wider social formation in which the texts were produced.

Such an approach to biblical texts – one that Kautsky pursues – boils down to a methodological preference. Rather than the scouring of texts in order to construct a political history, Kautsky's Marxist approach focuses on the economic and social history. It is less a search for the chronicle-like sequence of major events in which the political leaders are actors and more an effort to locate the deeper logic of an economic system. And within such a system, or mode of production as it tends to be called in Marxist criticism, a collection of texts like the Bible is a collection of cultural responses. How it responds is often unexpected, since these cultural products are not mere effluvia of the economic base but are the result of various (now largely unknown) authors exercising a fair degree of agency.

On that score Kautsky's reading is fascinating, especially the section concerning the 'thought and sentiment' in the era of the collapse of the Roman era (Kautsky 2001 [1908]: 90–150). While we might find his constant efforts to draw parallels between the ancient world and his own – such as between the Roman era and the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Kautsky 2001 [1908]: 91), or between ancient Palestine and Poland and Italy (Kautsky 2001 [1908]: 176) – a stretch, the basic point he makes is worth retaining: periods of economic and social upheaval generate a host of cultural

and ideological responses as old structures begin to break down and people search for new structures. The Christian church was one such structure that provided an answer in a period of turmoil. I will have more to say on how Kautsky sees the early church later, but for now I am interested in the cultural manifestations – the ‘thought and sentiment’ – of the time. He identifies seven themes that arose in that time of change: insecurity in the face of massive change, credulity (in terms of supernaturalism and the craving for miracles), untruthfulness and deception for religious ends, apparent ‘humaneness’ (in reality necessary doles for the poor and the need to keep slaves alive and fit for work), internationalism (as far as the Mediterranean can be counted as ‘international’), piety and an increasing number of religious sects, and monotheism (of which Christianity was not the only variety). The list may not be complete and it may miss the point in some respects (his emphasis on individualism and his vulgar Marxist explanation for monotheism – as a reflection of imperial politics – being at least two questionable points (Kautsky 2001 [1908]: 91, 147), but the underlying assumption concerning the nature of texts cannot be gainsaid.

## **RECONSTRUCTING ECONOMIC HISTORY**

The real achievement of Kautsky’s study is that it is the first book-length effort to reconstruct the economic history of ancient Israel and the early church using Marxist methods. For that reason alone, it is worth renewed attention, as much for the questions raised than the answers provided. He may have been hampered by a relative scarcity of information, at least compared to the situation at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But then again what looks to some like a glut of information (Van De Mieroop 2007: 7) is only so when compared to other ancient civilisations. It is still a very small amount for a period of about three millennia (3000–331 BCE). While Kautsky had very little information to go on, we have not quite so little.

## **DIFFERENTIATION AND SLAVES**

Three items draw my attention in his reconstruction: the narrative of differentiation, the vital role of the slave-based mode of production, and the perpetual question of the transition of modes of production. As for the narrative of differentiation, for Kautsky it is a fundamental resource; he resorts to it in regard to the mode of production in Rome and in ancient Israel, and then again when tracing the dissolution of Christian communism in both the early communities and then the monasteries (Kautsky 2001 [1908]: 33–35, 177–178, 352–359, 384–391). Quite simply, the narrative moves from a given un-differentiated state to one of differentiation. With differentiation comes the division of labour, exploitation and class. In regard to Rome, it goes like this: under certain conditions (soil fertility, rainfall, trade or booty), especially for agricultural societies, the differentiation of wealth and power sets in and is concentrated in the hands of certain individuals. As a difference between exploiters and exploited, such economic differentiation is the beginning of class, in which a certain group is disconnected from the production of essential items for survival such as food and clothing. This class then relies on those who do produce these essentials and must extract it from them in some fashion, whether by coercion or persuasion or some mix of the two. With more and more people removed from production as exploiters, whether wealthy landowners, chieftains, clergy, or a scribal sub-class, a labour shortage arises: there is simply not enough manpower to till the soil, especially since production was primarily agricultural. The

first full mode of production arises from this problem of labour shortage, and the resolution is slavery. In the case of Greece and Rome, the response was to resort to conquest in order to find more people to put to work as slaves. The result: a slave-based mode of production in which surplus value was extracted from slaves.

With ancient Israel, the beginnings may be slightly different, but the result is largely the same. Kautsky buys into the biblical picture that the early Israelites were desert nomads, accepting the theory that they were probably Bedouin tribes (a theory discredited now). Such a life on the move provided a vital and relatively simple life. However, when these nomads settled in Canaan, they took on an agricultural life on the land. From here differentiation sets in, with some gaining wealth on the land at the expense of others. Wealthy landowners began appropriating more and more land, which they then rented out to landless peasants. When these peasants failed to meet the exorbitant requirements to repay their debts – usually a portion of the produce of the land – they forfeited their rights to the land and were driven to the position of debt-slaves of those same landowners. From here the move into a slave-based mode of production was inevitable. In short, although the actual mechanism was slightly different, producing chattel-slaves in Greece and Rome and debt-slaves in Israel, the overall narrative of differentiation is largely the same, running from chance distinctions through to a full-blown mode of production and its mechanism of exploitation. The result is the same as well, namely a slave-based mode of production.

Underlying Kautsky's narrative is an assumed primitive communism: the undifferentiated state on the land in early Rome or the nomadic life of the Israelites before they settled. This assumption becomes more explicit when he turns to the story of Christian communism. In this case, the early proletarian movement adopted a form of communism based on having all goods in common and sharing a common meal. However, in order to maintain such a commune, it required some with wealth who were able to distribute it. Such a situation already had a tendency to slip into further differentiation and before long having all goods in common turned into charity from the rich for the poor, who then became dependent on the rich. Further, since Christian communism only worked with a small group, as the movement grew in size, differentiation became marked. The movement required organisation and structure, with the result that a hierarchy of leadership developed. Since the leaders and the organisation required material support, the goods that used to be held in common were now provided to maintain the leadership and church structures. Once again, division of labour leads to class difference and economic exploitation. A similar path shows up with monasticism: although it carried on the spirit of early Christian communism, now based on agriculture in the countryside, the monasteries eventually became wealthy (through the ban on marriage and passing of all possessions over to the monastery), developed leaders who became the new exploiters of the monks and nuns, and so on.

