

Jules Gleeson

The Byzantine Eunuch: Pre-Capitalist Gender Category, ‘Tributary’ Modal Contradiction, and a Test for Materialist Feminism

The gender position of eunuchs in the Byzantine Empire (and elsewhere) presents a challenge to existing schools of Marxist Feminist history. At present, Marxist Feminism is largely attempting to depart from ‘dual systems’ approaches to understanding patriarchy. What is lacking from these efforts is an appreciation of the complexity of pre-capitalist gender relations, and how these variations were entwined with the modal systems found prior to modernity. Pre-modern economic modes placed varied demands on the societies which sustained them, and were accompanied by a range of state formations — gender relations and household structure were responsively arranged to these demands, and must be understood for us to appreciate the full history of class societies.

As a medievalist, my contribution to this collection (and field) is from a member of a minority. As such, I’ll begin by re-introducing some more familiar territory for Marxist Feminists, before addressing the eunuchs as a particular feature of Byzantine gender relations (with particular reference to disputes *within* Marxist scholarship around the mooted “tributary mode”, and its distinctive imperial state). This essay aims to illuminate how each of these topics can benefit from integration with the other. Gender history of pre-modern eras can benefit from Marxist-Feminism, and considering pre-modern gender relations will certainly be necessary to resolve current debates over the ‘patriarchy question’. If there is to be a ‘unitary theory’ of capitalist gender relations, pre-capitalist gender relations must be understood in their own terms, rather than with scholarly placeholders. Eunuchs enjoyed a contradictory position as subjects within the tributary mode, and as participants in the pre-capitalist state, which there have only been limited efforts to grasp. Marxist Feminism at once provides a means to account for this complexity, and will fall short of its broader aims should it fail to.

If we are to succeed in meaningfully twinning gender liberation struggles, and the drive to surpass our current Mode of Production, the divisive relations (household and state) of any historical era can not be treated as truly bygone.

The Systems Debate: Arruzza’s ‘Three Theses’ on Gender and Capitalism

In 2014, Cinzia Arruzza’s *Remarks on Gender* surveyed Marxist Feminist literature to date (Arruzza, 2014). *Remarks on Gender* used an exegetical style to tackle the still vexed question of ‘patriarchy’ (and whether Marxist Feminists ought even speak of one existing today, if ever.)

Arruzza taxonomised previously existing Marxist scholarship on the ‘patriarchy question’ as divisible between three schools:

- Firstly, **Dual (or Triple) Systems Theory**. Here, patriarchy and Capitalism operate as historically interconnected systems, with dual system thinkers often proposing economic class existing alongside gender as a ‘**sex class**’. Both capitalism and patriarchy (and white supremacy, in many more recent accounts) serve as ‘**systems of oppression**’. Patriarchy predates capitalism and its logic has come into historical relationship, or entwinement, or consubstantiality, with capitalism. This school of thought has been advanced most famously by Christine Delphy (1980), Heidi Hartmann (1979), and Sylvia Walby (1990). There have been many variations of this position advanced, with structuralism’s treatment of kinship and Lacan’s theorisation of patriarchy and theorisation often drawn from as methodological troves offering external insights. For the most part, however, this strain of materialist feminism is based on Beauvoirean existentialism, focusing phenomenologically on gender as the relation of women/men as Other/Self.
- Secondly, **Indifferent Capital**. This school asserts that capitalism has displaced patriarchy and interacts opportunistically with **race and gender**. Capital enjoys contingent use of gendered oppression; while pursuing its only intrinsic need: extraction of surplus value. This stance has been expressed more or less explicitly by many Marxist theorists, but was argued most clearly by the late Ellen Meiskins Wood (Meiskins Wood, 2015). In this view, patriarchy remains as a residual, rather than conditional feature of Capital’s dominance through coercion into the market, including the workplace. There is no **logical** basis within Capitalism for gendered oppression, although it inherits and ideologically *naturalises* the hierarchies (racial and gender) it inherited. In this respect, the domination Capital has in fact *opened* horizons for overcoming once sturdier patriarchal norms. Sexism and racism are historical features, not invariant pre-requisites for Capital’s inter-generational survival. Gender here appears as expedient and instrumental for the purposes of Capital, historically rather than logically demanded by the system of Capital.
- Finally, **Unitary Theory** Arruzza’s own position, heavily informed by the work of Lise Vogel in her 1983 monograph *Marxism and the Oppression of Woman*, and subsequent work done to elaboration on the concept of **social reproduction**.¹ Unitary theorists hold there is no longer an autonomous *system* of patriarchy ‘in capitalist countries’ (Arruzza’s words), even if gendered relations continue to pervade interpersonal interactions.

