Marx’s Concept of Class and the Athenian Polis

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Abstract: Classical Athens is too often seen in an idealized form, as the paradigm of democracy. At the same time, the existence of slavery leads others to dismiss the direct and participatory nature of the polis. The social structure of Classical Athens has been hugely controversial for historians and sociologists. This article discusses this debate in the context of Marx’s concept of class. Against the dominant Weberian notions of status and order, I argue that the Classical Marxist conception of class is a deeper analytical tool that enhances an understanding of the contradictions of Athenian society. The most significant contribution to the debate from this perspective is G.E.M de Ste. Croix’s The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World. Much of the scholarship in regard to Marx and the sociology of the ancient world followed the publication of this book, thus my discussion is heavily focused on this text. First, I outline class in Marx’s theory of historical change. This involves an elaboration of key aspects of Marx’s sociological tools, most significantly, the definition of ‘mode of production’. Here I highlight the importance of the extraction of surplus value in defining social forms and discuss the birth of democracy in Athens. Second, I take up the arguments made about the ancient economy by the Weberian M.I Finley. I contend that his theoretical position misinterprets key aspects of ‘class-consciousness’ and from here too easily dismisses Marx’s insights. My analysis of these debates stresses the value of a Marxist conception of class as a means to clarify the structure of Athenian society.

Keywords: Athens, democracy, class, slavery, Marx, Marxism, Weber, class consciousness, polis, de Ste.Croix, Finley.

Introduction

The social structure of Classical Athens has endured as a highly controversial issue for historians and social theorists alike. One of the framing features of these debates has been the tendency to either focus too myopically on the limitations of Athenian society at the expense of a broader analysis or to elevate the virtues of Athenian society at the expense of any understanding of its limitations and broader character. In short: the

1 The limitations of the democratic polis are significant: citizenship was denied to women, foreigners and slaves. For example, Paul Lafargue, The Right To Be Lazy, (London: Charles Kerr and Co., Co-
analysis has been largely one-sided. This paper argues that Classical Marxism offers a way to overcome these reductions, without the need to either dismiss or accept the ‘Athenian legacy’. Approaching the question with a sense of the contradictions inherent within the Athenian polis allows for both an appreciation of the elevated and ennobling role the ancient Greeks gave to politics and citizenship, but at the same time remaining critical of the basis that the society had in chattel slavery. When applied to the polis, a Marxist analysis gives clarity to the dynamics of Athenian society.

To make sense of this approach, I draw on a specifically Marxian definition of class.\(^2\) This requires an explanation of the nature of production. ‘Production’ is not analogous with ‘the economy’ but is the broader character of social relations that exists within the total organization of society. The shape of political and state structures must be seen in close reference to the manner and nature of production. This is not to suggest any automatic base/superstructure causation but instead to underline a mode of analysis that looks to understand social forms as a totality. This means stressing that social phenomena have an integral relation to production, and are so interwoven that a method of abstraction is necessary to show the way in which the political and the economic form each other. With this in mind, an analysis of production underscores the role and place of politics within the greater organization of society. The contention of this article is that the form of production in the Ancient Greek polis provides an important, but overlooked, method to assess the merits of the ancient polis.

The nature of the Greek polis has been a constant source of inquiry for political theorists. Regrettably, the current mainstream of classical history and theory has relatively little interest in Marx. The failure of theorists to adequately address Marx exposes a significant weakness of such interpretations. This is especially evident when attempting to meaningfully analyze slavery and production in general, as I argue below. On a higher level it exposes a lacuna in Classical Studies neglect to seriously engage with social theory.

Moreover, in analysis of the ancient economy, the terrain has been largely defined by the debate between the ‘modernists’ and the ‘primitivists’. Where the modernists take the position that the economy of antiquity is more or less the same as today with commodity exchange, currency etc., the primitivists, most notably M.I Finley, argue that modern notions of economics are highly problematic when applied to the ancient world because of the absence of a market economy.\(^3\) The theoretical advance of Finley’s work (first outlined in The Ancient Economy published in 1973) was significant; by disproving the conventional assumption that the ancient economy was in most ways similar to a

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\(^2\) The definition of ‘class’ is highly controversial both for and between Marxists and non-Marxist sociologists. See for example, Giovanni Arrighi et al, “Rethinking the Concepts of Class and Status-Group in a World-Systems Perspective” in Anti-Systemic Movements, (London: Verso, 1989): 3-28.

modern capitalist one, Finley made the astute point that the ancient economy was not driven by commodity manufacture but actually based on agricultural production. Consequently, Finley concludes that class (in Marx’s sense) does not exist. In this way, rather than overcoming the problems of the ‘ancient economy’ Finley replaced the current static orthodoxy with one of his own based on his reading of Weber. The prevalence of Finley’s Weberian approach to the classical world is by far the most influential in regard to the economic debate and has continued to be the main form of analysis used by classical theorists when attempting to deal with sociological questions. However, the weakness of Finley’s theoretical standpoint is evident when teased out. The distrust of, and failure to use, the key concept of class in the historical study of Athens is the focus of this article.