I will return to the question of a slave-based mode of production and the nature of Christian communism below, but first let me tarry for a while with the narrative of differentiation. What continues to surprise me is how pervasive this narrative is. Kautsky may use it to develop his position of the slave mode of production, in which surplus value is extracted from slaves by the slave-owners, or indeed to account for the breakdown of Christian communism. However, a far more common usage of this narrative, especially in biblical studies, is for the rise of the state. So what we also find is that with the concentration of wealth and power, chieftains and towns arise and then, at some vague point when the extraction of essential items becomes sufficiently complex and requires some form of defence for such wealth, we get the city and the state and its ruler,

whether a king, despot or tyrant. For example, such a narrative turns up in the work of biblical critics such as Niels-Peter Lemche (1988: 22–24; 1998a: 94–95), Philip Davies (1998: 59–73) and Norman Gottwald (2001), as well as the Marxist work of Perry Anderson (1974), to name but a few.

The narrative itself has a number of features: a progression from a non-differentiated to a differentiated state; a move from simplicity to complexity; a versatile narrative that accounts for economic exploitation, class structures, the end of primitive communism, and the formation of the state; and the need for a trigger that sets differentiation under way. Let me say a little more concerning each item. The narrative assumes a state of non-differentiation and simplicity as its starting point. In this respect it has deep resonances with two other narratives that are still powerful today, the one from evolutionary theory and physics, and the other from creation stories in the Jewish and Christian traditions. Evolutionary theory postulates a simple origin for life on earth, from which more complex organisms develop over time through natural selection. So also in physics, the theory of the ‘singularity’ from which the universe (or indeed universes if we take account of string or membrane theory) began is a move from a simple one to a complex multiplicity. So also in the creation narrative of Genesis 1. Here we begin with an earth that was ‘without form and void’ (Gen 1:2) and then move through stages of differentiation until creation is complete – light and dark as day and night, the firmament that separates the waters above and below, the seas and the dry land, which then produce their swarms of creatures and so on. To a lesser extent the creation story in Genesis 2 begins with simplicity, with an earth devoid of plants, animals, rain and human beings only to be rendered far more complex with the introduction of each of these items.

Given the pervasiveness of such a basic narrative of differentiation, whether in myth, science or history, one could argue that this is the way things are or that Marxism merely gives the narrative its own twist. Thus, it may be reshaped to provide a story of the origins of exploitation, class and indeed the state. And Marxists might also want to note that this version of the narrative has become a staple of much study of both the Ancient Near East and ancient Israel. However, a little ideological suspicion never goes astray. Has Marxist analysis merely taken over a mythical biblical narrative for its own purposes, a narrative that does service just as well in science or indeed in stories about the emergence of capitalism? Now, one might want to argue that the evidence points incontrovertibly towards such a narrative, but that is nothing more than special pleading. In the case of ancient Israel and the Ancient Near East, the narrative really tries to put the relatively scarce pieces of evidence in a coherent and progressive relation to one another. In that respect, it is no different from any other imaginative narrative (Kautsky’s included), but it is worthwhile recognising it as such. But it also means that another narrative may do just as good a job, for instance, one that notes the periodic stages in the Ancient Near East that staggered from one collapse to another in terms of increasing differentiation and then increasing simplicity. Or perhaps one that argues against any narrative that moves from simplicity to increasing differentiation, arguing that what we have is a good deal of complexity and differentiation right from the beginning. This last position is in fact my preference and one I seek to develop elsewhere (Boer 2007b).

One of the reasons for taking such a position is that it avoids what I would like to call the ‘problem of paradise’. What I mean here is that the simple, non-differentiated state is invariably paradisiacal: in that simple original state we find mythical stories of a natural harmony before the arrival of disobedience to the deity, or indeed before exploitation in terms of economic rela-

tions, gender, ethnicity and so on. In Marxist terms this is nothing other than primitive communism, a theme that pervades a significant argument concerning the origins of ancient Israel (Gotwald 1999; Meyers 1988; Yee 2003; Jobling 1991; see Boer 2005), let alone Kautsky's own narratives. It is also one to which Kautsky reverts in his analysis of Thomas More (Kautsky 2002 [1888]). Further, there is the problem of the trigger for differentiation that then leads to exploitation, class, conflict and the oppression of the state. What exactly is the trigger? Kautsky resorts to a naturalist argument, citing matters of the quality of the soil, differences in climate (which we might put, for the Ancient Near East, in terms of irrigation or rainfall agriculture), and the role of natural disasters such as drought or flood affecting crop yields. These natural differences then produce relatively greater yields for some, healthier and more numerous cattle, and less for others, and so we find the first moments of economic differentiation. Or he makes use of the simple trigger of size with the early Christian church: once it moved beyond the small communist groups, the church had to find some structures to manage the larger movement. The problem of the trigger for differentiation is, however, generated by the narrative itself; without a simple non-differentiated state, we do not need a trigger for differentiation in the first place.

### **SLAVES AND OTHER MODES OF PRODUCTION**

At the end of Kautsky's narrative of differentiation comes the slave-based mode of production. On the one hand, the argument for such a mode of production in Greece and Rome is not in the least controversial, since it remains a staple of Marxist reconstructions of the Hellenistic world (and indeed many other approaches influenced by Marxism). On the other hand, it was and is controversial in regard to the Ancient Near East, for here too he argues for a slave-based mode of production. On this score there is an ongoing and fascinating debate, and so I would like to see how his argument fares in light of developments in that debate.

