

A JUDICIOUS STUDY OF DISCERNIBLE REALITY

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G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, *Athenian Democratic Origins and Other Essays*, edited by David Harvey and Robert Parker, with the assistance of Peter Thonemann (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. vii + 447; £92.00, ISBN 0 19 925517 2 (hardback).

In the mid 1970s the eminent American ancient historian Chester Starr asked his Ann Arbor graduate students to name the two most important books in the field of Greek history written in second half of the twentieth century. Starr's own answer was memorable: E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1959) and G.E.M. de Ste. Croix's *Origins of the Peloponnesian War* (1972). Even though Starr made it clear that neither book was without its flaws, his answer was, on the face of it surprising to his students (and to that degree a mark of the originality of Starr's pedagogy): Dodds pointed Greek scholars beyond the tyranny of the intellectualism and rationality that made the Greeks so apparently like us moderns, in favour of a focus upon the strangeness and foreignness of Greek thought and culture manifest in ritual, cults, and folk belief. Dodds' book was (and is) a revelation to those raised on the 'glory that was Greece' and has proved enduringly influential. The point is that it seemed at the time to be rather far from the mainstream of classical Greek historiography, at least as Michigan graduate students then understood it.

Starr's choice of *Origins of the Peloponnesian War* seemed at the time somewhat less *outré*, although it was not what we, his students, might have expected him to say. Ste. Croix was known at the time as a radical classical historian: He was ferociously polemical, famous for writing lengthy, erudite, and highly critical letters to colleagues (more on this below). His voluminous correspondence was complemented by long narrative footnotes and numerous appendices (forty seven of them in *Origins*) in which he pointed out just where and how Greek scholars who differed from his opinions had gone wrong. Moreover, although *Origins* was not explicitly based on historical materialist argumentation, Ste. Croix was an avowed Marxist. He introduced his second big book, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (1981) — a work that took as its subject the whole of Greco-Roman antiquity — with a lengthy lesson in the right way to read Marx. This was necessary, Ste. Croix believed, because of the 'general ignorance of the thought of Marx, and a lack of interest in it' on the part of most English-speaking ancient historians. That ignorance, he suggested 'can be attributed partly to mistaken attempts in

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modern times, on the part of those who call themselves Marxists' to interpret ancient history in Marxist terms.²

Ste. Croix's Marx was a non-deterministic historical sociologist who developed a powerful explanatory paradigm centred on the analytic category of class, on exploitation as the social condition resulting from the monopolistic control of property by the ruling class, and on class struggle (played out on political and ideological planes) as the historical dialectic between exploiters and exploited. In this book, the polemics were focused on *soi-disant* Marxists and confessed Weberians. A particular target was M.I. Finley, a well known and highly influential Cambridge-based historian of Greece and Rome. Finley had a deep Marxist background (which is being clarified by ongoing research by Daniel Tompkins) but advocated Weberian historical sociology as a particularly appropriate model for ancient historical analysis. Ste. Croix was convinced that Finley (among others) had fatally deviated from a clear and analytically powerful class/exploitation/struggle analysis in favour of the less precise Weberian categories of status and order. Ste. Croix proposed to set them, and the field of ancient history generally, right.

Putting Marx in his rightful place at the centre of the analytic frame was, for Ste. Croix, one side of the hard work of doing ancient history properly. The other side was reading the ancient Greek and Latin sources with care and critical acumen. Read aright, ancient sources would prove the validity of Marxist theory, just as that theory would be an essential aid in understanding the sources. For Ste. Croix, Marx and the facts about the ancient past were mutually supporting — together they revealed the truth about the past. Yet it was necessary to keep them in the right relationship: The analysis came from Marx, the facts from the sources. While respecting Thucydides, especially, for his factual accuracy, Ste. Croix found most ancient authors vastly inferior to Marx as social analysts. He made a major exception to the general rule for Aristotle. In a famous section of *Class Struggle* (pp. 69–80), Ste. Croix sought to show that Aristotle's analytic thinking on issues of class struggle and political development was, in fact, entirely compatible with that of Marx: Aristotle and Marx were the two giants of social thought in Ste. Croix's world and, again read aright, they would be understood to be making identical arguments, albeit in somewhat different idioms.³