¹ More recently collection of essays: Bhattacharya (2017). The term was also explored from a wide range of angles in: *Viewpoint Magazine Issue 5: Social Reproduction* (2015), published online: <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2015/11/02/issue-5-social-reproduction/> See also: Lewis, 2016.

Capitalism is a social order which extends beyond economic laws, and includes gender. Social Reproduction of society (and its workforces) involves gender in a way that ensures the inter-generational reappearance of gender norms, including (and requiring) the oppression of women. For as long as capitalist economies remain fuelled by Labour Power, the accompanying economic relations will require and direct women's oppression.

Although this goes largely unstated, this debate rests a lot of weight on what form patriarchy (or patriarchal relations) took prior to capitalism. Implicitly, *each one of these views* seems to presuppose a pre-modern 'patriarchy', which either survived the development of capitalism as an 'autonomous' system (dual systems), or did not (unitary and indifferent). Variations on the '**Dual Systems**' thesis claim that patriarchy survived into capitalism as an autonomous system, whereas the both the **indifferent** or **unitary views** of Capital claim patriarchy-as-system was dissolved, subsumed, or otherwise exists only in a looser, non-autonomous form. In these discussions, there has been limited engagement in existing scholarship with the particular details of what a pre-capitalist patriarchal system looked like. Pre-capitalist societies are vaguely bracketed as "agrarian" by *Remarks on Gender*, without further concrete division, or investigation. This elides considerable scholarly debate around relations in both modal or state formations, and gender relations, which prevailed in pre-capitalist class societies. It also seems to disregard non-class societies altogether, while occluding significant variations within pre-modern economies. (Whereas the Byzantine Empire strictly restricted commercial activity, for instance, its economy functioned quite differently from the rest of what would come to be known as 'Europe' or Anatolia, due to its centralised minting, tied up with continual operations of the imperial fisc.)

Arruzza herself (who when not writing Marxist Feminism or organising the International Women's Strike, is a professional researcher of Platonism) is not to be blamed for this shared failing of the material she summarises.² Instead, it originates the bulk of scholarship on the '**patriarchy question**', which was surely intended to address the circumstances which women faced today (or in the later 20th century). The focus of these thinkers was on gender as a historical relationship which exists in the face of Capital, in light of the capitalist context they worked against. While it is appropriate for political thinkers to confront the most pressing issues and strategic questions of the day, this will not suffice for a satisfying historical account. Pre-capitalist (or 'Tributary Mode') class economies will have to be examined for the fruitful materialist theorisation of gender as a historical particularity to continue.

In recent years, the existence of pre-modern societies without pervasively dyadic gender identification has been emphasised by post-colonial and decolonial activists and scholars. Marxist feminist theory can mutually benefit through theoretically including apparently

² More recently Arruzza has brought these fields together in a piece co-written with Aaron Jaffe (2018).

non-dyadic gender forms, which at present seem to rarely appear in this field's work. At present, too much of Marxist-Feminist research literature risks establishing a normative account of gender, with the inevitable queer conflicts which arise in the face of such schematics thought through only *post hoc* (at best). A good corrective of this can begin with a concrete examination of the Byzantine eunuch.

Introducing Byzantine Eunuchs

“The Byzantine Empire” is a term of convenience used by historians to discuss the Roman Empire between the re-founding of Constantinople by Constantine, and its eventual conquest by the Ottoman Empire almost ten centuries later.³

Other than during a brief interregnum of Western occupation between 1204-1261, the Byzantine state remained centred around Constantinople, easily one of the largest capitals across Eurasia. Eunuchs were a feature of imperial life throughout this history, particularly concentrated in positions reserved exclusively for them in the higher tiers of state administration. In a similar capacity (although in a ‘racialised’ fashion not yet present in the Byzantine Empire), courtly eunuchs later continued to serve the imperial court under the Ottoman Empire after their eventual conquest of Constantinople.