To begin with, he challenges what would have been the Marxist consensus concerning the Ancient Near East. He was no mere scholastic, refining the positions of his forebears; Kautsky makes a few bold moves of his own. When he was writing the book in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the dominant Marxist position was that the Ancient Near East was one instance of the Asiatic Mode of Production, a mode that also included India and China before British colonialism, as well as ancient South America. To see what Kautsky was challenging (and for readers not familiar with this aspect of Marxist thought) let me outline the key elements of such an Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP). The relevant material from Marx and Engels is dispersed in their work over a thirty-year period. It includes newspaper articles, letters, critiques of political economy and ethnological research.<sup>3</sup> Out of this collection, the key features of the AMP are as follows:<sup>4</sup> common rather than individual private property in land, often personified in the figure of the god-ruler; centralised control of public works by the government (irrigation, building, roads and so on); a self-sufficient and decentralised economic world of villages with their resilient combination of agriculture and handicrafts over against the imperial state; the social division of labour in terms of usefulness. Marx is not always consistent on the AMP, most (in)famously describing it as a stagnant economic form that changed little over millennia, and yet elsewhere he writes of far greater complexity, especially the exchange, surplus value, rent (in labour and in kind) and tax operating within the village community, between communities, between communities and the state and then between the state and the limited long distance trade generated by manufac-

turers. This was the position Kautsky comprehensively challenged with his argument for a slave mode of production in ancient Israel.

All the same, Kautsky's reconstruction has an extraordinary resonance with Soviet studies of the Ancient Near East that spanned the decades from the 1920s to the 1980s, the implications of which are still felt today. Kautsky's argument for a slave-based mode of production became the default position in Soviet scholarship from the 1930s until the 1960s. The strange thing is that none of this work – at least work that I have been able to find<sup>5</sup> – refers to Kautsky, for he was branded as a deviationist for other matters in the Soviet Union, especially after he and Lenin fell out.

As far as that debate in the Soviet Union was concerned, which provides an extraordinary example of the dialectical interplay between data and theory rarely matched in the West, it falls into a number of clear stages: the early position that the Ancient Near East, of which ancient Israel was a part, was characterised by the Asiatic Mode of Production gave way briefly to Feudalism which then fell beneath the sweep of the slave-based, or Ancient Mode of Production, which in its turn begrudgingly allowed the return of a revived Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP). The 'anti-Aziatchiki', as the opponents of the AMP were called, swept the field early in the debate and the AMP disappeared as a viable category. For a few years Feudalism became the preferred descriptor – a position that held sway long afterwards in non-Marxist scholarship on the Ancient Near East (see Schloen 2001: 187–189) – but it soon fell away. The crucial moment in Soviet scholarship was the influential lecture (four hours!) delivered in 1933 at the Academy of the History of Material Culture in Leningrad by V. V. Struve. He dismissed Feudalism as a way to describe the mode of production in the Ancient Near East, pointing out, 'If we say that everything is feudalism, then we get a feudal porridge in the literal sense from Babylon to Napoleon' (quoted in Dunn 1981: 44; see Struve 1969). In a careful survey of all the crucial and available texts for ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, Struve persuaded most scholars that the evidence incontrovertibly suggested a slave mode of production. Struve's argument was ingenious, for he pointed out that although slaves were not as numerous as classes, especially free labourers or landholders, the slaves were owned collectively by the state and temple complex, worked the year round and were therefore the dominant means for the extraction of surplus value.

Struve may have been more of an expert on the Ancient Near East – an academician no less – and Kautsky more of a politician and populariser, but it is remarkable how he anticipates the dominant position in the USSR by a good three decades. In the end, the reconstruction of a slave mode of production was to crumble, but not until the 1960s and even the early 1970s. After much argument that I have traced in more detail elsewhere (Boer 2007b), including refinements, challenges and qualifications, Struve's argument finally gave way, only to see a refined and re-freshed Asiatic Mode of Production re-emerge from the wings.

However, neither the slave nor the Asiatic modes of production have fared all that well with regard to the Ancient Near East. If the former faces the insurmountable problem that slaves were only a minority of the population and that the primary location of production was the village-commune, then the latter runs aground in the argument that the state was the prime exploiter by means of tribute. For one of the staples of Marxist historiography is that the state arises in the context of class struggle: it is an outcome and manifestation of class struggle and not one class in that struggle. And as Hindess and Hirst have shown in their strictly theoretical work

(Hindess and Hirst 1975: 183–200), tribute or tax is neither a unique nor a primary means for extracting surplus value.

### THE SACRED ECONOMY

However, Kautsky is full of enticements, the main one for me being his unfinished and flawed project of a Marxist reconstruction of the economic history of ancient Israel and the Ancient Near East. So, in the spirit of Kautsky's unfinished project, I can't resist the temptation to take it a step further. Kautsky emphasises a number of elements, such as the primacy of agriculture, the ubiquity of war and plunder, the importance of trade, but above all finds the mechanism for the extraction of surplus value by means of slave labour. The relations between slaves and masters thereby comprise the primary class division. It seems to me that while Kautsky has identified a few features – agriculture, war and trade – he has been somewhat misled by the search for a clear and identifiable mechanism for the extraction of surplus labour. In other words, this Marxist key to all social formations, as well as the need to find a distinct division of labour may well have misled him, as it has other Marxist historians.

I would rather make use of Marx's own approach, which is not to impose categories developed from one mode of production and then impose them on other, very different ones. Rather, it is best to begin anew and develop the model from the data that is available. So, to begin with, it seems to me that a clear mechanism for the extraction of surplus value is simply not available in the ancient Near East, nor indeed is a clear distinction between two major classes. In other words, we do not have one class (or even a collection of various sub-classes) that extracts surplus value from another class. Instead, there is a very dispersed system of village and agricultural production by relatively 'free' producers. And the agricultural produce was allocated in a complex and overlapping system. What surplus value there may have been was generated by plunder during war, the spasmodic exaction of tribute and limited trade. However, it was usually extremely limited and rather basic. The inability to locate a clear mechanism for the extraction of surplus value has led more than one Marxist critic to refuse to offer any distinct economic model for the ancient Near East (Anderson 1974; Ste. Croix 1981). That is a good enough indication that we need to rethink the whole question.