As a committed Marxist, devoted to demonstrating the correctness of Marx's analysis of class, exploitation, and struggle, Ste. Croix might have fallen outside the mainstream of historians of classical Greek whose books were being taught to American classical graduates in the 1970s. There were not many Marxists or even fellow travellers among senior American ancient

² *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (London, 1981), p. 20.

³ Cf. Josiah Ober, 'Aristotle's Political Sociology: Class, Status, and Order in the Politics', in *Essays on the Foundations of Aristotelian Political Science*, ed. Carnes Lord and David K. O'Connor (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1991), pp. 112–35.

historians in those days — or, for that matter, before or since. Starr's own politics were more or less those of a Truman democrat (like Truman, Starr was from Missouri and adopted a somewhat deceptive persona centred on 'Mid-western common sense') — in any event he was certainly very far from being a Marxist.⁴ Yet if anything, Starr was on the left wing of American professors of archaic and classical Greek history who were then engaged in training PhD students: Some of the most prominent Greek historians, like Donald Kagan at Yale and Raphael Sealey at Berkeley were known for being staunchly right wing. Yet the experience of being informed that Ste. Croix was a 'must read' scholar was not unusual: students at Berkeley and New Haven (and elsewhere) were being admonished to read *Origins of the Peloponnesian War* with care, just as we were in Ann Arbor. The point is that Ste. Croix, along with certain of his distinctive ways of understanding the Greek world, was then (and remains) part of the Greek history mainstream. Ste. Croix's books and articles are required reading for any student of antiquity seeking to gain a proper understanding of the social roots of Greek political practice: Both because of this intellectual history, and because of his penetration and erudition, Ste. Croix should be read with care by every contemporary classical theorist concerned with the historical context in which the political ideas of the Greeks were developed.

The *Origins of the Peloponnesian War* appeared shortly after the first instalment of Donald Kagan's four-book (as it turned out to be) series on the Peloponnesian War, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War* (1969). These two books on the same historical events used all the same sources — in the first instance this meant the history of Thucydides augmented by Athenian drama, by a number of fragmentary inscriptions, and by later historical writers, like Plutarch, whose testimony was understood to be more problematic in terms of determining the facts of what actually happened. Yet the contrast between the two books was stark: Kagan's study was modelled on the great nineteenth-century German tradition of historical scholarship (notably Georg Busolt's *Griechische Geschichte bis zur Schlacht bei Chaironeia* of 1885). Kagan's book related the facts, such as they were known. It was oriented around the leading figure of Pericles. Kagan's theme was that Thucydides' account was over-deterministic and that the Peloponnesian War need never have happened — indeed would not have happened had the two sides been clearer about signalling their policy intentions. Here we can see hints of the neo-conservative political position that would be made explicit in Kagan's later work: great power, when held by a morally superior state, should be frankly proclaimed and, when necessary or advantageous, vigorously and

⁴ Just how distant Starr was from Marxist historians is clear in the fierce response to Chester G. Starr, 'An Overdose of Slavery', *Journal of Economic History*, 18 (1958), pp. 17–32 by Carl N. Degler, 'Starr on Slavery', *Journal of Economic History*, 19 (1959), pp. 271–7.

preemptively employed. Ste. Croix's book also had all the facts, but its agenda was very different: According to Ste. Croix, Thucydides was right to say that the war was an inevitable result of Spartan fear: the paranoid, militaristic, and deeply conservative Spartans were to blame for the long and destructive war. Where Thucydides went wrong, for Ste. Croix, was by implying that Spartan fears were precipitated by provocative Athenian actions: Democratic Athens, in Ste. Croix's account, was innocent of belligerent intent or practices.