CLASS IN MARX’S THEORY OF HISTORY

Until recently, few historians of Antiquity seriously considered class with reference to Marx. 4 There is an assumption in academic Classical Studies that the sociological tools associated with Marxist history writing are anachronistic; specifically, the use of categories that only came with the theorizing of the development of capitalist society are inapplicable to pre-modern forms of the economy. Apparently, Marx “never really devoted himself to the problem of class relations in pre-capitalist societies”.5 According to this view, Marx is only useful as a critic of modern capitalist society. Class was deemed inapplicable in pre-capitalist society if there was no large industrial proletariat. This was combined with a drastic lack of interest – a ‘silence’ – in the question of class.6 But this silence, willing or not, was challenged in decisive terms with G.E.M de Ste. Croix’s The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World.7 This work provides a powerful statement on how the Marxist method should be used to interpret the classical world and redefined the terrain regarding Marx and the ancients.8 Following this publication, unprecedented contributions to classical history and political theory for the first time earnestly considered historical materialism. One of the remarkable aspects of Ste. Croix’s Class Struggle is its methodological rigor. Not simply content in mapping out a history of Ancient Greece, Ste. Croix sets out to probe the real driving structures of the ancient world as a historical epoch. By seeing society as a totality, Ste. Croix explains

4 Ancient historians seemed to lag behind other periods, for example social historians like E.P Thompson, Christopher Hill and Eric Hobsbawm significantly challenged this conservative view of social history in the 1960s and 1970s.
8 One notable issue in Ste. Croix’s otherwise well-considered approach is his claim that women possibly formed a distinct class in classical society, CSAGW, 98-111. This problem stems from his dissolving of “‘production’ into ‘reproduction’, for a brief discussion see Anderson, History Workshop, 65.
why the forms of society change and why class relations force this change. The basis of this argument is in the operation of class and the subsequent form of surplus extraction from the exploited classes. Ste. Croix’s polemics against other academics are notorious and this article seeks to define the debates in context of the polis.9

Ste. Croix begins his theoretical account of the ancient world with a defense of Marx’s use of class and provides a detailed discussion to support this view. Class, according to Ste. Croix, “is the collective social expression of the fact of exploitation, the way in which exploitation is embodied in a social structure”. Exploitation necessarily involves the extraction and preservation of a surplus by a dominant class: “the appropriation of a part of the product of the labour of others”.10 This meant that “the main determinant of an individual’s class position in Antiquity is the extent to which he exploits the labour of others (mainly unfree) or is himself exploited”.11 Fundamentally, class is defined by the relations people have to the overall form of production, namely the degree to which they control the conditions of their production, and hence the degree to which they can relate to one another in the context of the relations of production. The social relation that forms the basis of Athenian society is the exploitation of unfree labour by a free, slave-owning, minority who exploited the surplus, the means of production and the labourers. Therefore as an empirical category, class exists in Athens just as it exists in any society where there is a division between those who produce and those who control the productive apparatus. Class is a relationship and a process. Thus the most important class antagonism in Antiquity was between the slave owners and slaves; that is, an antagonism between those who owned sufficient property (in the means of production – large agriculture), and those who did not and upon whose forced (slave) labour rested – the power and wealth of the owning class.12

Marx sees class, as Ste. Croix outlines, not simply as a matter of consciousness but instead as an objective relationship that “people have to the means and labour of production and to each other”.13 This is fundamental to historical materialism, as Georg Lukács maintains: “In Marxism the division of society into classes is determined by position within the process of production”.14 Various social phenomena can disguise class divisions, such as status, order, religion, the law etc., but what is really fundamental is the ability of historical materialism to make sense of these ideas in