In light of these considerations, let us begin again. The following outline, which comes from a larger project called the 'Sacred Economy' (see Boer 2007b), seeks to locate the deeper logic of the economies of the Ancient Near East over some three millennia, from about 3000 BCE to 331 BCE (the time of the conquest by Alexander the Great). Of course, one will want to identify specific variations over that time span, but the majority of commentators agree that the economic structure remained remarkably consistent. The key to the sacred economy is the distinction between what I call *Regimes of Allocation* and *Regimes of Extraction*. More than a distinction, it was a profound tension between two contrasting economic logics, one that operated by means of allocation and the other by extraction. Only in the second does any form of surplus value appear. This tension both generated the possibilities of the sacred economy as a whole and was responsible for the periodic crises and wholesale collapses of the economies of the Ancient Near East. As far as an allocative economics is concerned, the primary problem was to account for production outside human control and knowledge and then to ensure adequate allocation of such production.<sup>6</sup> In a situation where agriculture is the prime means of production (as Kautsky repeatedly notes for ancient Israel), the problem of accounting for production outside human

control is dealt with by means of the deity or deities. They are responsible for fertility of the soil, rains, open wombs and so on. But then, how does one allocate the products of soil, animals and women? Again, the gods are responsible, although they now function as a code for the various systems of allocation, of what I call regimes of allocation.<sup>7</sup>

As for the regimes of allocation, I designate six: allocation in terms of land, fertility, family, war, patron-client relations and the judiciary. The first two – the allocation of land and fertility – concern those elements that are productive, namely land itself, animals and women. As far as land is concerned, without any legal and economic concept of land as private property (the closest we come is a limited and relative control over land), we need to speak of the allocation of land: the god or gods allocate land to a people, a village, even a king or an individual in order to graze, irrigate, till and reap. In return, those allocated such land must repay some of its produce to the deity. Closely related but distinct is the allocation of fertility, which includes the fertility of land but also animals and women. At this level the over-riding metaphor is one of a receptacle for seed, whether that is a woman for a man's seed, the ground for crop seeds, or female animals with the seed of male animals. God in his various names ultimately controls and thereby allocates such fertility, as well as the fear of famine and celebration of plenty.

If land, animals and women are allocated by the deity who controls how and what they produce, then the question that arises is what to do with this produce. The next four regimes of allocation are concerned with precisely this problem. Thus, a family based regime of allocation determines the allocation of products from land, women and animals in terms of kinship. Kinship patterns determine the allocation of women in terms of endogamous or exogamous partnering, the allocation of children, the way inheritance passes on through the clan, all of which is determined by the deity. Another mode for the acquisition and allocation of land, animals and women is the regime of the war machine as a militia. Again, Kautsky plays up the role of warfare and conquest (Kautsky 2001 [1908]: 180), but it remains a feature of inter-state rivalry. Rather, it seems to me that warfare is a crucial regime of the (re-)allocation of land, women, animals and their produce. However, when the war machine is not a militia drawn from the people but a professional army of the imperial centre then it becomes part of extractive economics, for its task then includes ensuring the payment of tribute to that centre. A further over-lapping regime is that of patron-client relations, which now includes more intangible items such as protection and service. Although Simkins has argued that patronage is a mode of production all on its own (Simkins 1999), it is far better understood as one element in a larger economic system, for patronage is found in other economic systems apart from the sacred economy. Finally, there is the judiciary, whose primary function in the Ancient Near East was to oversee the workings of allocation. It is not for nothing that many of the laws in the Hebrew Bible deal with the allocation of land, the control of women, the patterns of kinship and inheritance and the nature of patron-client relationships. The fact that these laws are presented as given by the deity is yet another signal of the dominance of the sacred in an allocative economics.

Over against an allocative economics we find an extractive economics, which designates the process of extracting something from a producer by someone or some group that has not produced it. Here we are on more familiar territory, where the technical Marxist terminology of exploitation – the process of acquiring from those who work by those who don't – and surplus value may be relevant. But we need to be very wary about using such terms, for what we do not have in the

Ancient Near East is a market economy. Thus, there is no complex and widespread scheme of production, distribution and consumption that is necessary for a market economy. Above all there is no process of commodification, in which an endless series of very different items become equivalent through their exchange value as commodities, nor a metaphorisation of the market as we find under capitalism. In line with my use of the phrase ‘regimes of allocation’ to speak of the allocatory side of the sacred economy, I propose we use ‘regimes of extraction’ to designate the various ways in which an extractive economics worked. There were two regimes of extraction, tribute and trade.

That tribute – from extraction by a local state from the peasants to that by an imperial centre from subject states – existed is beyond doubt, but its function is open to endless debate.<sup>8</sup> Tribute is a crude mode of extraction, extending the plunder of war into a system of tribute gatherers, a bureaucracy, the accumulation of treasure in temples and palaces and its ostentatious display. Indeed, its primary role was the maintenance of the temple-city complex and the larger imperial state. However, even though it is not the determining features, tribute is the point at which the main tension of the sacred economy shows up: over against allocation by the deity, tribute is the extraction and transfer of value from a producer to a non-producer. The problem with the second regime of extraction – trade – is that it has suffered at the hands of researchers who come from a mode of production in which trade and the market are primary (capitalism). For all Kautsky’s protestations about the minimal development of trade, it plays an important role in his reconstruction, especially when he attempts to identify the Jews’ liking for commerce from a history of trade (Kautsky 2001 [1908]: 165–173). Indeed, the evidence of relatively limited trade has led more than one historian of the Ancient Near East or of the Bible into a frenzy of spotting market economics in every nook and crannie (McNutt 1999: 195; Warburton 2003; Finkelstein 1989; Silver 1983). This is simply an anachronism, for trade does not mean a market form of exchange: such a form requires an extensive network of market relations before it becomes market exchange (Wallerstein 1983), a network that simply did not exist in the ancient world. Here we need to distinguish between the exchange of goods at local markets (the vast majority of transactions) and the very limited trade that moved across regions. In the case of the latter – what is euphemistically called ‘international’ trade – there was a limited level of the extraction of surplus value, although it was restricted to a small number of mostly luxury items.

