

Idols of Nations: Biblical Myth and the Origins of Capitalism

Roland Boer and Christina Petterson

The Sacred Economy

Roland Boer

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According to Roland's blog <http://stalinsmoustache.org> he now has 21 books, 11 edited volumes and 253 refereed articles and book chapters. These publications are the fruit of twenty years of research at the Uniting Church Theological College, Monash University, University of Newcastle, and now Renmin University in Beijing, though much has been written on his extensive travels by bike, boat and other less common forms of transport. His writing has been supported by a succession of Australian Research Council grants.

Roland's research combines two topics long considered unfashionable topics in academic circles—Marxist theory and religion—and judging by the response has found a winning combination with publishers and granting bodies. Reactions to his work vary widely. He quotes with pride some of the assessments on his blog: "all style and no substance", "mystifying and dismaying", "garbage" "yellow journalism" and "Stalinist and apologist for the strong-arm tactics of the Maoists and the PRC". Obviously his ARC referees' assessments have been different.

As someone who shares Roland's interest in the intersections of economics, theology and biblical studies I have looked forward for some time to reading *Idols of Nations* and *The Sacred Economy*. Over the years I have bought and read many of Roland's books over the years from *Jameson and Jeroboam* (1996 - based on his McGill University PhD thesis), *Last Stop before Antarctica: The Bible and Postcolonialism in Australia* (2001), *Marxist Criticism of the Bible* (2003 - flowing from his first major grant), *Rescuing the Bible* (2007), *Political Myth* (2009) and his multi-volume collection on Marxism and religion *Criticism of Heaven: On Marxism and Theology I* (2005), *Criticism of Religion: On Marxism and Theology II* (2009), *Criticism of Theology: On Marxism and Theology III* (2010), *Criticism of Earth: On Marx, Engels and Theology IV* (2012), *In the Vale of Tears: On Marxism and Theology V* (2014). I have not read his more recent *Lenin, Religion, and Theology* (2013) nor his work attempting to rehabilitate Stalin.

Idols of Nations will no doubt play well in some humanities tea rooms and conferences, and be enthusiastically reviewed in these circles. I'm not sure how much scrutiny it will receive from specialist biblical scholars, as these days they tend to be absorbed by such things as the form of a certain Hebrew verbs in obscure corners of the book of Numbers or Chronicles that nobody has yet written a PhD thesis on. As a book from the specialist theological publisher Fortress Press it will receive little scrutiny from specialist historians of economics.

Roland Boer and Christina Petterson's book focuses of four figures in the development of political economy: Hugo Grotius (1583–1645); John Locke (1632–1740); Adam Smith (1723–1790); and T. R. Malthus (1766–1834). They have produced a clever, well written and stimulating book, much more engaging than the usually turgid treatises produced by Christian ethicists on economics. The underlying problem with this work, however, is that it is ill-informed, and ultimately misleading in its interpretations of these four major figures and in its main arguments.

All goes well reading Boer and Petterson's book if we (a) accept without question the orthodoxies of certain circles of contemporary humanities academics (b) treat economists and capitalism as one, since economists are obviously ideological lackeys of the capitalist system, and (c) are willing to take arguments of the following form as acceptable historical arguments:

- Premise that contemporary economics and economists are wrong and dangerous (or riddled with contradictions, to use the preferred language of Boer and Petterson).
- Identification of a writer as an economist. This is the historical component of their argument.
- Conclusion that the figure is wrong and dangerous (or riddled with contradictions)

Hugo Grotius is the first political economist to receive attention. As with all the writers, Boer and Petterson begin with some biographical material and a discussion of the writer's theological background. Grotius (perhaps as a Dutchman and a traveller) is treated rather gently with only a few mild aspersions cast on his character, mostly to do with his links to the capitalist Dutch East India Company. His theological position is identified as Arminian, and Grotius is commended as an anticipator of contemporary liberal theology.

As a proto-economist Boer and Petterson must then find a problem with Grotius' work, and this is found in his identification of free will as the source of evil (17), and the alleged muddles in Grotius' account of the origin of property as the extension of claims of ownership based on use beyond food and drink to other things (though such claims do not extend to the sea which remains common property). I'm not convinced on textual grounds by their argument that choice is the source evil in Grotius and others.