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9 Josiah Ober, “A Judicious Study of Discernible Reality”, *Polis*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2005): 1-3. For example, Ste. Croix’s damning of the French intellectuals that have attempted, wrongly as he sees it, to use Marx. He cites J.P Vernant and Charles Parain and points out the deficiencies in their reading of class. “Where Parain or Vernant would allow Greek slaves to count as a class at all in Marx’s sense is not clear to me.” CSAGW, 63-4.
10 CSAGW, 43.
11 Ibid., 270.
12 Ibid., 115. Ste. Croix discusses the other forms of labour at length, regrettably there is not sufficient space here for such discussion, see CSAGW, 205-278.
13 CSAGW, 32.
relation to society as a whole.\(^{15}\) This type of analysis takes the objective realities of society and analyses them concretely in terms of class.

The Marxist method rests upon the material conditions of society, as they change and evolve. The total form of society, which is always in movement, decisively shifts as friction between the forces and relations of production intensifies and each comes into contradiction with the other. Each historical social form is differentiated by the precise way surplus labour is extracted. As Marx put it:

> Thus the social relations within which individuals produce, *the social relations of production, change, are transformed, with the change and development of the material means of production, the productive forces, the relations of production in their totality constitute what are called the social relations, society, and, specifically, a society at a definite stage of historical development, a society with a peculiar, distinctive character. Ancient society, feudal society, bourgeois society are such totalities of production relations, each of which at the same time denotes a special stage of development in the history of mankind.*\(^{16}\)

Analysis of the social relations and forces of production, *the mode of production*, provides “the framework from within which the class struggle, politics, ideology, etc., of that social formation can be explained”.\(^{17}\) However, the relationship between social, political and ideological institutions and the ‘economic basis’ of a society are far from automatically determined.\(^{18}\) Marx and Engels themselves never imagined that the economic relations as such constituted the whole, nor even the sole determining cause, of any society. Engels made this very clear, insisting upon the complex nature of historical causation crucial to historical materialism as a mode of analysis:

> According to the materialist view of history, the determining factor in history is, *in the final analysis*, the production and reproduction of actual life. More than that was never maintained either by Marx or myself. Now if someone distorts this by declaring the economic moment to be the *only* determining factor, he changes that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, ridiculous piece of jargon.\(^{19}\)

The core of Marx’s method, *mode of production analysis*, understands history as a changing process, a dynamic variation. It is *production*, not the economy which lies at the center of this process. ‘Economy’ unlike ‘production’ is static, referring merely to the existence of economic functioning – supply and demand, scarcity, price, etc. Conversely, Marx looks at “human working activity, not from the standpoint of its technical methods and instruments of labour, but from the standpoint of its social form.

\(^{15}\) These factors of course interrelate with the position of class, but do not intrinsically define the relationship, although they can certainly help shape it. See Lukács, *H&CC*, 50.


\(^{18}\) See for example Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Holy Family*, MECW 4, 93.

\(^{19}\) Engels to Joseph Bloch, 22 September 1890, MECW 49, 33-4.
It deals with *production relations* that are established among people in the process of production*. The ‘mode of production’ refers to the entire social organism as it exists, including both relations of labour and the form (or forms) of surplus extraction, and it is the precise form of surplus extraction which provides the key to understanding these processes. Ste. Croix outlines the importance of the category of surplus extraction throughout his book, stating: “the really distinctive feature of each society is not the way in which the bulk of the labour of production is done, but how the extraction of the surplus from the immediate producer is secured”. Marx supports such a notion: “The specific economic form in which unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of the direct producers...reveals the innermost secret, the hidden basis for the entire social structure”.

Ste. Croix establishes that the ‘innermost secret’ of unpaid surplus labour in Antiquity arises from the ownership of large agricultural properties and the silver mines that the ruling classes relied upon. Although revenue came in the form of taxes, public utilities, the empire and trade, the ruling surplus was generated by the use of unfree labour on the large agricultural properties. What systematically makes Athens a slave society, or a ‘slave mode of production’, is not which class does the majority of labour but that the propertied classes extract most of their primary surplus from “the working population by means of unfree labour”. So here we would agree with Perry Anderson’s characterization that the Greeks transformed slavery “from an ancillary facility into a systematic mode of production”. Moreover, it has been well established that the majority of labour carried out in Athens was carried out not by slaves, as traditionally thought. Instead, the overwhelming *bulk of production* was performed by free peasants who utilized little or no labour outside their own families and contributed little to the overall surplus. But, crucially, slavery was always present and provided the fact for surplus extraction. This analysis of class proves the basis to explain the nature of the Greek polis in terms of the forces acting upon it and pushing it forward – as an arena of class struggle. Therefore, while Athenian democracy acted as a bulwark for the lower classes against the propertied class, to maintain or sustain their ruling class position, those at the top were reliant on raising the rate of exploitation of the slaves. “We need not be surprised, then”, Ste. Croix writes;

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22 CSAGW, 51.


