

Author of *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* dies

G.E.M. de Ste Croix: A lifelong empathy with the oppressed

Ann Talbot
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Few historians can claim two masterpieces to their name. This is the case with Geoffrey de Ste Croix, the author of *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* and *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, who died in Oxford on February 5 at the age of 89.

The achievement is all the more remarkable given that de Ste Croix's career as an ancient historian began late in life and attained its greatest success after he retired.

Having left school at the age of 15, de Ste Croix returned to education following the Second World War when, at the age of 37, he became an undergraduate at University College, London. He taught briefly at the London School of Economics before becoming a tutor at New College, Oxford in 1953, where he remained until his retirement in 1977.

He had already established his reputation among ancient historians with *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* [1], a monumental study of the fifth century BC war between Athens and Sparta, which lasted for a quarter of a century and tore the Greek world apart. Not content with this, de Ste Croix turned in his retirement to a work that was to be even more ambitious in scope—his *Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*. [2]

Begun originally as the Gray lectures, which he delivered at Cambridge in 1973, the book grew into a volume of over 700 pages. In them de Ste Croix brought to bear not only his immense knowledge of classical sources, but introduced his study of the ancient world with a theoretical discussion of the meaning of class and Marx's understanding of the ancient world.

This was a bold decision. The study of ancient history in Britain had remained resolutely conservative in its preoccupations, when other areas of history had begun to focus on issues related to class—primarily under the influence of historians such as Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, Rodney Hilton and E.P. Thompson who had been in the Marxist Historians Group of the British Communist Party. In the second half of the twentieth century ancient history was still recognisably operating within the tradition created by the German historians Mommsen and Grote in the nineteenth century and concerned itself almost exclusively with the politics of the ruling class.

Insofar as ancient history moved away from this traditional approach, it was to adopt some of the conceptions of Weberian sociology through the influence of Professor Sir Moses Finley. Finley had been educated at Columbia University in New York where he had been influenced by German émigrés, including remnants of the Frankfurt School, giving him a familiarity with sociological concepts that was unusual among ancient historians.

While Finley's prolific output of fluent books became known to students of other disciplines and to the general reading public, de Ste Croix was little known outside of a specialised field until the publication of his *Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*. The book had been eagerly awaited

by ancient historians, but only gradually did it become known to a wider circle of readers. He was awarded the Isaac Deutscher Memorial Prize in 1982.

Thus it was that, in his retirement, de Ste Croix found himself invited to lecture to students who often had no knowledge whatsoever of ancient history. He spoke to all audiences in the same way. Whether colleagues or socialist minded students, they were all treated to the same bravura display as he sought to communicate not just his knowledge, but his passion for the ancient world. Ancient historians were sent scurrying back to the texts to look up previously obscure references that his exhaustive research had unearthed. Those who had invited him found their fashionable structuralist ideas dismissed as "French phrasemongering" as he cut through the thicket of verbiage that then passed for Marxism in the universities and demonstrated a knowledge of Marx's works that dissuaded all but the foolhardy from challenging him.

Although over 70 when the *Class Struggle* was published, de Ste Croix had already begun work on two more books, both concerning early Christianity, which he did not finish. They were condensed into a series of essays before he died, and will be published posthumously.

De Ste Croix's great contribution to the study of classical Greece and Rome was to re-establish economic class as a valid concept for the analysis of ancient societies and to reaffirm that their history can only be understood in terms of the struggle between classes.

Sir Moses Finley was a resolute opponent of this approach. He declared that class was not an appropriate category with which to analyse ancient Greece and Rome, which were societies based upon a spectrum of political statuses rather than opposing economic classes.

It was an old objection—one that Marx himself encountered—that while modern industrial society might be based on economics, ancient society was based on politics and medieval society on religion because the prevailing ideology took these forms. A man might be very rich in ancient Athens, but if he came from another city he had no political rights and fewer rights than a poorer individual who was native to Athens. Similarly, some of the richest residents of Rome were imperial freedmen, former slaves of the emperor, who despite their wealth had a lower social status than less wealthy men from old Senatorial families.

De Ste Croix rejected attempts to understand ancient society in terms of social stratification by statuses of this kind and recognised that the social relations through which surplus was extracted were the most fundamental. He followed Marx in recognising that direct forced labour [direkte Zwangsarbeit] was the foundation of the ancient world, because the propertied class obtained its surplus "by the exploitation of unfree (especially slave) labour".[3]

This gave him a clear, unidealised vision of ancient democracy. He understood that it was based on slavery. Democracy is not a political

abstraction for de Ste Croix, but is always conceived in its historical context.

