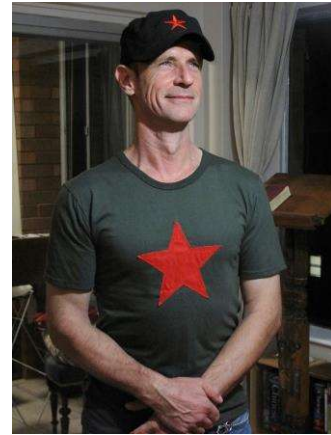


**Review of Roland Boer and Christina Petterson *Time of Troubles: A New Economic Framework for Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017).**

Reviewed by Paul Oslington <sup>219</sup>

This book follows Boer's earlier work on the Sacred Economy of Ancient Israel, previously reviewed in *Australasian Pentecostal Studies* (see Volume 19 (2017)).

One of the great weaknesses of recent work by biblical scholars on early Christianity is using vague or incoherent theoretical models (Oslington 2015). Boer and Petterson attempt to remedy this weakness. After dismissing a caricature of neoclassical economics as "individualizing, desocializing, and dehistoricizing" (p3), some rude remarks about Adam Smith, and then a longer discussion of the works of Rostovtzeff, Finley, Polanyi and Weber, the authors opt for a Marxian theoretical model of early Christianity that is essentially Franco-American Regulation Theory plus insights from the classical Marxian scholar Ste. Croix. Boer and Petterson do not linger over its history, aside from a brief comment about origins in debates about Marxian economics, and the influence of Althusser, Kalecki, and the Annales school. Readers can find more background in Boyer (1990). They do emphasise that they "use the term *régulation*," in its French form, and not "regulation," since the latter suggests juridicopolitical regulation (for which the better French word would be *réglementation*). By contrast, *régulation* designates the social, institutional, and ideological factors that determine the stabilities and transformations of a system as a whole." The greatest strength of this work is its attention to economics and application of regulation theory to early Christianity.



*Roland Boer, Xin Ao Distinguished Overseas Professor in Philosophy at Renmin University of China.*

The authors confront the issue of anachronism in theoretical models head-on. "All of the approaches we use are anachronistic. Far better, then, to develop an approach that is constantly aware of such anachronisms, so much that it is built into the approach itself" (pxv). However, Boer and Petterson claim of achieving this through a "narrative of difference" (pxv) is unconvincing. We are left I think with the economists' side stepping of the issue on the grounds that they are providing an outside explanation of ancient economies, not the insider understanding sought by historians and anthropologists.

As Regulation Theory is the basis for this work, and it is important for readers to appreciate its main features. Boer and Petterson begin their account of Regulation Theory by identifying four commitments:

<sup>219</sup> Paul Oslington is Professor Economics and Theology, Alphacrucis College

“economic activity is inescapably social; contradiction and therefore crisis is the norm; temporary stability is the exception and needs to be analysed; stability is enabled by institutional, behavioural, and ideological practices” (p40). The key theoretical categories are the regime and mode of regulation. As they explain “Each regime is constructed by units or building blocks called institutional forms. These forms are codifications of the fundamental social relations that underpin economics. They may be quite discrete... Or they may overlap in significant ways... Usually, one institutional form dominates regime with the other forms finding a place within that structure... The relations between the institutional forms produce much of the tensions and potential crises of a regime... At times the contradictions become too much and the regime into is a structural crisis, collapse, and the replacement with another regime” (p45). The institutional forms Boer and Petterson use are subsistence survival, polis-chora (loosely urban-rural), tenure and the slave-relation. The other key theoretical category is mode of regulation which is “an emergent ensemble of norms, institutions, organisational forms, social networks and patterns of conduct that contemporarily stabilize an accumulation regime despite the conflictual and antagonistic character” (p45). Modes of regulation are “constantly adjusting to temporarily stabilise, in three ways: “1) compromises and constraints such as laws and rules; 2) learned and established assumptions about the world and acceptable patterns of behaviour; 3) mechanisms of socially reinforcing and indeed challenging such assumptions behaviour patterns and compromises.” The most important theoretical move that Boer and Petterson make is to identify Christianity as “a highly effective and supple mode of regulation” (p45) in the ancient world. They sum up “The key question is, therefore, how specific economic systems stabilise crises in order to establish continuity for certain periods. Thus, and economic system (mode of production) is made up of key building blocks (institutional forms) that come together in unique formations (regimes) to provide very limited continuity for a time within the larger scale of a mode of production. Due to internal contradictions, these regimes face constant tensions and crises. In those efforts at continuity, a whole series of compromises have to be made, which are enabled and sustained by cultural assumptions, social forces, and above all, religious beliefs (mode of regulation).” But this is a dialectical situation where “regimes generate their own instability” (p45-46)