24 CSAGW, 65-8.

25 Marx had observed correctly, that the “history of classical antiquity is the history of cities, but of cities founded on landed property and on agriculture”, *Grundrisse* (M.N), 479. For a brief but useful discussion on trade see Antony Andrews, *Greek Society*, (London: Penguin, 1971), 130-147.

26 CSAGW, 133.


29 CSAGW 112-6; Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* in MECW 28, 400-4.
[I]f we find a more intense development of slavery at Athens than at most other places in the Greek world: if the humbler citizens could not be fully exploited, and it was inexpedient to try to put too much pressure on the metics, then it was necessary to rely to an exceptional degree on exploiting the labour of the slaves.\textsuperscript{30}

This position offers the content of the dialectical relationship between democracy and slavery. This historical fact has necessitated a change in the way that the polis is evaluated by raising the issue of the central contradiction of the freedom of the Athenian citizen.

The Athenian Constitution, in its fullest form, came into being by political revolution. In 507/8, after intense fighting between sections of the ruling class, the \textit{demos} were able to establish the constitutional reforms that wrestled political power into the hands of the citizenry.\textsuperscript{31} It is clear that the \textit{demos} were instrumental in creating the actual changes and institutions of democracy.\textsuperscript{32} Constitutionally, the Assembly was the backbone of the polis. Consisting of every Athenian citizen, meeting around once a week, it had a quorum of 6,000 and an incredible power over the fine details of policy.\textsuperscript{33} The right to participate and speak in the Assembly was universal to citizens and provided the context for debate all over Athens. The law courts (with no entrenched judges) and the public offices (some offices could only be held once during a lifetime) were chosen by lot and provided every citizen the (potential) practice of government, also encouraged by public pay.\textsuperscript{34} The ethos of the democracy reflected this feature, as the Xenophonian-Pseudo \textit{Constitution of Athenians} upheld:

\begin{quote}
\textit{At Athens the poor and the commons seem justly to have the advantage over the well-born and the wealthy; for it is the commons which mans the fleet and has brought the state her power, and the steersmen and the boatswains and the ship-masters and the lookout-men and the ship-builders these have brought the state her power much rather than the infantry and the well-born and the good citizens. This being so it seems just that all should have a share in offices filled by lot or by election, and that any citizen who wishes should be allowed to speak.}\textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[30] {\textit{CSAGW}, 141.}
\footnotetext[32] {This is not the place for a discussion on the merit and nature of the Constitution. The best short account on this topic remains Jones, \textit{Athenian Democracy}.}
\footnotetext[33] {The administrative functions were carried out by the Council of 500 consisting of an annual rotation of citizens; the Council prepared the agenda for the Assembly and met 200 times a year. However, on controversial issues the Council put the question to the Assembly and any citizen could draft a motion. Any citizen could say what they pleased and offer amendments to that motion. The Presidents of the Council and of the Assembly were chosen by lot daily.}
\footnotetext[34] {The ten generalships were, however elected by the Assembly. The Athenians tended to view election as an aristocratic principle, since voters would tend to go for a known rather than an unknown name – and this is reflected in the class background of the generals – often from very wealthy families. However, the Assembly had direct power over direction of the generals and had renegade generals punished.}
\end{footnotes}
While it is more than apparent that the actual workings of the democracy had substantial shortcomings, the type of politicisation that was embedded in citizen life was essential to how the Athenians themselves made sense of their government.36

Clearly Athens was not a democracy simply for the slave owners, but instead can be seen as a relentless struggle between the active citizenry and the propertied class that ever aimed to wind back the power of the citizens. This can easily be seen in the operation of the democratic institutions of the polis that aimed to curb the power of the aristocrats – such as election by lot, public pay and mass participatory forms of government – and in so doing to actively control the state.37 This class struggle on the political plane represented real achievements. The extraordinary nature of the Athenian polis represented a real political existence that needs no justification, simply explanation.