Boer and Petterson's main argument in this part of the book is that Grotius and Locke have "smuggled labour and private property into the garden". In their reading of both Grotius and Locke, they run together labour and the curse applied to labour. According to the book of Genesis, however, work is not the result of the fall; serving and protecting the earth is the pristine vocation in Genesis 2.

It also needs to be recognised (following, for instance, Claus Westermann's *Genesis* commentary) that the Biblical fall is not a point in a linear history, but part of a cycle of stories in Genesis 1–11 that encode truths. Roland as an accomplished scholar of the Hebrew Bible surely knows this, and elsewhere he writes about myth in relation to political economy. The linear and literal interpretation of the Genesis stories offered here seems to place Boer and Petterson strangely alongside literalists. Similarly with property, which is not prominent in the Genesis story, yet becomes an important part of their argument based on Genesis that Locke has “smuggled labour and private property into the garden”.

Their argument also identifies the pre-fall situation with state of nature. (e.g. 57), but I'm unconvinced Grotius and Locke do this (see also James Tully, *Discourse on Property: John Locke and His Adversaries*, Cambridge University Press 1980). Though the state of nature is important for Locke, it is not part of his argument about property in chapter V of the *Second Treatise*, and Boer and Petterson have to resort to a flimsy suggestion that it is implicit in his critique of Filmer in the *First Treatise*.

Their intuition is correct that evil is an important issue for political economy, but their reading of Grotius and Locke on evil is flawed. A far better account is provided by Peter Harrison's *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science*—strangely not cited though one of Harrison's earlier works on religion in the English Enlightenment is cited somewhat out of place. This section contains several examples of the pseudo-historical argument described above. For instance Boer and Petterson assume the truth of the humanities common room orthodoxy that “revelation raises a myriad of problems” (51) so Locke's reliance on revelation must be problematic. This is one of the most tenuous arguments in a book.

If their readings of Grotius and Locke are flawed then their reading of Adam Smith is truly appalling. For instance their interpretation of Smith is admitted to be based on the *Wealth of Nations* plus “a quick look” at the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (94). There is no recognition of Smith's works being an interlocking system, each addressing different aspects of human nature and society (as demonstrated for instance by Andrew Skinner and I. S. Ross). Boer and Petterson seem unaware that the *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (a major source for our understanding of Smith's history of commercial society) are recently discovered student notes from his early Glasgow lectures (112). They make no mention of scientific natural theology about which there is an emerging consensus of its importance for understanding Smith. Instead they recycle the older views in the secondary literature that Smith holds to a “Stoic inspired Deism” (125). This is despite Smith categorically rejecting Stoic philosophy in his discussion of systems of moral philosophy in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. The association of Smith with Deism in the older secondary literature is inconsistent with his admiration for the scientific natural theology of Isaac Newton and the role Newton gives to continuing divine action in the universe.

Then there is their dubious assertion that Smith was responsible for introducing of the abstraction “the economy”. They provide no 18th or 19th century textual evidence for their claim—in fact no textual evidence at all—yet Smith's responsibility for the abstraction plays an important role in their argument. The textual analysis that has been carried out by historians of economics on the abstraction of the economy indicates it came

much later with little connection to Smith. Examples could be multiplied of Boer and Petterson's ignorance of Smith's texts and context. Certainly some latitude needs to be given to writers from outside the community of Smith specialists and historians of economics, because so many important insights come from outsiders (and I ask for latitude from the specialists for my own ventures as an economist into theology and biblical studies). Nevertheless these examples do not instil confidence in Boer and Petterson's interpretations of Smith.

