

An exchange on G. E. M de Ste. Croix, historian of Ancient Greek society

By Ann Talbot
8 April 2000

The following is an exchange between a World Socialist Web Site reader and Ann Talbot, whose obituary of the eminent British historian, G. E. M. de Ste. Croix., author of The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World, appeared on the WSWS March 21. [G.E.M. de Ste. Croix: A lifelong empathy with the oppressed]

To the Editor:

Ann Talbot's obituary of G. E. M de Ste. Croix was excellent. De Ste. Croix's *Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* is an imposing work, perhaps a key work in articulating a Marxist, that is, scientific, view of ancient history. It is very much to the credit of the *World Socialist Web Site* that it found such an analysis. The critique of M. I. Finley was especially nice. There is much needed to be said about both Finley and de Ste. Croix. To get at the both of them will have intellectual benefits for the whole development of Marxism in this century.

Nevertheless, I do have disagreements with some of Talbot's remarks.

1. I would put a question mark over Talbot's statement that M. I. Finley "... had been influenced by German émigrés including remnants of the Frankfurt School ...". It is true that Finley worked in a nonacademic capacity at the Institute for Social Research in New York from 1937-39, and that the sinologist Karl Wittfogel, associated with the Frankfurt School, was a colleague and teacher—and also the man who informed on Finley during the McCarthyite period. (Finley played an honorable role during the witch-hunts and refused to name names of colleagues associated with left-wing movements.)

But that is not the same as saying that he followed the intellectual tradition laid down by the Frankfurt School, or even of Wittfogel, which I am afraid is implied by Talbot's statement. I am not ruling this out pending further discussion of Finley's work, but, to the best of my knowledge, the decisive influences on Finley, in terms of contemporary thinkers, were his teacher the historian W. L. Westermann and Karl Polanyi, a Polish immigrant influenced by Marxism in his youth, who, like de Ste. Croix began an academic career later in life. Polanyi is the decisive figure in the modern field of economic anthropology. He also has had a huge and ongoing influence in thought on ancient economies, including the Greek and Roman. It will be necessary to encounter Polanyi again. Finley was an admirer of the Russian historian M. I. Rostovzeff, then teaching at Yale, and was unable to escape his influence like almost any other ancient historian of his generation. In terms of a greater intellectual tradition, Finley was, as Talbot intimates, a Weberian.

It might be good to mention here that Finley is widely and ignorantly considered a Marxist by many perfectly competent ancient historians today. This view needs to be realigned.

2. I would like to take issue with Talbot's statement that "The [Greek] city-states of Aristotle's day were divided between a *propertied* class and those who had no property. What distinguished the *propertied* rich from the propertyless poor in ancient Greece was the ownership of land and slaves, which were the principal means of production in this agricultural society" (emphasis added).

I do not think that any ancient historian, de Ste. Croix included, would be prone to seeing things this way. Greek society in Aristotle's time and much later was comprised of larger landowners, slaves with little or no productive property, but also an extremely large class of agrarian small-holders who worked their own land with the labor of their families or a few slaves. The question is how decisive was a large minority of agricultural slaves in a mass of peasants to productive relations. The importance of the peasantry should not be overlooked. De Ste. Croix himself grappled with the problem of the peasantry and its specific weight in Greco-Roman society. It can be argued that the small farmer played a decisive role in economic, cultural, and military life of the city-states, both in the Greek-speaking world and in some states, such as Rome, in ancient Italy. Small-scale slave ownership by peasants in many respects may be the key to understanding the difference between Greek and Roman society and other ancient cultures, and in fact, to understanding the material basis for the cultural flowering of the classical world.

3. I also think that de Ste. Croix's *Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* needs to be viewed a little more critically in terms of Marxism.

De Ste. Croix never uncovered the trajectory of the development of ancient society. This is his great failing as a historian. When one reads his work, one encounters a brilliant series of snapshots, solutions to certain important problems, a breathtaking command of the ancient sources, but no overall historical mural. Historical imminence over the long term in the development of city-state to empire is not something that he takes up. For example, while he does give a plausible solution to the medium-range reasons for the decline of the Roman Empire, he nowhere addresses decline and fall as a necessary development in the history of the Roman world from its earliest inception. It does not appear to have occurred to him to have asked if the seeds of decline in the late Empire were sown in the initial stages of the Roman republic and in the forms of labor and class struggles that dominated it through successive passages—from peasant-citizen republic, to slave society, to a serf-based society in Christian Late Antiquity.