ORDER, STATUS AND CLASS

Ste. Croix mounts a strong case that class is the fundamental tool for analysis because unlike other sociological tools, class offers pivotal elucidation, and not mere description. Ste. Croix’s main stalking horse here is, of course, Finley. The Weberian position, as advanced by Finley, sees classical society in terms of a ‘status based model’, categorizing societal divisions between rich and poor by ‘status and order’ – as put on a ‘spectrum’.38 Finley describes these terms himself as “admirably vague” with a “considerable psychological element”.39 What “determines a man’s place on the spectrum” is his or her access to “rights, privileges claims and duties” and “he may have certain civil rights but no political rights…the combination of these rights or lack of them” is where he would sit on the status spectrum.40 Finley then adds, “invariably what are conventionally called ‘class struggles’ in antiquity prove to be conflicts between groups at different points in the spectrum disputing the distribution of specific rights and privileges”.41 But as Ste. Croix makes clear, “Status is a purely descriptive category with no heuristic capacity, no such explanatory power as the dynamic Marxist concept of class provides”.42 Where a class analysis exposes the real, underlying relations that shape society, ‘status’ categorizes individuals on the basis of superficial ‘rights and privileges’. ‘Status’ is a partial acknowledgement that in class society, legal and political forms can obscure social relations. However, instead of looking to a class analysis and beyond to the historical importance of the modern proletariat, Finley merely accepts this contradictory status analysis.

37 CSAGW, 287.
38 AE, 61.
39 Ibid., 51.
40 Ibid., 67-8.
41 Ibid., 68.
42 CSAGW, 93.
Finley looks superficially at class in Marx’s sense but is quick to discard it, exhibiting his lack of understanding rather than the inapplicability of class as a tool. He seems to think that because an industrial working class didn’t exist, class did not exist in the ancient world and that the efforts of historians to apply class in Marx’s sense are wrong footed. Finley bases his refutation of class on an internal criticism of Marxist theory to prove that “neither in a Marxist nor a non-Marxist standpoint is class a sufficiently demarcated category”. He does this by reference to the “most-orthodox Marxist” Georg Lukács and his discussion of class-consciousness in pre-capitalist society. Finley quotes Lukács remarkably selectively, “status-consciousness masks class-consciousness”, and so “the structuring of society into castes and estates means that economic elements are inextricably joined to political and religious factors” and “economic and legal categories are objectively and substantively so interwoven as to be inseparable”. This argument is particularly revealing. Lukács is always clear that class objectively exists in pre-capitalist societies. What he is theoretically mapping out is the ability of historical classes (the proletariat is his focus) to become conscious. At no point is Lukács arguing that classes in pre-capitalist societies were conscious, basing his entire argument on that very fact as he explicitly states (a sentence after the final quotation Finley cites) there is “no possible position within such a society from which the economic basis of all social relations could be made conscious”. The ancient economy, as Finley is well aware, is quantifiably more primitive than a modern economy. The structure of pre-capitalist societies, which subsumed and melded political, legal and economic rights, did generally provide social expression in ‘status’ and ‘order’. Thus taken from a subjective ‘status’ viewpoint, Finley sees class as class-consciousness and not as Marxists do: as an objective social relation to production. In an attempt to answer for the absence of a self-conscious class in pre-capitalist society, Finley falls into contradiction and ahistoricism. On one hand, he is trying to offer a methodological explanation for the functioning of ancient society. On the other hand, Finley is unable to come to terms with the function of class as a dynamic category. Finley’s swift and simplistic denial of the existence of class exhibits his lack of understanding of the concept, while failing to actually undermine class as an applicable tool of analysis.

However, Lukács makes the distinction between ‘status’ and class in relation to their historically changing forms. This point is made explicitly: “in accordance with the looser economic structures of society, the political and legal institutions (the division into estates, privileges, etc.) have different functions objectively and subjectively from those

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43 As he discards exploitation and imperialism—“too broad as categories of analysis”, AE, 157.
44 AE, 50.
45 Ibid.
48 H&CC, 57.
exercised under capitalism”.49 Crucially, Lukács maps out the historical difference between class existing throughout history – now hidden, now open – and as a class for itself (i.e. a class with self-consciousness which can only be achieved with the stark contradictions of capitalism).50 Lukács surmises that “the economy has not objectively reached the stage of being for itself,” thereby affirming that the stage of economic growth cannot make conscious the totality of social relations.51 Class-consciousness is the unity of the subjective and objective realities of social production; the conscious realisation of the form in which a minority extract a surplus from the producing classes. Since capitalism universalises the form that surplus labour is exploited by turning it into a commodity, it is only the working class – by virtue of their place in social production – that is able to understand the totality of social relations and act upon this contradiction.52

