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Elvira Martín-Contreras

MATERIALIST CRITICISM

The basic sense of materialism as a philosophical position is that the only reality is matter and that all aspects of existence rely on material processes. Thus, observable, material processes determine what are usually regarded as immaterial, such as consciousness, beliefs, and ideas. Crucially, materialism denies the independent existence of these immaterial processes, and thus argues that there is no extra-material world of gods and spirits. However, precisely what constitutes "matter" is open to debate, especially if one places it within the context of the universe. Are gravity and antimatter also material or are they immaterial? Opposed to materialism are idealism (the position that ideas are real, historical causes) and dualism (allowing for material and immaterial realms). Most religions hold to versions of dualism or idealism, for the gods belong to the immaterial world.

In this light, materialist criticism of the Bible may be understood in two senses. First, the move to make biblical criticism a "scientific" discipline in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Europe (especially Germany) entailed removing theological concerns. God was no longer an actor in history, and texts were analyzed in terms of material causes, whether in terms of politics, economics, or social dynamics. However, most biblical critics also held to some form of idealism, either as a personal religious belief that they quarantined from their academic criticism, or as an assumption that ideas also have a causative effect on history.

A more sophisticated materialism is found in Marxist materialism, although Marxism is often misunderstood as reducing idealist elements of the

Bible to material or economic causes. Marx is occasionally guilty of such a reduction, for example, the “religious world is but the reflex of the real world” (Marx 1867 [1976], p. 90). More often Marx develops a complex dialectical argument in which materialism and idealism interact with one another, so much so that a fully realized idealism ends in materialism. Thus, in relation to Hegel, the dialectic which is “standing on its head” must “be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell” (Marx 1867 [1976], p. 22). This is known as dialectical materialism or historical materialism, for its approach is more inclusive than simplistic idealism or materialism.

For biblical critics the use of this more sophisticated approach means, on the one hand, an expansion of traditional concerns with the nature of the text, author’s intention (which in its more recent form is described as “political ideology”), and religious matters, and, on the other hand, an effort to overcome disciplinary splintering into literary, historical, and theological concerns. Materialist interpretation therefore means expanding traditional concerns to include material infrastructure—economic production and social relations—as inescapably part of that total picture. The following survey deploys the Marxist distinction between superstructure and infrastructure or base, the former designating texts, culture, religion, and ideology, and the latter the means and relations of economic production. As dynamic concepts, they should be understood in terms of trains and railways, where infrastructure is the complex network of tracks, stations, and electronic monitoring, and superstructure is the rolling stock itself.

Superstructure: Literature and Culture. At this level, the impetus for materialist literary readings in biblical criticism has come from Terry Eagleton (1991, 1996, 2006 [1976]) and Fredric Jameson (1981, 1991). Despite differences, both argue that literature is semiautonomous, with distinct features, and yet integral to its socioeconomic context. Other Marxists have also contributed, such as Lefebvre on space (1991), Gramsci on power (1992, 1996, 2007), Bloch on the dialectic of revolution and reaction (1995,

2009), and Adorno and Horkheimer on myth and theological suspicion (2002).

Key biblical scholars who have deployed Eagleton include Gottwald’s (1992a) reading of Deutero-Isaiah as propaganda to encourage a reluctant ruling elite back to Jerusalem from comfortable Babylonian exile, Mosala’s (1989) interpretation of redactional layers of Micah and Luke in light of class and ideology, and Yee’s (2003) study of ideological representations of woman as evil. Jameson’s work, especially his three-level schema of immediate politics, class-conflict and ideology, and the historical clash of modes of production, has been more influential in biblical studies. It has inspired Penchansky’s (1991) reading of Job, as well as Jobling’s (1992, 1998) interpretations of the contradictions of royal ideology in Psalm 72 and of 1 Samuel in conjunction with feminism and deconstruction. Sneed (1998, 2004) has interpreted Qoheleth via Jameson’s concern with ideological and class contradictions, and Burt (2009) deploys Jameson’s insights into textual-cum-socioeconomic tensions to interpret the contradictory “Nehemiah Memoir.” Boer uses that approach to interpret the Jeroboam narratives in Kings and Chronicles (1996), appropriations of the Bible in popular culture (1999), as well as contributions from Benjamin, Bloch, Gramsci, Althusser, Adorno and Lefebvre for biblical criticism (2003).