Boer and Petterson pay particular attention to Smith's use of the Bible, and one of their key arguments is that Smith's took the title of the *Wealth of Nations* from Isaiah 60–61. The claim is repeated throughout their book but no biographical or other evidence is provided—just the suggestion of a verbal parallel. For the suggestion to be credible closer analysis of the wording of the translations of the Isaiah passages in the versions of the Bible with which Smith was familiar would be needed (KJV for instance has “riches of the Gentiles”), along with some explanation of why Smith might want to allude to Isaiah. One would also need to explain why Smith, who is so reticent about theological matters, would expose himself to controversy with the Scottish Kirk authorities. Their claim, however does fit nicely with the title of the book, “Idols of Nations” referring to Jeremiah 14 and Psalm 135, allowing it to operate as a counterpoint to Smith's “Wealth of Nations” with its own supposedly Biblical reference. We don't really know why Smith chose his title. Perhaps it is an echo of Turgot's *Réflexions sur la Formation et la Distribution des Richesses*. The common *Principles of Political Economy* in titles of works of 19th century economists made no sense before there was an established discipline. Perhaps Smith may particularly have avoided *Principles* to distance his work from that of his Scottish contemporary Sir James Stewart, and other French works.

Much emphasis is placed by Boer and Petterson on Smith as a storyteller and mythmaker, but strangely the growing literature on Smith's rhetoric and economic rhetoric is not cited (for instance Vivienne Brown and Deirdre McCloskey). Brown and McCloskey's work is better grounded in the texts, and in my view more valuable than their mixture of personal abuse and puzzlement at how such a misguided and dull writer as Smith could create such an enduring myth of the origin of capitalism.

Their most preposterous argument is that Adam Smith's famous invisible hand is the penis of either Adam Smith or God. (99–100). The basis of this suggestion is a possible pun in the Hebrew between hand and penis, because Boer and Petterson's right-thinking readers know God to be an example of the latter. Really! The only hole in this argument is that the rest of the chapter is busy persuading us that Smith is a reactionary dolt who would have been incapable such imagination. There is no suggestion Smith knew Hebrew, nor any evidence that Smith's supposed startling insight was picked up by his contemporaries. Surely he could not have resisted mentioning this in correspondence with his close friend David Hume. My own view of the invisible hand passages in Smith and a brief survey of the main contemporary interpretations may be found in “God and the Market: Adam Smith's Invisible Hand” *Journal of Business Ethics* 108/4 2012: 429-38. Attempting to pin nonsensical and damaging things on God is a favourite rhetorical device employed by Boer and Petterson.

In relation to Malthus there are further indications of Boer and Petterson's ignorance. They concentrate on the 1798 first edition of the *Essay on the Principle of Population*, (131,133) mostly ignoring the longer and empirically richer later editions of the *Essay*. These later editions of the *Essay* are dutifully listed in a footnote—curiously repeated a few pages later. Boer and Petterson seem to have missed the Australian scholar John Pullen's recent textual discoveries which shed light on the removal of the theological chapters from the first edition of the *Essay*, despite citing the volume in which Pullen discusses the removal of the theological passages. They also recycle the "miserable Parson Malthus" caricature created by Marx and the English romantic poets in the 19th century. The fact that Malthus seems to accept and preach (as one would expect for an Anglican clergyman, and especially in an Easter sermon) the doctrine of the atonement further reinforces this caricature. The doctrine which the Biblical writers associate with forgiveness of sins and hope is of course often caricatured in some humanities common rooms as a miserable and misguided doctrine. Malthus is ridiculed at length by Boer and Peterson for preaching the atonement.

The main point Boer and Petterson make about Malthus is the tension in his writings between human nature and nature's provision—the battle between lust and hunger—as they memorably put it. In combination with the doctrines of creation and providence this battle creates a nasty version of the problem of evil.

Malthus is commended for recognising (like Boer and Petterson) the importance of wrestling with the problem evil for the development of economic thinking in the 18th and 19th centuries. Roland even takes time out from his discussion of Malthus to encourage his Marxist friends to take the problem of evil more seriously. Many scholars have been there before, however, including Jacob Viner, John Pullen and Anthony Waterman, and they offer much better informed discussions of evil in Malthus.

Notwithstanding the scholarly flaws in their work I enjoyed reading their book. There are some insights and good arguments—mostly about contemporary economics and politics—but these insights are mostly incidental to their analysis of the 17th and 18th century thinkers. For example, their argument about the mythological elements of many defences of free markets. Another example is the link they draw between the reductionism and universalism of contemporary economics. Why not write directly about contemporary economics and politics rather than trying to do it through inadequate history?

Boer and Petterson's conclusion is that we need to turn back to Marx. I look forward to similar analysis of Marx where the authors would presumably be on firmer ground. We have some idea of the way this analysis would go from Roland's earlier works. However, with Roland's recent literary directions it is not Marx but Stalin and Mao that we should be looking to.