I believe that to ask such questions would not only be materialist, but dialectical. What does it mean to speak of historical necessity? Does historical necessity operate in pre-capitalist societies? I would suggest that the answer is yes, but the exact forms of such development have yet to be discovered. De Ste. Croix made a magnificent introduction to the mode of such developments—the class struggle—but the dialectical, immanent, teleological course of ancient society still remains to be discovered.

4. Finally, it is absolutely true to say, as Talbot does, that de Ste. Croix saw Athenian democracy in its historical context. But should we leave matters where de Ste. Croix did? De Ste. Croix did not raise the issue of the world-historical significance of Athenian democracy. Let us ask, beyond the idealization of Athenian democracy by the capitalist class for its own political needs at several points in its history, was there something objectively progressive about it? We cannot dance around the question of what is progressive in history (and I am not accusing Talbot of doing so);

I cannot but think that it is significant that de Ste. Croix did not raise this issue and that we find little discussion in his work, to the best of my knowledge, of the place of Athenian democracy in the history of world development.

And a related question: while it is imperative to never forget Athenian freedom was based on slave labor, do we not have the right to be moved by Athenian democracy? Yes, there is idealization of Greek democracy not only by the bourgeoisie, but also by many Greek writers as well. But if we accept the progressive character of Athenian democracy, and the astounding appeal that it can make today within its substantial limitations, should not such passionate defenses of democracy as Pericles' Funeral Oration be a part of *our* corpus? How does it make us feel? I can only speak for myself, but the defense of democracy in Thucydides makes me realize that our tradition, the tradition of social equality, is a long one, that some groups of the poor in totally alien societies were able to articulate, or have articulated for them, ideas of equality.

History is a science. But not every historical document or historical moment has only scientific value. Athenian democracy was a substantial step forward for humanity, and its beauty, and the beauty of the poetry, historical works, and oratory that it inspired ought not to be dead to us. In fact, they should inspire us.

Sincerely,

Sandy English

Ann Talbot's reply:

I would like to thank you for the appreciative comments you make about my article.

To turn to your criticisms; firstly, does de Ste. Croix think the Ancient Greek city-state was divided into propertied and unpropertied? Yes, and so does Aristotle. This is not, however, the same as saying that most of the people in a Greek city-state were either rich or poor. Most of them fell somewhere in between. They were what Aristotle calls the *hoi mesoi*, the people in the middle, whom he discusses in book IV of the *Politics*. He explains that the best state has a large number of these people of moderate wealth, because they will support neither an extreme oligarchy nor an extreme democracy. But as de Ste. Croix points out:

“On the other hand, Aristotle also (and more often) resorts to a simpler ‘dichotomic’ model—which, by the way, is regularly adopted by Plato. In Aristotle's dichotomy (as in Plato's and everyone else's) the citizens are divided into rich and poor, or into the propertied class (*hoi tas ousias echontes*) and those who have no property, or virtually none (*hoi aporoi*). Even in the passage from *Politics* IV that I have summarised above Aristotle admits that the number of *mesoi* in most cities is small, and he regards outright oligarchy or democracy as only too likely to occur. In general, it would be true to say that in Aristotle, as in other Greek writers (especially the historians), the nearer a political situation comes to a crisis the more likely we are to be presented with just two sides: whatever the terminology used (and the Greek political vocabulary was exceptionally rich) we shall usually be justified in translating whatever expressions we find by the ‘upper classes’ and the ‘lower classes’ meaning essentially the propertied and the non-propertied” (*The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, p. 72).

He comments:

“The most important single dividing line which we can draw between different groups of freemen in the Greek world is, in my opinion, that which separated off from the common herd those I am calling ‘the propertied class’...” (p. 114).

I hope I've said enough to show that de Ste. Croix thinks that the essential division in the Greek city-states was between rich and poor and that he backs this up from the sources, although by no means all, or even most, ancient historians would agree. More commonly historians emphasise, as you do, that the majority of the citizens were Aristotle's *hoi mesoi*, peasants who worked the land with the help of their families and

possibly a few slaves.

This arithmetical approach seems to be common sense and even materialist. We ask what the majority of the population do for a living, what their relationship is to the productive forces and find in the case of ancient Greece that they were peasants. So we declare that this is what determines the character and dynamic of this society. This is a purely formal approach to the problem, however. Marx comments on this method in the *Critique*, where he writes:

“When examining a given country from the standpoint of political economy, we begin with its population, the division of the population into classes, town and country, the sea, the different branches of production, export and import, annual production and consumption, prices, etc.