It seems to me that the sacred economy meshes together a number of disparate elements into a coherent whole, indicating the deeper logic and tensions of the economies of the ancient Near East. Enticed and inspired by Kautsky to take his reconstruction a rather large step forward, I suggest that the driving force of the sacred economy was not slavery. Nor was it trade or tribute, nor indeed was it either allocatory or extractive economics, but rather the tension between the two. I cannot go into more detail here, except to point out that with this contradiction we come up against the necessary limit of the sacred economy, a limit that enables the sacred economy to function but also hobbles it from the full realisation of either allocation or extraction.

One of the advantages of such a reconstruction of the sacred economy is that provides a more systematic explanation of the context for the function of religion with ancient Israel and the Ancient Near East. It is not that god or the gods were manifestations of the political organisation of the empires of the Ancient Near East, especially the model of the infamous ‘oriental despot’ favoured by the theory of the Asiatic Mode of Production. Nor is it the case that monotheism

arose within the Roman Empire as a reflection of the Roman emperor and his bureaucracy (Kautsky's argument). Rather, the religious forms that we find – tribal and ethnic gods, a pantheon in conflict but mostly involved in agricultural cycles of death and renewal – is an inescapable part of the ideology that is woven into the sacred economy.

## TRANSITIONS

For all the differences with Kautsky on the question of economic history, I do share a deeper assumption with him, and that is the narrative of modes of production. Now, that narrative has a number of implications well known to those who work with Marxist theory. Its starting point is difference, for the theory of distinct modes of production operates by means of qualitative differences between each mode of production: feudalism is as distinct from capitalism as the slave (or Ancient) mode is distinct from hunter-gatherers, and so on. The question of continuities – such as private property or money – then becomes a crucial issue. How does one account for the role of private property in slave, feudal and capitalist modes of production?

Further, the theory of modes of production more often than not generates competing narratives of the progression of modes of production. Initially Euro-centric, that narrative moved from hunter-gatherer through tribal, slave, and feudal modes to capitalism. However, as D'iakonoff has argued (D'iakonoff 1999), the European situation is an anomaly when one takes a global perspective. So what we find is that various complexities, alternative tracks, intersections and disruptions have entered into the narratives, so much so that we have numerous narratives (see, for example Melotti 1977). All of them end, however, with a global capitalism. In one sense, these narratives are an effort to deal with the way various parts of the globe have arrived at capitalism. For my purposes, and indeed those of Kautsky, such a narrative or collection of narratives is not at all necessary, interested as we are in the Ancient Near East, ancient Israel and early Christianity.

What we are both interested in is the question of transitions, to which a theory of modes of production also commits us. If modes of production are qualitatively different – in terms of their distinct combinations of certain features rather than the originality of those features – then the way one replaces another becomes crucial. For Kautsky, there is no problem with a transition from whatever mode of production prevailed in the Ancient Near East to that of the Hellenistic world, for they were both slave societies. Where the problem does arise is in the transition from slavery to feudalism (a problem that also concerns Perry Anderson in his fascinating study *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (Anderson 1974)). In Kautsky's case, the question is more interesting than the answer: the inherent decadence and technical backwardness of slavery (the second point he derives from Marx, the first from Gibbon), as well as the depredations of the barbarian invasions of the Roman Empire, led to the decline and collapse of the slave mode of production. Already embodied in the *colonus*, a tenant farmer that first arose in Egypt, feudalism emerged as an answer to the bankruptcy of slavery (Kautsky 2001 [1908]: 51–65). In short, it is a classic Marxist narrative, relying upon the internal contradictions of a mode of production that eventually lead to its stagnation and collapse as well as external factors such as the invasions of a weakened Roman Empire.

There is little to fault in this reconstruction, except for a detail or two. The combination of internal contradiction and external forces is one of the great Marxist contributions to historiography, and Kautsky provides as good an example as any, although I do have a problem with

his tendency to moralise concerning the corruption and decadence of the Roman Empire (Gibbon's legacy is indeed long). However, in order to show how Kautsky's reconstruction of this transition still holds up, let me refer briefly to Perry Anderson's reconstruction of the transition, which really is a model Marxist analysis (Anderson 1974). Anderson tracks feudalism's emergence from the intersections between Roman slavery and a Germanic primitive communal mode of production in which the Roman *servus* becomes, via the *colonus* or dependant peasant tenant, the feudal serf. Yet these relations of production are part of a more fundamental shift in the mode of production in which the extraction of surplus value moves from the vital role of the ubiquitous slaves (only slaves in fact 'worked') to that of the serfs, indentured to the lord but no longer 'owned' by him.

However, there is a point in Kautsky's discussion of transition that provides both an unwitting insight and potentially undermines his argument for the similarity of the Ancient Near East and the Hellenistic world. It comes in his discussion of the turbulent state of the Roman province of Judea at the time of the early Christians. Here Kautsky (2001 [1908]: 226–268) points out that Judea was riven with competing groups, some of them decidedly insurrectionist. While the Pharisees and Sadducees struggled over cultural and religious accommodation and resistance to the Romans, the proletarian Essenes withdrew from the world to await divine intervention. The proletarian Zealots, by contrast, took the armed struggle up to the Romans with an early form of guerrilla warfare. For Kautsky, all of this is a sign of 'the spectacle of woe and blood that constitutes the history of Judea in the epoch of Christ' (Kautsky 2001 [1908]: 255). Such unrest and bloodshed must be read as a response to Roman oppression. It is in this context, argues Kautsky, that the Jesus movement, or early Christianity first arose.