In New Testament work, Pippin (1992a, 1992b) deploys Eagleton and Jameson to reinterpret the Apocalypse in its ancient and postmodern conjunctions, Cadwallader (2007) brings together archaeology and materialist analysis of economic contradictions in his Gospel interpretations, and Bernier (2010) explores intersections between psychoanalysis (Julian Jaynes) and Jameson to read the cognitive forms of John’s Gospel, as well as a materialist approach to the earliest Christologies (2012). All these works overlap with infrastructure, although they begin with detailed analysis of texts before considering questions of socio-economics. The same approach is used in a recent collection of Marxist-feminist readings of the Bible, in which a range of materialist approaches, including those of Simone de Beauvoir, Rosemary Hennessy, Julie Kristeva, and Juliet Mitchell, are used to offer

new readings of Proverbs, the Solomon narratives, Mark's Gospel, Paul, and the epistle of 1 Peter (Boer and Økland 2008).

Infrastructure: Economics and Society. Here we follow a pattern in which work done outside biblical criticism has influenced that discipline.

Hebrew Bible. Karl Kautsky (2007 [1908]) was the first to offer a sustained materialist, socioeconomic analysis of early Israel. He argues that the agricultural basis in Canaan set in train a process of differentiation, in which some—due to soil fertility, rainfall patterns, war, or happenstance—gained wealth at the expense of others. Such economic differentiation is the beginning of class, in which a certain group is disconnected from the production of food, clothing, and housing. Wealthy landowners appropriated land, which was rented out to landless but working peasants. When these peasants failed to meet exorbitant debt requirements, they became debt-slaves to the landowners. The inevitable result was in a slave-based mode of production.

In between Kautsky and serious materialist analysis of the Hebrew Bible is an important but largely ignored tradition of Soviet-era Russian scholarship. The little that is known has been mediated by Wittfogel's (1963) wayward argument that the key to the Ancient Near East's economies was in the oriental despot's control over irrigation (Krader 1975, pp. 290–291; Hindess and Hirst 1975, pp. 208–220; Butzer 1996). The key here is the Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP), a proposal drawn from Marx (Krader; Bailey and Llobera 1981; Lichtheim 1990; Marx 1964). In contrast to Wittfogel, its features were more extensive: common ownership of land, centralized control of public works by government, tensions between autonomous village-communes and cities, and religion as the central language for expressing political, philosophical, juridical, and political issues. Many of the debates taken up later in the West are already found in these Soviet-era discussions. One may delineate the following stages in Soviet research (Dunn 2011 [1982]; D'iakonoff 1969b; D'iakonoff and Kohl 1991). In that scholarship, the AMP gave way briefly to feudalism as the preferred mode of production, which then was

overtaken in the 1930s by a slave-based mode of production under the influence of V. V. Struve (1969a, 1969b; Tyumenev 1969a, 1969b; Dandamaev 2009 [1974]), which then, in the face of increasing problems (D'iakonoff 1969a, 1974, 1991), fell beneath a revised and revitalized AMP in the 1970s. This happened precisely when it was attacked in the West, belatedly and without reference to Soviet research (Hindess and Hirst, pp. 178–220; Anderson 1974, pp. 462–549). The lessons from the Soviet debates have still to be learned, for they provide a remarkable example of the dialectical interaction between data and theory that is the core of historical materialist analysis. Specifically, the issues that remain include land ownership, different modes of extracting surplus, city-village tensions, indentured labor, class conflict, state formation, and socioeconomic transition.

Although both Kautsky's work and that of the Soviet-era are still ignored, they established mode of production as the key to materialist studies. In biblical criticism debates have turned on the nature of that mode of production, with Gottwald providing the benchmark (1999 [1979]). He argued that the context of ancient Palestine was a "tributary" mode of production, in which surplus was produced by extracting tribute, in produce and labor, from overtaxed peasants for a city-state ruling class (and then imperial center). These city-states were economically oppressive and socially hierarchical. Ancient Israel arose through a rebellion of disaffected peasants against the tributary mode in the thirteenth century B.C.E. and establishing a different, "communitarian" mode of production. It was cooperative, relatively egalitarian, and distributed surplus among the people. Gottwald traces this communitarian mode at various points in Israel's history, especially with the prophets, the Jesus movement, and reconstruction of Judaism by the Pharisees after the two revolts against Rome (67–74 C.E. and 132–135 C.E.) (Gottwald 1992b).