In a long chapter (VII) and an appendix (no. XXXV) that would become famous among students of Greek history, Ste. Croix discussed an Athenian decree passed some time in the 430s B.C., barring *Megareis* (Megarians: that is, residents of the neighbouring state of Megara) from the *agora* of Athens and the harbours of the Athenian empire (Thucydides 1.67.4, 139.1, 1.144.2). This action had generally been taken by Greek historians as a shrewd and deliberate manoeuvre, masterminded by Pericles, aimed at putting severe economic pressure on a key Spartan ally. It was thus understood as a deliberate Athenian act of provocation or at least very risky piece of brinkmanship — and thus part of the case that Athens bore substantial responsibility for the catastrophic war. Ste. Croix attempted to show that the Megarian decree was nothing of the kind. Rather than excluding all Megarian trade from all commercial markets throughout the relatively vast Aegean trading zone dominated by Athens and secured by Athenian naval power, the decree was in Ste. Croix's account a minor slap on the wrist, and motivated entirely by Athenian religious scruples. Taking *Megareis* in a restrictive sense, Ste. Croix argued that in punishment for impiously occupying sacred land, Megarian citizens were to be excluded from the Athenian public square and from imperial harbours. Yet Megarian citizens could, Ste. Croix argued, carry on trade elsewhere (including in the markets of Piraeus, the port of Athens). In any event, he supposed that most Megarian trade would be carried on by non-Megarians (including non-citizen residents of Megara), and non-citizens carrying Megarian goods were not, on his reading, affected by the decree.

Ste. Croix's seemingly tortuous exegesis of the Megarian Decree was based on a minute and, as I think most Greek historians would still say, improbably literal reading of the Greek texts. But it was without doubt a *tour de force* of text analysis, which was one reason graduate students in Greek history were made to read it with care. Moreover, it was in aid of a very important general argument, one that Ste. Croix had presented in a much-cited and highly controversial article, published in 1954.⁵ The title of the article was 'The Character of the Athenian Empire'. Greek historians had long held (following what most readers had taken as the obvious way of reading Thucydides) that the Athenian imperial order was accurately characterized by

⁵ G.E.M. De Ste. Croix, 'The Character of the Athenian Empire', *Historia*, 3 (1954), pp. 1–41.

non-Athenian Greeks as a collective tyranny, and despised by them as such. This assessment was based on explicit comments in speeches presented in Thucydides' text (in *Origins* Ste. Croix would argue that these comments were Thucydidean rhetorical inventions), on the fact that Athens deprived once-independent (or potentially independent) Greek communities of their autonomy, and on the belief that autonomy was deeply valued by the residents of Greek *poleis*. Ste. Croix vigorously dissented from this *communis opinio*: the Athenian empire, he argued, was widely (and rightly) regarded by the majority of Greeks, and especially by Athens' imperial subjects, as a boon: Empire, in this case, had something approximating a virtuous character.

In Ste. Croix's view, any affront to local *polis* patriotism that might have been entailed by the loss of *political* autonomy was more than made up for by the more fundamental concerns that arose from *class* interests. Ste. Croix argued that in the imperial period, Athens systematically supported the masses of ordinary citizens in its subject states against exploitation by local oligarchs. Athens accomplished this end in various ways, but especially by supporting the development of local democracies in the cities of its empire. For Ste. Croix, Greek democracy in the fifth century B.C. was thus much more than an optional mode of local *polis* self-governance: it was a political manifestation of the class struggle. Democratic and democracy-fostering Athens was an instrument on the right side of the fundamental process of history. This was despite Athens' own oppressive system of chattel slavery, which Ste. Croix frankly acknowledged as an exploitative class-based mode of production. After the publication of the 1954 article, more conservative Greek historians (cited in full in the footnotes to *Origins*) jumped into the fray, claiming that local autonomy was of outstanding interest to classical Greeks and lambasting the Athenians' (in the context of the times 'Athenian' tended to blend into 'Soviet') imperial arrogance in imposing an unwanted form of populist government. The critics' position in turn provoked many scathing letters from Ste. Croix and the eventual publication of *Origins*.