Again, Kautsky entices me to take his analysis further, for he provides only part of the picture. Rather than merely the turmoil of Roman imperial expansion and control, what we have are the distinct signals of a tension, if not a shift, between two very different modes of production. Needless to say, this argument runs against Kautsky's position on the two slave-based modes of production in the Ancient Near East and the Hellenistic world, which would merely have come into contact with one another at a flashpoint such as Judea which lay in the intersection between the two. At one level, Kautsky's reconstruction still holds, particularly with regard to the picture of insurrection and unrest. Here the recent work of Richard Horsley (1997) fills in some of the details in light of more recent research. Horsley and those who follow him focus on the extraordinary transformations brought about in the Roman Empire by Augustus: the full-fledged development of the cult and gospel of the Emperor, the centralisation of patron-client relations in the emperor, and the profound impacts of such changes in regional cities such as Ephesus in Asia Minor and Corinth, where the Christian movement took root. Above all the infamous *pax Romana* turns out to be a system of violence, bloodshed, systematic destruction and enslavement in order to expand and maintain the empire. Here is Horsley:

During the first century B.C.E. Roman warlords took over the eastern Mediterranean, including Judea, where Pompey's troops defiled the Jerusalem Temple in retaliation for the resistance of the priests. The massive acts of periodic reconquest of the rebellious Judean and Galilean people included *thousands enslaved* at Magdala/Tarichaea in Galilee in 52–51 B.C.E., *mass enslavement* in and around Sepphoris (near Nazareth) and thousands crucified at Emmaus in

Judea in 4 B.C.E., and the systematic devastation of villages and towns, destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, and *mass enslavement* in 67–70 C.E. In the area of Paul's mission, the Romans ruthlessly sacked and torched Corinth, one of the most illustrious Greek cities, slaughtered its men, and *enslaved* its women and children in 146 B.C.E. (Horsley 1997: 10–11, emphasis added).

Yet it seems to me that even Horsley does not go far enough either. Was it merely the Emperor, warlords and the Romans themselves who were responsible for such acts? Such a concern with their agency loses sight of the political and economic issues at stake. One of the basic signs of change in social formations is a high level of violence, social unrest and conflict as a new system imposes itself on an older established one. Such troubled transitions produce displacement, tension and violence, in demographic, economic, social, political and psychological terms. I have highlighted the references to enslavement in my quotation from Horsley, for the Greeks and especially the Romans brought a new economic system to their Empire, a slave-based economic system in which the slaves did all the work and the relatively few 'citizens' did not.<sup>9</sup> In other words, what the Romans brought to the 'East' was a rather different mode of production than the one that prevailed there, one that I have outlined in terms of the sacred economy.

But then, Horsley is no slouch as a Marxist biblical scholar, for he goes on to point out that while the Greeks under the Seleucids and then the Romans may have imposed their economic and cultural system on the cities of Judea and Samaria, the rural areas still operated according to the older system. All these rural areas found themselves doing was rendering tribute to a new empire. What, however, was that older, different mode of production that the Greeks and then Romans gradually replaced in a pattern of systematic brutality? This is none other than the sacred economy (see above), which was gradually replaced by a slave-based system in piecemeal fashion through systematic violence and disruption, especially in the three or four centuries at the turn of the era. The genius of Christianity in this brutal environment was to provide a psychic, intellectual and emotional narrative that enabled people to make sense of such a massive and brutal transition. This took place particularly through the story, developed by Paul in the New Testament, of the violent crucifixion and resurrection of a certain Jesus of Nazareth, one who suffered all the violence of the system and yet rose beyond it.

While my reconstruction may seem to be some distance from Kautsky, it carries on in his spirit at a basic level. For Kautsky argues that Christianity arose as a response to economic and social conditions, specifically the brutally oppressive one of Roman rule in Judea. I have merely extended this position to argue that the context of early Christianity marks the transition from one mode of production to another, from the sacred economy to the slave mode of production of the Hellenistic era.

## **CHRISTIAN COMMUNISM**

The crucial question then becomes: what kind of movement was early Christianity? For Kautsky it was a proletarian, militant response to Roman rule, an urban movement that mediated between the militancy of the anarchistic and disorganised Zealots and the communist escapism of the Essenes who escaped to the countryside (Kautsky 2001 [1908]: 268–272). As a proletarian movement, early Christianity gave voice to a hatred of the rich, expressed in the image of a rebel

Jesus who condemns the rich and powerful, is anti-establishment and anti-clerical, identifies with the poor and oppressed, and loves a communal life with the disciples who gave up all to join the group (Kautsky 2001 [1908]: 272–280, 305–312). Well known sayings still have bite, such as, ‘It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God’ (Mark 10:25). Or the words of the Son of Man, when he identifies with the poor and hungry in the parable of the sheep and the goats: ‘I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me’ (Matthew 25:35–6).<sup>10</sup>

Above all, Kautsky is probably most remembered for his claim that the early Christian community, beginning with Jesus and then reflected in the Acts of the Apostles (2:42–5; 4:32–5), was a communist one: ‘At first the community had been permeated by an energetic though vague communism, an aversion to all private property, a drive toward a new and better social order, in which all class differences should be smoothed out by division of possessions’ (Kautsky 2001 [1908]: 346). Indeed, this was the secret of the success of Christianity, for only a ‘communistic mutual aid society’ (Kautsky 2001 [1908]: 317) would have enough impetus to move beyond the death of its founder. Kautsky was not the only one who saw something here, for people as diverse as Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers in 17<sup>th</sup> century England and Étienne Cabet and his Icarian communities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>11</sup> also found inspiration in such Christian communism (see Boer 2007a).