Without the theoretical sophistication of a historical analysis to distinguish and relate structural to superstructural phenomena, Finley has no alternative but to dispense with the crucial category of class altogether. As Lukács notes, in pre-capitalist periods, “the classes could only be deduced from the immediately given historical reality by the methods of historical materialism”.53 Finley’s approach fails on his own terms. By doing nothing more than pointing out a fact of pre-capitalist, imputed-consciousness, Finely shows that Marxists can provide an explanation for status as a historical phenomenon, whereas Weberians cannot, by their own account, provide any meaningful account of class.

For this reason, Finley objects to Marxist classification of slaves as a distinct class, “in particular, neither slaves were as such members of a single class nor were slave owners”.54 He argues that the role of slavery in production “varied too greatly” to be seen as a class relation. However, there is deep inconsistency within Finley’s historical evidence and his conclusions. In Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology he is in full agreement with Ste. Croix on the factual and fundamental aspects of production:

[F]ree men dominated small-scale farming, much of it subsistence farming, as well as petty commodity production and small-scale trading in the cities; slaves dominated, and virtually monopolized, large-scale production in both the countryside and the urban sector. It follows that slaves provided the bulk of the immediate income from property of the elites, economic, social and political.55

This is the same position as Ste. Croix, so how does Finley come to a theoretical conclusion at such odds with Ste. Croix? Finley has the right starting point: the ancient economy was not dominated by commodity manufacture, but production was based on

49 Ibid.
50 As Marx maintains, “this mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself”, Poverty of Philosophy, MECW 6, 483, 211.
51 H&CC, 57.
53 Ibid., 58.
54 AE, 184.
agriculture, where slaves provided the surplus. Where Finley errs is his interpretation of the process of production. Finley sees it as “essential” to “lay the ghost once and for all of the slave mode of production”, due to both the ‘scale’ of the free productive labour in Antiquity and because “chattel slavery has in the past been integrated into other modes of production, most obviously capitalism.” Both arguments miss the point rather drastically. Firstly, what characterizes a mode of production is not related to the overall scale, but instead what class (“slaves provided the bulk of the immediate income from property”, to use the language of his passage above) produces the surplus for the ruling class. This is what determines the mode of production. Secondly, at any one time in a mode of production there can be a great variance of types of labour performed; what characterizes the form is the forces and relations of production.

The applicability of the ‘slave mode of production’ has not only been questioned by those openly hostile to Marxism. Political Marxist Ellen Meiksins Wood has argued vehemently against the ‘slave mode of production’. Her book Peasant-Citizen and Slave is a response to the Classical Marxist position that ancient surplus production rested upon slave labour. According to Wood, Marxists have replicated the anti-democratic rhetoric of those claiming that the ordinary Athenian citizen did not work, or what she calls the ‘myth of the idle mob’. While Wood does provide an interesting line of development for the bourgeois origins of the ‘myth of the idle mob’, her argument that Marxist analysis has simply ‘inverted’ the myth is dubious. Wood contends, “[p]aradoxically, though the myth of the idle mob originated in a conservative reaction to democracy, it has lived on in the Marxist conception of the ‘slave mode of production’”. Wood mounts her position against Engels, Anderson and Ste. Croix and draws most heavily from Finley. Considerable time is spent refuting Ste. Croix, who she argues “leaves the critical questions unanswered, and unasked”. At the heart of the disagreement is what role slaves played in surplus production. Wood disagrees that slaves played the crucial (or significant) role in agriculture, and instead sees slave labour as mainly confined to the household and the silver mines. Wood disputes Ste. Croix’s evidence for the bulk of surplus labour being performed by slaves, but provides no solid case for where slave labour fitted into the production of surplus value. The closest she gets to this issue is where she writes, “[t]he large numbers [of slaves] in the mines and in domestic service were certainly ‘essential’ to the Athenian economy, and their

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56 *AE*, 179. Oddly enough in Finley’s review of Anderson’s *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* which appeared in *The Guardian* (Feb 6, 1975), he doesn’t dispute the “slave mode of production”.