Looking back at this intellectual history from the perspective of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the irony is striking: Ste. Croix was often castigated by more intellectually conservative historians for allowing a theoretical vision to obscure his apprehension of the facts of the matter regarding democracy and empire. Today politically conservative Greek historians — including Donald Kagan, a leading figure in the neo-conservative 'Project for a New American Century' — publicly advocate an apparently very Ste. Croix-like position on democracy and empire (or at least hegemonic power, centred in one state). For the neo-conservatives, an assumed preference for democracy on the part of Afghans and Iraqis (*inter alios*) easily trumps any concerns the residents of these countries might harbour about the long-term presence of foreign armies of occupation. Just as Kagan and his fellow neo-conservatives are the most democratic of conservatives (a fact that

remains very hard for some American liberals to deal with), Ste. Croix was, in the words of the editors of the volume under review here, ‘the most democratic of Marxists’ (p. 2).⁶ Of course, today’s American neo-conservatives differ starkly from Ste. Croix in that they do not regard democracy as a tool for promoting class struggle or preventing exploitation of the labouring many by the propertied few.

For all his methodological commitment to Marxism, Ste. Croix also remained a devoted member of what a senior aide to President George W. Bush scornfully described, in a noteworthy extension of the neo-conservative position, as the ‘reality-based community’, that is, people who ‘believe that solutions emerge from ... judicious study of discernible reality’. Given that we are concerned here with the relationship between imperial power, promotion of democracy, and empirical facts, these comments deserve quotation in full: According to the reporter, Ron Suskind, the aide said in 2002 that

guys like [Suskind] were ‘in what we call the reality-based community’, which he defined as people who ‘believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality ... That’s not the way the world really works anymore’, he continued. ‘We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality — judiciously, as you will — we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors ... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.’⁷

Thucydides experienced both the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War and — unlike the tens of thousands of people who died as a result of the war — its aftermath. Although he traced the origins of the war to the structure of power in the Greek world, Thucydides repeatedly emphasizes moments at which the war might have ended, had it not been for decisions made by individuals with a distorted view of reality. Thucydides certainly saw it as his responsibility, as a historian and an analyst of power, to study what men who regard themselves as history’s unique actors do. Thucydides’ narrative can fruitfully be read as a sort of how-to manual — teaching the reader how to rebuild from the rubble that history’s self-appointed actors leave behind them. The conviction that ghastly results ensue when policymakers come to believe that solutions need not conform to discernible reality lay, as I have argued elsewhere and at length, at the centre of Thucydides’ explanation for Athens’ loss of the Peloponnesian War.⁸

⁶ Liberal unease: See the thoughtful review of Natan Sharansky, *The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror* (New York, 2004), by William F. Schulz in *Boston Review*, Summer 2005.

⁷ Ron Suskind, ‘Without a Doubt’, *New York Times Magazine*, October 17 2004.

⁸ J. Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens: Intellectual Critics of Popular Rule* (Princeton, NJ, 1998), chapter 2. Those who regard themselves, as history’s unique agents, as capable of devising solutions outside the bounds of discernible reality have, of

Because Ste. Croix did judiciously assess the facts of discernible historical reality (even when pushing the case too far, as with the Megarian Decree), his ‘Athenian subjects’ satisfaction with Athenian empire’ thesis has never been definitively refuted. Other Greek historians have argued that local autonomy remained more important to most Greeks than any putative benefits associated with Athenian support for democratic government. They can point to revolts by Athens’ subject allies in support of their case, but the known facts are insufficient to prove it. The facts that Ste. Croix’s position has been taken so seriously by scholars who never shared his theoretical or methodological commitments, and that it stands up so well a half century later, despite the improbable interpretation of certain parts of the historical record, are testimony to the cogency of Ste. Croix’s arguments and to his superb command of the ancient evidence.