The reconstruction of a supposed Christian communism is very close to Rosa Luxemburg’s own reconstruction (Luxemburg 2004 [1905]). They share the same argument concerning the demise of this early form of communism, yet despite the fact that both texts were written at about the same time (Luxemburg’s appeared in 1905 and Kautsky’s in 1908), they do not refer to each other. Kautsky argues that, for all its proletarian base and for all its communistic organisation, Christian communism was flawed, for without an agricultural base it remained a communism of consumption rather than production. It is all very well for people to aspire – based on the stories in Acts – to share everything, to sell all they have and own it communally. But that does nothing to change the way such things are produced. What happens when the goods run out? Do people go back to their various professions in order to produce or buy more goods so that they can sell them again or share them once more? Indeed, for Kautsky a communism of consumption needs the larger economic system to continue, for the commune’s members would need to keep on generating some income in order to distribute it to each other (Kautsky 2001 [1908]: 353). So we find that early Christianity had no effect on the economic system based on slavery.

Again like Luxemburg, Kautsky traces the way this initial Christian communism dissipates: having all things in common becomes charity and alms-giving by the rich; the commune becomes a community that is increasingly attractive to the rich; the common meal (a real vestige of primitive communism) was divided into the symbolic Eucharist and a meal for the poor members who receive alms; as the community grows it develops its own administrative hierarchy of bishop, apostle and prophet. So great was the change that by the time Christianity was adopted by Constantine and became the religion of the Roman Empire, it had become yet another mechanism for exploitation. Yet Kautsky ends his narrative on an ambiguous note: for all the changes that

took place, the communist drive could not be eradicated entirely, so it was shunted off into monasticism. Here we find an obverse of the urban based communism of consumption, for the rural basis of the monasteries lent themselves to a communism of agricultural production. Here we find a communism of production rather than consumption. For all the expansions of the monasteries, their *latifundia* and concentrations of wealth, for all the exploitation of slaves and unpaid workers, they maintained ‘uncommon resistance and capacity for development’ (Kautsky 2001 [1908]: 388). All of which was to lead into the Middle Ages and its communist movements.

Once again, Kautsky entices me to go further, firstly in terms of the nature of the story of early Christian communism, and secondly concerning the subsequent legacy of this communism. As for the first point, Kautsky took the book of Acts in the New Testament as a reasonably accurate description of the early Christian community (it was one of the many times he forgot his caution about the reliability of the Bible for historical reconstruction). But this story functions far better, it seems to me, as a ‘founding myth’, for the book of Acts is as unreliable as any biblical text for historical data. Here we face a delightful contradiction: the less historically reliable such a story is, the more powerful it is as a political myth. In fact, it is important to insist that this picture of the early Christian community rests on the flimsiest of evidence – the book of Acts – since only then can we avoid the tendency of trying to restore some pristine state that has been disrupted by a ‘fall’. As long as the belief holds that Acts presents what was once a real, lived experience, the more efforts to restore that ideal early church become reactionary. Any effort at restoring what was lost, of overcoming a ‘fall’, is reactionary in the first degree. However, if we insist that the communal life of the early church is myth, that it projects a wish as to what might be, that it gives us a powerful image of what may still be achieved, then we are able to overcome the reactionary desire to return to the early church in the book of Acts. It might then be possible to reclaim it as a radical rather than a reactionary myth.

My second extension of Kautsky actually builds on one his major projects, which was nothing less than the effort to reconstruct a much longer history of socialism of which modern socialism is the culmination. In this light, Christian communism becomes one moment in this longer history. For example, in his great study, *Vorläufer des neueren Sozialismus (Forerunners of Modern Socialism)* (Kautsky 1969 [1895]),<sup>12</sup> he looks to the Middle Ages and then the period of the Reformation for various movements, mostly inspired by Christianity, that he identifies as socialist in some sense. In what he describes as ‘heretical communists’, he finds that the various reforming and radical religious movements had communist elements. He focuses on the Taborites (a 15<sup>th</sup> century religious movement that championed asceticism, communal living and the establishment of the kingdom of God by force of arms), those around the Peasants Revolt and Thomas Müntzer (who took Luther’s reforms to their radical and logical conclusion), the Bohemian Brethren (who believed that the kingdom of God was among them in a communal life and worship and who had a profound influence on Czech literature through the translation of the Bible), and the Anabaptists of the Radical reformation more generally (Kautsky 2002 [1897]). Ernst Bloch would tread a similar, albeit more philosophically sustained path in his search for the utopian impulse through various heretical religious currents.

However, Kautsky’s great hero is Thomas More, whom he calls the first modern socialist (Kautsky 2002 [1888]). More’s *Utopia* is for Kautsky one of the major socialist texts before Marx and Engels. But what is it that unites all of these various movements? They draw upon

various features of primitive communism, such as the common meal, communal living and the sharing all things in common. Indeed, it is this tradition – of which Christian communism is one of the earliest and clearest expressions – that Thomas More draws upon. For Kautsky, More finds that element in both the ‘old, feudal, popular Catholicism’ (Kautsky 2002 [1888]: 72) and the monasteries which kept alive the spark of Christian communism. It was this Catholicism of which More was the last representative and for which More died as a martyr. Yet More also offers sustained criticism of economic exploitation in the England of Henry VIII and offers his *Utopia* as an economic, political and social alternative to what he experienced. At this level, he is also a materialist critic. More then becomes the crucial link between the older Christian communism and modern communism, the one who links medieval religiosity and modern materialism (see Schwartz 1989). Or, in Kautsky’s flourishing words:

We believe that we have disclosed the most essential roots of More’s Socialism: his amiable character in harmony with primitive communism; the economic situation of England, which brought into sharp relief the disadvantageous consequences of capitalism for the working class; the fortunate union of classical philosophy with activity in practical affairs – all these circumstances combined must have induced in a mind so acute, so fearless, so truth-loving as More’s an ideal which may be regarded as a foregleam of Modern Socialism (Kautsky 2002 [1888]: 128).