“It would seem to be the proper thing to start with the real and concrete elements, with the actual preconditions, e.g., to start in the sphere of economy with population, which forms the basis and subject of the whole social process of production. Closer consideration shows, however, that this is wrong. Population is an abstraction if, for instance, one disregards the classes of which it is composed. These classes in turn remain empty terms if one does not know the factors on which they depend, e.g. wage-labour, capital, and so on” (*Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1970, p. 205).

In the course of history there have been many thousands of societies in which peasants have made up the majority of the population. For example, in twentieth century Latin America, Asia, Africa and large parts of Eastern Europe most people have been peasants. Yet these societies are very different from those of the ancient world. The designation “peasant”, that appears at first so concrete, is, as Marx puts it, an “empty term”, which does not help us to distinguish between the many societies in which the majority of the population have made their living by small-scale subsistence agriculture. Nor does it help us to identify what inner contradictions provided the dynamic of any of those societies.

By contrast, Aristotle, that consummate dialectician of the ancient world, has identified one of the fundamental contradictions in the Greek city-state, which is the key to the laws of motion in that society. When he says that the nearer the political situation in a city comes to crisis, the more apparent the division is between rich and poor, he is observing a general dialectical law at work.

The fact that few societies in which the majority of the population are peasants have achieved the level of cultural and political development that existed in Ancient Greece, should tell us that it is not sufficient simply to say that the majority of the population are peasants. We have to understand the essential historical character of a society if we are to invest a term like “peasant” with any meaning. We cannot know that twentieth century peasant societies are determined by their relationship to the capitalist world market by counting heads, but only by an examination of the historical development of these societies, which reveals their colonial and semi-colonial relationship to the imperialist powers.

In the case of Ancient Greece the surplus that paid for the monuments and allowed a small elite the leisure to write plays and poetry, and develop philosophy—and a rather larger group the leisure to watch plays, listen to poets and philosophers or attend the assembly—was produced by slaves. As de Ste. Croix himself puts it, “the most significant distinguishing feature of each social formation, each ‘mode of production’, is not so much *how the bulk of the labour production is done, as how the dominant propertied classes, controlling the conditions of production ensure the extraction of the surplus* which makes their own leisured existence possible.” (p. 52, emphasis in the original).

This exploitative relationship between citizens and slaves is the other great contradiction in ancient society, apart from that between rich and poor. Or perhaps it is better to describe them as aspects of the same fundamental contradiction. The ferocity of the laws pertaining to slaves and the fear, acknowledged in Greek and Latin literature, that every slave

was an enemy harboured, amply testifies to the centrality of this contradiction to the ancient world.

One writer who rejects this analysis is Ellen Meiksins-Wood, a radical historian connected with the journal *Monthly Review*. In her *Peasant-Citizen and Slave: the Foundations of Athenian Democracy* (Verso, 1988) she argues, “the distinctive character of Athenian democracy was not the degree to which it was based on dependent labour, the labour of slaves, but on the contrary, the extent to which it excluded dependence from the sphere of production, that is, the extent to which production rested on free, independent labour” (Meiksins-Wood, p. 82). She accuses Marx and Engels of adopting what she terms the “myth of the idle mob” and of inventing something called “the slave mode of production”, a concept, by the way, which is not to be found in Marx. She takes de Ste. Croix to task for giving a large estimate of the number of slaves in Ancient Greece, as though the role of slavery in a society was a purely quantitative question and there must be a majority of them before we can say that slavery was essential to ancient democracy.

The constitutional measures, associated with the names of Solon and Kleisthenes in the sixth century BC, which established democracy in Athens, produced a qualitative change in Ancient Greek society. They prevented the propertied class from exploiting the peasantry as they wished, with the result that they increased their exploitation of those who could not defend themselves—the slaves.

We can only arrive at this conclusion if we analyse Ancient Greek society as an organic system, in which we are alert to its living processes and do not simply try to pin down its structures like beautiful butterflies in a museum. This brings me to your point that de Ste. Croix only offers us “a brilliant series snapshots”. I would say that, on the contrary, it is the arithmetical and formal approach that many historians use which offers us snapshots, because it focuses on structure rather than process and overlooks the basic contradiction within ancient society.

Your conception of what constitutes the historical process is, it seems to me, flawed. You complain that de Ste. Croix “nowhere addresses the decline and fall as a necessary development in the history of the Roman world from its earliest inception” and that he does not ask “if the seeds of decline in the late Empire were sown in the initial stages of the Roman republic”. You suggest that this would be the materialist and dialectical approach. I would have to disagree with this.