Until recently, Gottwald continued to set the agenda for materialist criticism, although not without modifications. Subsequent work has reshaped some of his categories. Carol Meyers and Gale Yee have argued that the communitarian mode of

production should be reconsidered in light of Marshall Sahlins's familial or household mode of production (Sahlins 1968, 1972), a term that recognizes the role of women in the economy. In Meyers's appropriation, the household (*bet-av*) was the primary unit of economic and social production, and it includes many elements from Gottwald's communitarian mode: in the highlands an alternative society was formed, with allegiance given to Yahweh alone and no earthly master, and in which women played a much larger role. Although Meyers does not engage directly with Marxist studies, that task is undertaken by Yee. She agrees with Meyers concerning the nature of the domestic mode of production. Yee's concern is women, in which the domestic situation is one of the kin group loyalty controlled by a paterfamilias. By contrast, the later kings preferred a nuclear family that broke the control of the kin group and policed the sexual lives of women in a more restrictive manner. Jobling (1991, 1998) too works with the domestic mode of production, expanding it to include the primacy of the household, the architectural dominance of domestic buildings, and absence of fortifications, division of labor according to gender. Jobling offers a novel interpretation of familial structure, drawing on Bal's (1988) distinction between virilocal (the woman leaves her household to live in the man's) and patrilocal (the man leaves his household to live in the woman's father's). Thus, virilocal marriage characterizes the tributary mode of production in the era of kingship, while the domestic mode of production operates patrilocally. Simkins (1999a, 1999b, 2004) provides a unique variation on the familial tensions outlined by Yee and Jobling. He argues that these should be seen as clientalistic (nuclear family) and domestic (extended family) modes of production. The qualified egalitarianism of the domestic mode of production (as argued by those earlier) is actually a textual ideology that attempts to ameliorate economic and social inequality. In response to the domestic mode's inability to deal with inequality, the hierarchical and unequal patron-client mode (a reworking of Gottwald's tributary mode) replaces it under the Israelite kingship.

Relatively little work in historical materialist analysis of the infrastructure has taken place after these contributions, although Boer (2007b) attempts a preliminary sketch of what he calls the "sacred economy." It draws not only on the work outlined earlier, but also on neglected Russian Soviet-era scholarship, the Marxist-inspired Regulation School of economic theory, and Marxist approaches more generally. Assuming that all economic relations are socially determined and that crisis is the norm rather than equilibrium, Boer suggests that the primary economic source of tension was between allocative and extractive economic practices. While the former reallocated agricultural produce along kinship, patron-client, judicial, and military lines, the latter extracted its surplus through tribute and limited exchange. Each period of relative economic stability involved compromise between these tensions (a regime of allocation), the unravelling of which caused economic and political collapse. The role of religion, culture, and other institutions was to provide the necessary justifications (a mode of regulation) for each compromise. This sketch is the basis for a monograph to be published by Westminster John Knox. Recently, Nam (2012) has offered a critical re-engagement with Karl Polanyi (1971 [1968], 2001 [1944]; Polanyi, Arensberg, and Pearson 1957). Nam deploys Polanyi's distinctions between formal (identity between the ancient economic world and ours) and substantivist (difference) approaches, as well as the forms of exchange—reciprocal, redistributive, and market—to argue for a complex picture in Kings. Both Nam's and Boer's work takes place in the context of a revived interest in materialist questions in a new Society of Biblical Literature section, "Economics in the Biblical World" (from 2011), in which all of the key questions are being reassessed—economic theory, class, family, agriculture, tribute, and exchange.

New Testament. New Testament materialist analysis begins with Friedrich Engels (1894–1895 [1990], 1882 [1989], 1883 [1990]). Engels argued that "Christianity was originally a movement of oppressed people: it first appeared as the religion of slaves and freedmen, of poor people deprived of all

rights, of peoples subjugated or dispersed by Rome” (1894–1895 [1990], p. 447). His proposal has influenced materialist analysis both within and without biblical criticism. Thus, both Luxemburg (1970 [1905]) and Kautsky (2007 [1908]) agree with Engels but go further, arguing that early Christianity was communist (following Acts 2:44–5 and 4:32–5). However, being urban, it was a communism of consumption and not production, thereby leaving the economic system intact. Modern communism therefore completes what was imperfectly begun in the early church. Despite the collapse of early Christian communism into a hierarchical organization comfortable with imperial power, Kautsky traces the communist impulse through monasticism and continual religiously-inspired revolutionary movements down to his own day (1947a [1895–1897], 1947b [1895–1897]; 1977 [1922]). While Luxemburg’s text was neglected, Kautsky’s position was simultaneously criticized and assumed by biblical scholars and sociologists (Deissman 1929; Troeltsch 1992 [1911]). By contrast, conservative or neoliberal scholars preferred to argue for a mixed social origin of Christianity, including upper and lower class members (Judge 2008 [1960]; Stark 1996; Meeks 2003).