In Kautsky’s reconstruction of this long history of pre-Marxist communism, religion plays a central role. Indeed, it is only with Marx and Engels that a complete materialist communism emerges, for which all of these earlier forms are incomplete forerunners. We need to exercise a good deal of suspicion regarding such a teleology, one that also afflicts Bloch’s work. Yet, I did promise that I would extend Kautsky’s intriguing reconstruction. The problem is not that he is too enthusiastic about all these earlier moments of communism, but that he operates with a dubious assumption. More often than not he takes the religious impulse as the source of these pre-Marxist communist movements. Although one senses that he would like to see a greater recognition of the continuation of that impulse within Marxism, the problem really lies with the assumption that is an original source. By contrast, I would suggest that the religious nature of these movements is one form they may take, but it is not necessarily their source or original power. What we have, then, is the religious form of a longer and deeper revolutionary and insurrectionary current which at its core is the search for a whole new collective social formation.

## CONCLUSION

I could have focused on the various points where Kautsky falls short in his *Foundations of Christianity*, such as his argument that mercantilism profoundly affected Israel’s thought, nationalism and sacred text, as well as being the basis for anti-Semitism, or the conspiracy theory concerning the role of the church in editing and canonising the Bible, or indeed his tendency to moralise regarding wealth and its attendant decadence. Yet, it seemed to me that there is much more promising material in Kautsky’s study, particularly the unfinished nature of the projects he inaugurated – a Marxist reconstruction of the economic logic and history of the Ancient Near East, ancient Israel and early Christianity, as well as his effort to find pre-Marxist forms of

communism. In other words, Kautsky's work raises and deals with some key questions that remain at the centre of such Marxist undertakings – the interactions of culture, economics and society, the issues that swirl around modes of production, and the relations between Marxism and Christianity. His answers may fall away as inadequate, but not the questions.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In citing Kautsky I have made use of the wonderful resource at [www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org), where most of the older Marxist classics are online, especially those for which the copyright has now lapsed. For Kautsky, [marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org) provides access to most of his work, especially in English translation. The page numbers for the quotations from Kautsky come from the numbers as the texts appear on my computer screen, but the fact that the texts are available online makes it much easier to search for the quotation should anyone wish to read further.
- <sup>2</sup> While Kautsky and Bloch are among the very few Marxists who have written books on the Bible, Kautsky also joins a slightly larger group who have written studies of theology and church history, especially Rosa Luxemburg's long essay, *Socialism and the Churches* (2004 [1905]), Lucien Goldmann's *Le Dieu cache: Études sur la vision tragiques dans les Pensées de Pascal et dans le théâtre de Racine*. *Hidden God* (Goldmann 1964, 1959) and Theodor Adorno's *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* (1989).
- <sup>3</sup> An early sustained attempt comes in *The German Ideology* (Marx and Engels 1975–2004, vol 5: 32–35), but the most complete discussions are from *Grundrisse* (Marx and Engels 1975–2004, vol. 28: 399–439) and the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Marx and Engels 1975–2004, vol. 29: 261–265).
- <sup>4</sup> A number of such distillations exist, such as Bailey and Llobera (1981), Krader (1975), Lichtheim (1990) and Shiozawa (1990). See also Pryor's survey of the Western literature up until 1980 (Pryor 1990). The problem is that these summaries tend to lose sense of Marx's dialectical approach in dealing with pre-capitalist modes of production.
- <sup>5</sup> As I write I am engaged in a large project to make the best of this work from the 1920s to the 1980s available in English translation. What exists at the moment is rather piecemeal. I am at this point heavily dependent on Dunn's useful summary (Dunn 1981), as well as the collections edited by D'iakonoff (D'iakonoff 1969, 1991).
- <sup>6</sup> For this reason allocation is a better term than distribution, since the latter is based on the perspective of the object produced.
- <sup>7</sup> I have outlined the theoretical background to the notion of regimes of allocation within Regulation Theory in an earlier work (Boer 2003).
- <sup>8</sup> On the one hand it led Norman Gottwald (1999) to develop his famous and influential notion of the tributary mode of production, since tribute, he argued, was the primary mode of exploitation (the extraction of surplus value). But it was also one of the main points of Hindess and Hirst's similarly influential argument against any notion of an Asiatic Mode of Production: tribute is tax, which is neither unique to the Ancient Near East, nor does it function as the prime mechanism for the extraction of surplus value (Hindess and Hirst 1975: 183–200).
- <sup>9</sup> See Sheila Briggs's useful study of Paul and slavery (2000), although a more systematic treatment indebted to Marxist analysis would have strengthened her study.
- <sup>10</sup> If we thought that the arguments over Jesus as a revolutionary figure date from the 1960s and especially from liberation theology, then Kautsky shows that such a debate is not all that new. Kautsky's engagement with an unnamed theologian whom he calls 'A. K.' on precisely this question shows that it was already an issue a century ago.

- <sup>11</sup> Étienne Cabet argued that communism is in fact pure Christianity. Cabet (1788–1856) was a fiery character and endeared himself neither to the Roman Catholic hierarchy nor the French Government. Soon enough, the deeply Christian but anti-clerical Cabet was found guilty of treason and fled France. In his later years he attempted to establish socialist – or ‘Icarian’ as he called them – communities in the United States, basing them on the model of his book *Travel and Adventures of Lord William Carisdall in Icaria* (*Voyage et aventures de lord William Carisdall en Icarie*) from 1840.
- <sup>12</sup> Only the second volume has been translated into English, as *Communism in Central Europe at the Time of the Reformation* (Kautsky 2002 [1897]).

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