59 Ibid., 5-42.


62 Ibid., 40-1. Wood believes Ste. Croix “does little more than prove slaves existed, especially on large estates”, 67.

63 Ste. Croix’s theoretical case, see *CSAGW*, 226-32.
absence, if such a thing can be imagined, would have transformed Athenian society”. This sentence hints at the general issues of clarity in Wood’s argument. She finds herself stuck between the antinomy of defending the peasant-citizen and attempting to make sense of the role of slavery in production. Since her argument relies on downplaying the latter, by both denying its importance in agriculture and its role in supplying a productive surplus, the material foundations of the Athenian economy are easily lost. There are reasons for this. Wood is at pains to reinforce her general thesis of a ‘peasant culture’. Wood suggests ”many of the most cherished ideals of Athenian culture, and even some of the exalted notions of Greek philosophy, may owe their origins to experience and aspirations of the Attic peasantry”. While this is a controversial claim in itself, the implications of her construction add a problematic gloss to the material basis of the Ancient polis. Further, Wood quotes Eric Wolf dreaming about a peasant utopia, where the free villager reigned supreme, unhampered by large landowners or tax collectors. Wood does state that this “of course, never existed”, but then goes on to say, “the peasant-citizen came as close as any peasant ever has to the freedom described by Wolf, and the deme as close as any peasant community ever has to the ideal of the ‘free village’”.

Since Wood’s case is entirely dependent on the independence of the peasant-citizen, there is a danger in slipping into one-sided formulations on what the nature of this freedom represents. This problem can be found in her earlier (co-authored with Neal Wood), Class Ideology and Ancient Political Theory, where they write, “[i]t is perhaps not excessive to say that the laboring citizenry of Athens came as close to being free and independent laborers as is possible where a class of laborers exists at all – more independent, of course, than the free proletariat of the modern age”. However, this type of statement opens itself up to claims of ahistoricism. Wood sees freedom resting purely in the relative absence of economic exploitation. In taking such a position she removes the dynamic agency of class as a historical factor. Conversely, to see the relationship dialectically, the proletariat is at once the most unfree and free of any historical class. It is unfree because capitalism involves direct exploitation, forcing people into lives they cannot control and making them dependent on selling their labour-power and making their own existence alienated. For Marx, modern capitalism places humankind in chains. But at the same time the proletariat has freedom because the social order is dependent on their labour-power. This provides the potential to

64 Wood, Peasant-Citizen and Slave, 79.
65 Wood, Peasant-Citizen and Slave, 82.
66 Ibid., 126.
67 Conversely, Ste. Croix writes, “These men [slave owning class], liberated from toil, are the people who produced virtually all Greek art and literature and science and philosophy, and provided a good proportion of the armies which won remarkable victories…In a very real sense most of them were parasitic upon other men, their slaves above all; most of them were not supports of the democracy…which was its great contribution to political progress, although they did supply almost all itself leaders”, CSAGW, 115.
68 Ibid., 126-7.
displace the entire apparatus. As Alasdair MacIntyre puts it, “this fact, that the working class has only the alternative of continuing capitalism or of ending class society for good, is one that marks off the struggle of the working class from all previous class struggle”.  

Further still, on review, Marxists have been fairly unconvinced by Wood’s arguments. Scott Meikle sums up Wood’s thesis as “allowing herself to slide into the opposite propaganda and a position with a piece of social-democratic sentimentality: Athenian peasants were hard-working types with a good labourist culture, took pride in their work and hardly employed slaves at all”. While most Marxists have recognized the merit of Wood’s originality, the comparison between her book and Ste. Croix’s has been the obvious focal point.

Conversely, Non-Marxists have been more sympathetic to Wood’s case. Josiah Ober, to take the most notable example, agrees with Wood’s ‘revisionist-Marxism’ approach which he regards as having opened up ‘interpretable possibilities’ closed by the perceived narrow positioning of Marxism. Like Wood, Ober “rejects the notion that Athenian democracy was fundamentally dependent upon slave labour”. Ober bases his own analysis not on class or status, but on the ideas of ‘mass’ and ‘elite’ because “neither Finley nor Ste. Croix succeeded in fully explaining the operational significance of the relations between ordinary and elite citizens”. However, overall, Ober’s work generally accepts Finley’s outlook, while shifting the emphasis onto the question of how the divide between the rich and poor played out on a political level in Athens. His contributions are certainly interesting pieces of history, as are Finley’s, but ultimately Ober’s analysis, by staying at the level of political phenomena, fails to probe more deeply into the driving forces and structure of ancient Athenian society.