Others sought to deepen the initial insights from Engels, Luxemburg, and Kautsky, often without explicit recognition. The breakthrough work by Belo (1975, 1981; Clévenot 1976, 1985) on the Gospel of Mark drew upon Marx, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Georges Bataille, and Louis Althusser to offer a complex literary reading with a specific materialist dimension. Following Dhoquois (1971), Belo argued that the context of early Christianity was a “subasiatic” mode of production, in which the local economy functions in its older fashion (AMP), but the state controls exchange in order to appropriate surplus value. The problem here is a multiplication of modes of production (a tendency also in Hebrew Bible scholarship), for Dhoquois also suggests Asiatic, subasiatic, parasitic, and Asiatic feudal modes of production, along with slavery and European feudalism. Rather than such multiplication, it is more rigorous to deal with the complexity of transitions between modes of production (Foster-Carter 1978; Feiner 1986).

Another feature of Kautsky’s study was the radically political nature of Jesus’s teachings, especially in relation to property and wealth. Outside biblical criticism, the Marxist classicist Ste. Croix has emphasized this dimension (Ste. Croix 1981, pp. 427–438; 2006, pp. 355–368). This element connects with a long tradition in biblically-inspired revolutionary movements, for example, Thomas Müntzer and the Peasants Revolt in Germany, the Münster Revolution, and Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers in England. But a specifically materialist approach is found not only in Belo, for whom Jesus’s band become militants, the resurrection a revolutionary symbol, and the *ekklesia* a radical movement, but also in Myers (1989), Theissen (1978, 1987, 1999) and Horsley (Horsley and Hanson 1985; Horsley 1992, 1995, 1996, 2002, 2008).

While for Myers, Jesus is an exemplar of nonviolent revolutionary resistance in the context of the Jewish uprising of 66–70 c.e. and the sociopolitical matrix of the times, Theissen argues that the wandering charismatics of the Jesus movement were able to deal with a series of contradictions, such as the tensions between rich and poor, socioecological tensions between city and country, sociopolitical problems in the debate over love for one’s enemy and theocracy, and sociocultural tensions between Hellenistic assimilation and Jewish identity. Horsley argues that the Jesus movement must be understood in the context of a Jewish peasantry militantly subversive before a brutal Roman Empire. The materialist context was a tension between a Roman-imposed slave-based mode of production in the cities and the Asiatic or tributary mode of production in the countryside, which exacted brutal tribute. The peasants resisted by means of slowdowns, sabotage, prophetic and messianic movements, scribal writings, counter-terrorism, and revolts.

A final feature of materialist New Testament readings once again gains its impetus from outside, now from Marxist philosophers who emphasize the radical nature of Paul. First was Alain Badiou (2003 [1997]), for whom Paul is the exemplar of the revolutionary event (Christ’s resurrection), which he names and which inspires fidelity and hope in a

militant band. Giorgio Agamben (2005 [2000]) replied with a different approach, arguing that Paul offers a radical approach to the “time that is left us,” a seizing of a moment of *kairos* out of the stream of *kronos* and bringing it to fulfillment. There followed Slavoj Žižek (2000, 2001, 2003, 2008; Žižek and Milbank 2009), who is actually caught, seeking a genuine event that will change the coordinates of existence—whether a laicized grace or Christian love with a distinct psychoanalytic-cum-Leninist approach—but also toying with refusism (a refusal to engage at all) in order to block the tendency of revolutions to run into the mud. The debate that followed these interventions increases (Critchley 2000; Caputo and Alcoff 2009; Surin 2009; Blanton and De Vries Forthcoming; Boer 2007a, pp. 334–390; 2009, pp. 155–204), but Elliott (2008) offers the most significant contribution from biblical criticism. He develops a sophisticated Marxist approach to the issues of faith, mercy, piety, virtue, and hope within the context of Roman imperialism, power, and economics. Notably, Elliott finds Paul caught in contradictions as he tries to mediate an alternative position characterized as the “horizon of the possible.”

To sum up, the attraction of Marxist-inspired materialist criticism is to enable one to connect fruitfully both superstructural and infrastructural dimensions, rather than separating culture, religion, ideology, politics, society, and economics into discrete fields. In the work of many of the scholars noted earlier, the social sciences, as well as history, archaeology, economics, and political science, are as crucial to analysis as literary and theoretical concerns.

[See also Class Criticism; Economics and the Bible; Social Sciences, *subentry* Hebrew Bible; and Social Sciences, *subentry* New Testament.]

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