In sum, Ste. Croix was among the seminal figures of twentieth-century Greek history — an intellectual Marxist, deeply concerned with Athens and with the social significance of democracy, whose two seminal books made it into the American graduate curriculum and whose published work has strongly influenced (one way or another) the projects of Greek historians for over half a century. It was therefore very good news indeed when Oxford University Press announced that it would be bringing out a group of Ste. Croix’s unpublished papers, under the title *Athenian Democratic Origins*. The essays, sensitively edited and annotated by David Harvey (who also co-edited a fine 1985 *Festschrift* in Ste. Croix’s honour)⁹ and by Ste. Croix’s Oxford colleague, Robert Parker, were intended by Ste. Croix to be brought together into a book. The editors note that most of the work on these essays was done by Ste. Croix in the 1960s — after the breakthrough article on the character of the Athenian empire, but before the publication of *Origins* and *Class Struggle*. The last years of Ste. Croix’s life were devoted to a large-scale project on Christianity in late antiquity. The essays on Greek history were left in various states of preparation at the time of his death in February 2000. One essay had to be reconstructed entirely from letters; others were more or less complete. None was up to date in terms of bibliography, but the editors have appended helpful bibliographic addenda.

The new book offers a good deal of insight into Ste. Croix’s thought process, especially as it concerns the interpretation of historical evidence, and it offers fine examples of his polemical fireworks. The essays are all worth reading — the scholarship is fine and detailed and the argument close and often very convincing. In some cases these pieces are as good as anything available

course, included Marxists (among others). See, further, James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT, 1998).

⁹ *Crux: Essays in Greek History Presented to G.E.M. de Ste. Croix on his 75th Birthday*, ed. P.A. Cartledge and F.D. Harvey (London, 1985).

in print on specific points of Greek history. They often treat quite technical issues in Greek history, but they are fully accessible to the Greek-less reader, due to the careful translation of all Greek passages by Peter Thonemann (who also contributed to the addenda).

The editors accurately point to the most important of these essays in the title they chose for the book, *Athenian Democratic Origins*.¹⁰ The discussion of Solon's census classes is very cogent. The analysis of the question of Solon-era debt slavery raises serious doubts about the prevailing orthodoxy. The essay on the Athenian statesman Cleisthenes and what he was up to with his constitutional reforms and how this relates to the famous events of 508 B.C. is especially masterly. It will present new insights (especially on the sources) even to those who know the lines of argument well. There is also a sustained and worthwhile discussion of the Aristotelian *Athenaion Politieia*, with special reference to its value as a historical source. An essay on problems of units of measurement in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* demonstrates Ste. Croix's capacity to deal with really difficult philosophical passages, picking out issues that elude most readers of Greek philosophy.

There is, in brief, a lot of value in these essays. The passion for the importance of historical truth, and the belief that a rigorous enough analysis of the sources can yield it, shines through each chapter. Yet the reader of *Origins* and *Class Struggle* is likely to feel that something is missing. In contrast to the vast historical canvas of *Class Struggle* and the profound theme of the moral character of empire that informed *Origins*, the essays collected in *Athenian Democratic Origins* are situated on a very constricted field of play. Partly it is because (with the exception of an essay on colonization), the problems being addressed are in fact more circumscribed: the concern is with a text, a *polis*, an individual. But if the restriction of scope in many of these essays seems even more severe than would have been required by the subject matter, perhaps it is because subject and approach were defined in large part by the curriculum of Oxford 'Greats' — the famous *Literae Humaniores* program, one part of which focused heavily on Athenian history from the late sixth through the end of the fifth century B.C.