The Sacred Economy is a much better book. It is tarnished by a dismissal of neoclassical or mainstream economics flowing from the assured results of *Idols of Nations* unmasking of the flawed and ideological character of that economics. Roland argues that neoclassical economics is "individualizing, desocializing and dehumanizing" (11) and that the "imperializing pretensions" of neoclassical economics" represents a "pernicious ...

theological absolutism transmuted” into economics “now without the traditional checks of theology” (12).

Aside from banishing mainstream economics from serious consideration (on grounds that have little to do with its potential explanatory power for ancient societies) the treatment of mainstream economics that I have criticised above plays little part in *The Sacred Economy*. Roland’s chapter 1 also discards Wallerstein’s world systems theory as sub-Marxist and Karl Polanyi as Weberian (no more obviously need be said), and he then explains his reliance on Soviet-era Russian economic theory and French Regulation theory.

The theoretical framework Boer outlines in Chapter 1 has three levels. Firstly, there is a description of basic institutional forms which are divided into allocative institutions (subsistence survival, kinship-household, patronage) and extractive institutions (estates, tribute-exchange). Secondly, these institutions are configured into different regimes of regulation (subsistence, palatine, plunder). Finally there is the overarching sacred mode of production which gives the book its name.

As Boer admits (217) his sacred mode of production resembles Marx’ much debated Asiatic mode of production. Boer has no time for suggestions of other scholars that multiple modes of production (such as a household mode of production) existed in ancient Israel—for him any variation over time is due to the reconfiguration of institutions and different regimes of regulation—there is always a single unchanging mode of production. Like the Asiatic mode of production however Boer’s constant sacred mode of production makes it hard to explain long term change in these societies. Is it that an intensification of the tribute-exchange regime the Persian and Hellenistic periods eventually destroys the sacred mode of production? How does Ancient Israel escape from the sacred mode of production to get on the road to Marx’s feudal and eventually capitalist mode of production? In the end Boer’s marriage of regulation theory and Marxism gives an encompassing flexibility to the analysis, but at some cost in comparison with classical Marxist historical analysis.

An important part of Boer’s framework is the emphasis on agriculture as “the persistent underlay of economic life” (78). His discussion of the institution of subsistence agriculture in chapter 2 identifies “diversity, risk aversion, optimal usage” as distinguishing characteristics. This is a rich chapter but I kept wondering whether it offered anything different or superior to the analyses of subsistence agriculture offered by mainstream economists.

Next is the discussion of the kinship-household institutional form in chapter 3, which merges into a discussion of the institution of patronage. Then the estate system in chapter 4, which came late to Israel in comparison to its neighbours, and the associated growth of the state. The final institution discussed is tribute-exchange in chapter 5, including a fanciful polemic about market exchange as state sponsored plunder.

Boer’s aim is to offer a comprehensive account of the economy of Ancient Israel, and the scope of the discussion matches his ambition. My main concern is the theoretical framework which while offering hooks on which to hang discussion of many aspects of the

economy of ancient Israel, seems to me to be less than coherent and driven too much by a contemporary political agenda.

Boer's contemporary agenda comes more out into the open in chapter 7 where he considers the attractions of a subsistence regime today. These are an "optimal rather than maximal engagement with nature", that subsistence regime does not seek luxury, that "diversity provides security" and that a "subsistence regime is stable" (220–22). He does explain that we need to reshape the subsistence regime to dispense with forms that are "hierarchical and abusive" especially towards women and outsiders. A key point is that contemporary society has to adjust its desires downward rather than seeking growth to satisfy ever increasing desires.

The Sacred Economy is a much better book than *Idols of Nations* because Roland Boer knows much more about ancient Israel than he does about early modern economic theory. If a reader can ignore some of the more ridiculous claims of the book it can serve as a thought provoking introduction to economic life in ancient Israel. The emphasis on agriculture is a useful corrective to the emphases of much of the existing literature on the temple and the palace.

Nevertheless we await a similarly comprehensive account of the economy of ancient Israel that utilises the much more coherent and powerful theoretical framework of contemporary mainstream economics.

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