If we assume that Roman society was doomed from its inception to fall at the hands of the barbarians, we would be adopting a metaphysical approach to history. Far from being dialectical, it would be entirely mechanical. Not least it would not explain why the eastern part of the Roman Empire, based on Constantinople, successfully repelled the barbarians and survived, in name at least, until 1453 when it was captured by the Ottoman Turks.

To imagine that the seeds of Rome's ultimate decline were already sown in the sixth century BC (if we take the conventional date for the foundation of the republic), only to work out their destructive purpose some thousand years later would be to forget that “history” is not, as Marx points out in the *Holy Family*, “a person apart, using man to achieve *its own aims*; history is *nothing but* the activity of man pursuing his aims” (*The Holy Family*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1975, p. 110).

In pursuing his aims, man engages in conscious activity and, although he does so within the confines of the historically given conditions, is not simply a puppet of socio-economic forces or whisked along by some omnipotent historical process.

By consciousness I do not of course mean the scientific consciousness that is necessary for the proletariat to overthrow capitalism, but consciousness in a less highly developed form is nonetheless a vital part of the historical process in earlier periods. At moments of crisis when the class struggle emerged into the open, Romans engaged in political activity with definite intentions and aims that reflected their class interests and

which they pursued with varying degrees of tenacity and skill, according to their personal character. Character cannot be ignored in the history of any period—still less in a period when socio-economic forces are often expressed in the actions of individual historical actors and in struggles between them.

The first evidence we have of a class struggle in the Roman republic is the prolonged struggle between the patricians, who monopolised political office, and the plebeians, who were excluded from office. The plebs' most effective weapon was the secession, when they marched out of the city and refused conscription. Three of these events, in 494, 449 and 287 BC, are well attested. The secession of 494 BC won them the right to elect tribunes of the plebs, who could defend them from other magistrates, call public meetings and veto laws. While some historians deny that this was a class struggle because the plebs and the patricians were legally defined social groups, de Ste. Croix stresses, “The ‘conflict of the orders’ was both a conflict between ‘orders’ and a class struggle, in which—exceptionally, as far as Roman history is concerned—the lower classes, or at least the upper section of the lower classes, played at times a vigorous part” (p. 336).

However, what these struggles created was a patricio-plebeian aristocracy because, to quote de Ste. Croix again, “The poorer classes at Rome made fatal mistakes: they failed to follow the example of the poorer citizens in so many of the Greek states and demand an extension and improvement in political rights which might create a more democratic society, at a time when the Roman state was still small enough to make a democracy of the *polis* -type (if I may call it that) a practical possibility” (p. 340).

The class struggle again reached an acute pitch in the late republic, when a series of popular leaders demanded the redistribution of land, debt relief, the distribution of corn and the defence of the rights of the tribunes. They did not represent an organised movement or ideology. Some of them, like Julius Caesar, were doubtless ambitious politicians who took up some of these demands to advance their own careers. But this would have been impossible unless there was substantial popular support. The poor certainly took an active part in agitation. We learn from Plutarch that they were chalking up slogans on the walls of public buildings. The most outstanding of these popular figures were the brothers Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus. Tiberius was beaten to death, along with 300 of his followers, and their bodies thrown into the Tiber in 133 BC. Gaius died in a second attempt to distribute land to the poor, which was bloodily suppressed by the propertied class and 3,000 of his followers were executed in prison.

An even bloodier series of class struggles broke out when large-scale slave revolts plunged Sicily and other regions of Italy into a state of war. Roman victories had not only brought wealth and land to the propertied class, but vast numbers of slaves, creating the conditions for revolt. The most famous of these uprisings is that led by Spartacus from 73 to 71 BC, 100,000 slaves are said to have been killed in the suppression, including 6,000 who were crucified along the Appian Way from Rome to Capua. This massacre was only exceptional for its scale. When Pedanius Secundus was murdered by one of his slaves in AD 61, 400 of them were put to death despite protests from the common people of Rome.

These class struggles are not merely superficial events that had no influence on the fate of a society that had already been mapped out by history. Had the Gracchi succeeded in halting the accumulation of land by the rich and in redistributing it to the poor, the republic might have had a longer life span before descending into the civil war between rival aristocratic factions from which Augustus emerged as emperor. Their lack of resolve in pursuing a policy they believed was for the good of Rome, and Julius Caesar's opportunism and selfish ambition, played a not insignificant part in that failure. By contrast the determination and skill of Spartacus, whom Marx describes as a “splendid fellow”, enabled him to lead a slave army that kept the Romans pinned down for two years.