Many of these essays (measurement in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is an exception) are identifiable as what American ancient history graduate students of the 1970s already regarded with some scorn (deserved or not) as the 'chestnuts' of Greek history — that is, knotty problems, useful for teaching and learning a certain method of historical reasoning, but usually incapable of

¹⁰ Other essays address the motives behind archaic Greek colonization (state-sponsored colonial expeditions were agricultural; 'trade colonies' emerged spontaneously through the activities of independent traders), the *polis* of Aegina (not a trade centre primarily, its economy was primarily agricultural), and the career of King Cleomenes of Sparta (not mad, but a sophisticated strategist). Ste. Croix's approach to each of these topics is bold and thought provoking, but the scholarly argument has moved on since they were written.

final resolution. Working on a chestnut involves the very close reading of a limited number of ancient sources. The fact that these sources are various in their date of composition (some written hundreds of years after the events they describe), frequently tendentious, and often fragmentary is part of the analytic problem. Ste. Croix here (as elsewhere) shows himself to be a master at the game of *Quellenkritik*, ‘source criticism’ that seeks to tease out the best (i.e. most accurate) narrative possible from inherently problematic materials. While it originated in Germany, the game of source criticism was brought to a high art in Oxford, where Ste. Croix spent most of his academic career. Working as students on chestnuts of Greek history helped to sharpen the minds of generations of British leaders and civil servants. Meanwhile, as an unintended (although perhaps not unwanted) side effect of pedagogy, working on chestnuts became the methodological point *d’appui* of a number of professional Greek historians.

My point is that these essays seem startlingly (given Ste. Croix’s two other books and most famous published articles) traditional — that is to say, they adhere to the norms of mainstream, twentieth-century Oxford-based Greek history. They seldom break the frames of the mid-century Greats curriculum, the methodology of source criticism, or the assumption that working on chestnuts is a worthwhile enterprise for a professional historian. That triple frame has given us a great deal of fine work on Greek history and has occasionally cracked a chestnut in a way that seems new and right. But it is a long way from the passionate and theoretically engaged projects that one associates with Ste. Croix.¹¹

We live in a historical era in which many academic scholars (including myself) are reminded on a daily basis of how deeply we value our membership in a ‘reality-based community’. But a commitment to the judicious study of discernible reality obviously (as Ste. Croix’s other books demonstrate) need not be limited to working on chestnuts. In *Athenian Democratic Origins* Ste. Croix seems more content than we might hope to quibble with Oxonian colleagues and students over seemingly minute points about obscure authors of dubious value. One catches occasional hints of the tutor, correcting a not-quite-diligent pupil who has neglected to study his *Ath. Pol.* with enough care. It all seems to be going on at a remove from the grand battles over class, exploitation, and historical struggle (often fought, it is fair to say, with colleagues at relatively nearby Cambridge) that defined his other work. Ste. Croix’s most important intellectual opponent, M.I. Finley, was famous for his scathing demand that presenters of intricate technical arguments answer the simple question: ‘So what?’ The two great books published during Ste.

¹¹ This is not to say that the same concern for class, exploitation, and struggle is not present in the background of these essays — surely it is. The point is rather that it is so far in the background, compared to the methodological focus on chestnut-cracking, as to change the reader’s sense of what is at stake in the enterprise of writing history.

Croix's lifetime remain invulnerable to that sharp jibe. Some of the essays presented here are perhaps less safe from it.

Athenian Democratic Origins is definitely worth reading, but for those who do not yet know Ste. Croix's *oeuvre*, I would not recommend beginning here — begin instead with Ste. Croix's 1954 article and his two big books. Then, when you still hunger for more and deeper analysis of the sources that inform some of that work, this collection will be the place to come. At that point, like this reviewer, you will heartily thank the editors and their assistant for their selfless collegial enterprise in turning a miscellany of almost-forgotten drafts of papers into a well produced book that allows you to engage further with one of the twentieth century's premier exponents of Greek history.¹²

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¹² My thanks to John Ma and Barry Strauss for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this review; obviously neither is accountable for facts or opinions offered here.