This summary raises the difficult question of the mode of production within Marxian theory. Boer and Petterson write: “We understand mode of production is the most inclusive of all economic models, incorporating economic matters (the traditional Marxian base or infrastructure), relations of production (the questions of class and class conflict), and the crucial role of ideologies, cultures, beliefs, and ways of being (the traditional superstructure, or what we prefer to call the mode of regulation). Modes of production are measurable only across centuries. Follow the conventional Marxist terminology and call it the “ancient mode of production” (p150). They argue the ancient mode of production encompasses the slave, colonial, and land regimes they have described in the terminology of regulation theory. They suggest it ran from fifth century BCE increase to the fifth century CE, preceded Southwest Asia in by the “sacred economy (at times known as the Asiatic mode of production)” that stretched over almost four millennia, and was followed by the feudal mode of production, whose precursor was the land regime of the ancient mode of production. This attempt to relate their regulation theory categories to the categories of classical Marxism is not wholly successful. In my review of their earlier book on the sacred economy of ancient Israel I criticise the ambiguous and question begging identification of the sacred economy with the Asiatic mode of production. Here they identify the Greco-Roman economy with the classical Marxian ancient mode of production, which unlike the Asiatic mode of production progresses through feudalism to capitalism. Is the distinction between the economy of ancient Israel and the Greco-Roman economy really that sharp?

Aside from the question of the relationship of regulation theory to classical Marxism, is regulation theory appropriate for their task of explaining the economic background of early Christianity? I have argued that contemporary mainstream economics offers the best set of tools for this task (Oslington 2015). Despite Boer and Peterson's significant theoretical achievement of relating regulation theory to the Christianity, I remain unconvinced that it is superior even to classical Marxism. They claim "regulation theory is notable for not being a Procrustes bed on which one attempts to force the various pieces, but rather for its flexibility, in terms of developing its categories from the data available and ensuring that such categories remain supple." (p45). However flexibility and suppleness can just mean that we have a language for describing the economic background of early Christianity, rather than something like classical Marxist or contemporary mainstream economics which offer strong causal accounts (their similarity discussed by Seers 1983).

Having outlined this theoretical model in chapter 1 the book proceeds to describe the institutional forms of subsistence agriculture that emphasises diversity to minimise risk and facilitate long term survival (chapter 2), polis-chora relations and land tenure (chapter 3) and the slave-relation (chapter 4). These are rich discussions, with some large claims made. Perhaps the largest is in chapter 4 where Boer and Peterson argue that slave markets were the origin of markets, and slaves the origin of the institution of private property. I'm unconvinced by both these claims and there are better explanations in the existing literature.

There is a shift in chapter 5 synchronic to diachronic analysis, where they describe successive transitions in the Greco-Roman economy from a slave regime to the colonial regime, to a land regime. These transitions were not clean, with the slave and colonial regimes coexisting for periods, and there been considerable regional variations. The endpoint though of the land regime where peasants were tied to particular plots of land was definite, and prefigured the transition from the ancient mode of production to the later feudal mode of production.

The chapter that perhaps will attract most discussion from biblical scholars and theologians is chapter 6 which expands on the previous claim that Christianity operated as a mode of regulation in the Greco-Roman economy. The early part of the chapter gives examples of how Christianity operated in this way, undergirding the slave and colonial regimes, and assisting in the transition to the land regime. It gets more interesting when Boer and Peterson pose the question of "why did Christianity so quickly become part of the early Roman urban setting?" despite its ostensible Galilean rural origins (p154) and their observation that "Everything about Jesus stands against the deeply held values of the Greco-Roman ruling class, almost uniquely in the literature of the ancient world" (p156). Boer and Peterson's controversial answer is that the Gospels are actually urban documents in their language and interests despite the ostensibly rural setting. They read the Gospel accounts of rural subsistence life as "responsive metaphorisation" (p160) which when examined closely display an "ambivalence" to such a life (p162). They examine John who they claim is the most urban of the Gospels, then Mark, then discuss the parables. The most substantial reading they offer is of Parable of the Wicked Tenants in Mark 12 (and Mt 21 and Luke 20), questioning the traditional identification of God with the owner of the Vineyard. Their general point about attending to the urban background of the gospels is well made, though each of the readings they offered of biblical passages I found ultimately unconvincing. I wonder whether the Parable of the Talents (Mt 25 and Luke 19) might have been a better major example. Provocation continues as they argue that slavery was essential to early Christian mission, that Paul owned slaves, and "the Gospels propagate the slave-ethos" (p177).

Overall this is a well written and thought-provoking book, but one which is in the end unconvincing in its advocacy of Regulation Theory as the best framework for understanding the economic background of early Christianity, and unconvincing in many of its specific arguments.

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