The importance of materialist analysis is reinforced by consideration of the work of Hannah Arendt. With little correlation to the basis of material production, Arendt constructs a politics that elevates Athens to an unreal position. In Arendt’s view, the Athenians were able to achieve the true active life because of the exclusion of the laboring masses, “Not only in Athens but throughout antiquity and up to the modern

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74 Ober, Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens, 12-3.

75 This flaw is again apparent in Ober’s more recent work, see The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).
age, those who labored were not citizens and those who were citizens were first of all those who did not labor or who possessed more than their labor power.”\textsuperscript{76} Not only is this factually incorrect, but the political conclusion is that those who labour are not capable of ruling – even in her idealized way. This is generally reflected in Arendt’s compartmentalization of ‘labour’, ‘work’ and ‘action’. Class is represented as removed from relations in production and in Marx’s sense a decisively nineteenth century phrase. Since Arendt is keen to strongly respond to Marx, there is certainly some irony in her (sometimes) explicit rejection of Marx’s insights, like the declaration that the “value of this hypothesis for the historical sciences is small indeed.”\textsuperscript{77} Arendt’s idealist rendering of Athens is a confirmation of the need for a materialist outlook to understand the realities of society.

**CONCLUSION**

The fierce debates regarding the nature of classical society and the functioning of the economy swiftly fizzled and died. After only a short few years of furor, the decline of any meaningful discussion is evident. There is no shortage of new material being written about Athens, yet there is a real shortage of new scholarship that adopts or engages with Marx in any meaningful way.\textsuperscript{78} But by far ‘status’ has taken the prevalent place in academic interpretations of the social basis of the polis, whilst class is dismissed as posing too many ‘recalcitrant obstacles’. The prominent classical historian Paul Cartledge contends that:

> Since the root of their antagonism lay in differential ownership of the means of production, and the aim of their struggle was often the control of the organs of government, this looks very much like class struggle - except that the classes are defined not purely by economic but by a mixture of economic and legal criteria, and the solidarity of ‘the poor’ was less organic and more soluble than that of ‘the rich’.

This formulation shares a very similar sentiment and dismissal of class to Finley’s reference to Lukács.\textsuperscript{80} It falls into the same mistake of misunderstanding class, and adopting the tenacious position that if a historical class cannot see themselves strictly


\textsuperscript{78} Such is the current predicament that Louise A. Hitchcock could treat Finley as if a hardened Marxist (“blacklisted as a communist”, while perhaps forgetting Finley’s knighthood), *Theory for Classics: A Student’s Guide*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2008), 17-8. Ober, on the other hand, gives overly generous influence to Ste. Croix, see *Polis*, 3. However, one notable exception is Dimitris J. Kyrtatas, who continues to maintain Ste. Croix’s form of analysis. For example, see his chapter, ‘Slavery and Economy in the Greek World’ in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery Volume 1: The Ancient Mediterranean World*, Ed. Keith Bradley and Paul Cartledge, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 91-111.


\textsuperscript{80} See Ibid., 15-17.
in class terms, class as category is faulty. This kind of aversion to class analysis is all too typical. To take the most recent example (although from Roman scholarship, the point remains fundamentally the same), Aldo Schiavone’s 2013 book *Spartacus* dismisses class as a modern and incompatible term for Roman slaves due to the lack of class-consciousness. But as Paul D’Amato has pointed out in a review,

And yet, it is undeniable that a great portion of the wealth of Rome’s ruling elite was derived, outside of direct plunder and taxation, from the labour of slaves. For Marx, classes were determined not only by their consciousness, but of their objective position in the production of society’s surplus wealth. The slaves may not have been a class ‘for themselves,’ to use Marx’s famous term — that is, a class capable of conscious organization in its own interests — but they certainly were a class ‘in themselves,’ that is, an exploited class whose labour was the foundation of Roman wealth.

In attempting to orientate through the cloud of mystery that covers the ancient polis, against the real errors of misinterpretation of the society itself, I have argued that the scholarship has vastly misunderstood Marx. Historical materialism sees understanding the productive basis of society as crucial to understanding social relations. What is really essential is how the surplus is extracted. The process of grasping the totality must always be aware of the reflection of the class structure of Athenian society, where a ruling class extracted its surplus from slave labour tied to large agricultural properties. For this reason, when the ruling class desired a rise in the rate of exploitation, it was the slaves that felt the turn of the screw. Instead, the citizen body exerted itself, in an extremely advanced existence, against the propertied class continuously. This illustrates the inherent contradictions of Athenian society.

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