Spartacus's revolt and that of other slaves could offer no alternative to the exploitation of unfree labour with the productive forces that were available in the Ancient world, but the experience of this revolt did persuade the rich that it was safer to turn to other means of exploitation. Increasingly slaves were settled on the land and free tenants were more heavily exploited until, by the end of the fourth century, the whole of the agricultural population inscribed on the tax registers were legally tied to their farms or villages.

It is by this process of class struggle that historical necessity is worked out in the ancient world. You seem to suggest that there is something other than the class struggle that needs to be discovered before we can understand the dialectical, immanent, teleological course of ancient society. This is not the case.

In capitalist society the means by which the ruling class exploit the working class is hidden, since it seems that workers are paid for the day's labour. It was Marx's achievement to uncover the laws by which capitalism operates. In the Ancient World the mechanism of exploitation is not hidden in this way, but is entirely open. As Marx put it, "The Roman slave was held by fetters: the wage labourer is bound to his owner by invisible threads" (*Capital*, vol I, Lawrence and Wishart, 1970, p. 574).

In ancient society the propertied class exploits the poor through taxation and rent, drive them into indebtedness and, if they can, enslave them so that they have unrestricted use of their labour and person. War tends to ruin the free peasants, who are the army's source of manpower, while providing masses of slaves, land and booty for the ruling class. Marx notes that the "secret history" of the Roman republic "is the history of its landed property" (*Capital*, vol. I, Lawrence and Wishart, 1970, p. 82, n. 1), by which he meant the process by which the peasants were deprived of their land and put at the mercy of the propertied class. In elucidating this history of exploitation, de Ste. Croix is revealing the dialectical course of ancient society. There is no more mysterious process at work.

As for de Ste. Croix not raising the world-historical significance of Athenian democracy, that would depend what we consider that significance to be. We owe the Greek world a great deal: political concepts such as democracy and equality before the law; systems of philosophy such as dialectics, materialism, empiricism—which have their origin in the ancient world. The same can be said of philosophical concepts such as the law of nature which was to provide the basis for Locke's political theories and, in turn, for revolutionary statements such as the *Declaration of Independence* and *The Rights of Man*; scientific concepts such as atoms, which provided a theoretical framework for experimental scientists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries before science could prove the existence of atoms; mathematical concepts such as those contained in Euclid's geometry, whose translation inspired Hobbes to develop a science of society; and artistic concepts such as the golden mean which were to inspire the Renaissance.

After giving us 700 pages analysing the class struggles of the Ancient Greek world, de Ste. Croix could be forgiven for not embarking on another volume that would have taken him far outside his own specialism and which he justifiably left to others, having laid bare for them the environment which produced these remarkable developments in thought.

Nor do I think it is possible to separate history as science and history as inspiration. Certainly emotion has a place in the practice of history. A scientific approach to history does not exclude emotion, but it is important to recognise that the historian's emotional responses are disciplined by the practice of history just as those of an artist are disciplined by the practice of painting, sculpting, directing a camera, or writing and by the study of other artists' work. Feelings at the level of gut reactions can often lead us astray in the field of history, as they can in art. An historian must learn to empathise with societies and cultures that are quite alien and often inherently uncongenial to modern tastes and feelings and, what is perhaps

more difficult, an historian must never suppress or skate over those aspects of a culture which do not conform to what he or she finds moral, progressive or acceptable. History can be scientifically based and inspiring at the same time.

We do not need to downplay the question of slavery in order to feel inspired by Greek democracy, once we recognise that "at first the development of the capacities of the human species takes place at the cost of the majority of human individuals and even classes, in the end it breaks through this contradiction and coincides with the development of the individual" (Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* II, p. 118).

Finally on Finley: Certainly Finley was influenced by Westermann and Rostovtzeff as you point out, but the influence of the Frankfurt School on his intellectual development should not be omitted. Neither of these two scholars could have made Finley such a sophisticated opponent of Marxism as he became compared to other ancient historians. My opinion was confirmed by Professor D. Whitehead, one of Finley's students, who referred me to B. D. Shaw and R. P. Saller (eds.), *Economy and Society in Ancient Greece* (London: 1981).

"Finley became involved in various Institute activities, participating in seminars and writing reviews for the Institute's journal, the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* [see ZfS 4 (1935) pp. 289-90; vol. 9 (1941) pp. 502-10]. From 1937 to 1939 the Institute employed him as a factotum, a job which included the translation of works into English that it wished to present to an American audience." It suggests a fairly close collaboration that cannot but have influenced Finley.

Professor Whitehead also took great delight in pointing out to me that I had made an error in referring to Grote as a German historian. He is of course English.

Best regards,
Ann Talbot

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>