Finley on the other hand avoided the issue of whether or not ancient democracy was based on slavery, confusing the matter behind his spectrum of statuses, and so preserved the myth that democracy was a pure political ideal rising above class interests. This had been a significant part of the ideological value of classical history for the capitalist class as, in the course of the nineteenth century, it was forced to concede political rights to the working class. Democracy was presented as a political system that was blind to class and in which it was illegitimate to pursue definite class interests.

The ancient Greeks, as de Ste Croix shows, had a very different view of democracy. Aristotle, who with his pupils produced 158 studies of different political constitutions, regarded "a man's economic position as the decisive factor in determining his behaviour in politics".[4]

Apart from restoring a class analysis of ancient society, de Ste Croix has also reconnected modern Marxists to the classical tradition in which Marx and Engels were themselves educated but which is now scarcely known. De Ste Croix had great respect for Marx as a classical scholar, particularly his doctoral thesis on Epicurus. He notes with pleasure a letter of February 1861 in which Marx tells Engels, "As a relaxation in the evenings I have been reading Appian on the Roman civil wars, in the original Greek".[5] He shared Marx's high regard for Aristotle and considers that "Aristotle's analysis of the citizen body of the Greek polis bears a remarkable resemblance to the method of approach adopted by Marx".[6]

The 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. Aristotle recognised that, given the opportunity, the propertied class would set up an oligarchy reflecting their interests while the propertyless demanded democracy, reflecting their particular class interests. He noted that in some states oligarchs took an oath that "I will bear ill-will toward the common people [demos]".[7]

Aristotle's great anxiety was *stasis*, by which he meant civil commotion as a result of the conflict between these opposing classes. It was a frequent feature of Greek political life. The stresses of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC) produced civil wars in many Greek city-states, as the rival classes looked for support to democratic Athens and oligarchic Sparta. With Athens' defeat its own propertied class, backed by Sparta, imposed an oligarchic constitution. Ancient democracy did not die or commit suicide. As de Ste Croix points out, it was murdered.

Gradually, citizens were stripped of their rights until by the third century AD a poor Roman citizen could legally be flogged and tortured, penalties once reserved for slaves and from which the rich were exempt. Any evidence a poor citizen gave in court had less weight than that of a rich citizen. The effect was to make it easier for the ruling class to exploit the peasants who formed the bulk of the population. Ultimately, without the protection of democracy, they were reduced to a new form of slavery in which they were tied to the land. While chattel slavery—involving slaves bought and sold on the market—declined in importance after the great slave revolts of the first century BC, the enslavement of the free poor increased. By the later Roman Empire it became the main means by which the propertied class extracted surplus.

De Ste Croix's class analysis allows him to offer a coherent and materialist explanation of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. He explains that, as the screws were tightened upon them, the mass of the population had little or no incentive to resist the barbarian invasions that came with increasing force. They were burdened by a rapacious army and, once Christianity was adopted as the state religion in the fourth century, a growing body of unproductive priests, monks and nuns.

Consequently "the Roman political system (especially when Greek

democracy had been wiped out ...) facilitated a most intense and ultimately destructive economic exploitation of the great mass of the people, whether slave or free, and it made radical reform impossible. The result was that the propertied class, the men of real wealth, who had deliberately created this system for their own benefit, drained the life-blood from their world and thus destroyed Graeco-Roman civilisation over a large part of the empire.... That I believe," concludes de Ste Croix, "was the principal reason for the decline of Classical civilisation." [8]

This is a profound analysis of ancient society, which puts de Ste Croix among a limited number of truly great historians. And, as with all such work, an analysis that is materially grounded in one society resonates beyond that specific context and has a relevance to all class societies, including our own.

Like many of his generation de Ste Croix was deeply impressed by the social gains made by the Russian Revolution and radicalised by the rise of fascism. Later he had great hopes for the prospects of the Chinese Revolution, but he seems to have avoided active politics and did not discuss it willingly. The truest expression of his commitment to progressive principles is to be found in the single-minded dedication with which he pursued his vocation as an historian. His view of history is never dry or academic, even when his scholarship is at its most painstaking. He lived the political struggles of the ancient world as though they were his own and his understanding of them was informed by an empathy with the oppressed that did not come from ancient documents but was the expression of the most enlightened traditions of the twentieth century.

Notes:

1. *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War*, Duckworth, 1972
2. *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World from the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests*, Duckworth, 1982
3. *ibid*, p. 94
4. *ibid*, p. 71
5. Quoted *ibid*, p. 24
6. *ibid*, p. 77
7. *ibid*, p. 73
8. *ibid*, pp. 502-03



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