“Eunuch” (Greek: ὁ εὐνοῦχος, notably a masculine noun) was something of an umbrella term, most famously referring to Romans/Byzantines who had experienced a range of physically emasculating procedures (usually as boys). Procedures ranged from total excision of the male genitals, to (rarely, during the Byzantine period) the mere severing of the vas deferens. Castration itself was formally banned repeatedly under Roman Law, but continued as a *de facto* commonplace in the Empire's fringe territories. The procedure was largely performed on pre-pubescent boys, commissioned by slave traders or aspirational parents (adult castrations were very rare after Late Antiquity, with auto-castration having been prohibited by the Early Church, (see Hanson, 1966).

The majority of eunuchs appear to have been emasculated as children (with adult autocastration censured by the Early Church, and by all accounts fleetingly rare beyond Late Antiquity.) Both slave traded eunuchs and the children of aspirational parents tended to originate in the imperial provinces, or beyond.⁴ Less known (and in an indeterminate proportion of cases) the term also covered those “born eunuchs” (Kuefler, 2001, 19:12): infants born with ambiguous genitals, who

³ Certain scholars have adopted the term ‘New Rome’ for this state formation, in light of its population referring to themselves as Romans up until its final dissolution, but on Pragmatic grounds I will retain ‘Byzantine’ as a term of scholarly convenience, with full apologies for any upset this anachronism causes to either the living or dead.

⁴ This would continue to hold true of courtly eunuchs in the Ottoman period, see Toledano, 1984.

contemporary medicine would identify as those with intersex conditions.⁵ It is impossible to estimate what proportion of eunuchs mentioned in our surviving sources were ‘born’, as opposed to those castrated: this is certainly not a topic which historiographical authors were forthcoming with detailed speculation. Whatever the exact demographic composition, eunuchs as they appear in remaining sources are distinguished by liminality, and distinction within manhood. According to accounts by the Byzantines, eunuchs had distinctive appearances on both a physiological and sartorial level (including lack of beards, tendency to be slender and tall, to specific courtly attire and attributed gendered mannerisms.)⁶ Eunuchs were often likened to angels (Hatzaki 2009).

Existing Scholarship on Eunuchs – From Telltale ‘Oriental’ Figures, To Gender Construction

Western Byzantine scholarship until the mid-20th century was dominated by Orientalising tropes, which in this instance presented the Byzantine Empire as torn or in tension between the essential cultural forces of the Hellenic and the Oriental (given their heritage from the Classical era existing against theocratic dogmatic despotism). In this view, eunuchs were considered a telltale feature of the Byzantine Empire's ‘Oriental’ character by the Empire's earlier historians. To Enlightenment historians (most notoriously Edward Gibbon, who preferred an equally idealised vision of the rugged militarism of the West and Islamic East), the continued presence of eunuchs into the Ottoman Empire, and their parallel appearance in the imperial courts of China, made this something of an ‘open-shut’ case in terms of the Byzantine Empire being partially ‘Oriental’. Even in scholarship from the earlier 20th century, eunuchs could be portrayed in authoritative works as disfigured troublemakers, as this quote from Charles Diehl (1923, p. 756-766,) shows:

‘In this court full of eunuchs, women, and idle high dignitaries, there were intrigues incessantly and everywhere, alike in the Gynaceum, the barracks of the guards, and the Emperor’s antechambers; every man fought for himself and sought to overthrow the reigning favourite, and any means were good, flattery or calumny, bribery or assassination. In dark corners was prepared the fall of the minister in power, nay even the fall of the Emperor himself.’⁷

⁵ The contemporary medical establishment, it should be noted, usually seeks

to surgically eliminate these bodily ambiguities in a procedure intersex activists term ‘Intersex Genital Mutilation’. For more on this issue see my piece: Gleeson (2018). The contemporary intersex movement largely rejects the term ‘conditions’ as pathologising, we instead prefer to refer to ‘intersex variations’. The contemporary plight of those born intersex is a worthy point for anyone prone to dismissing eunuchs as an exotic cultural ‘Other’ to consider carefully.

⁶ For an examination including analysis of a rare depiction of a bearded eunuch, see: Charles Barber (1997).

⁷ Orientalism as a feature of medieval Western historiography is considered in a paper by Shaun Tougher (2012.)

This attitude changed markedly in the second half of the 20th century, when eunuchs were brought into more 'scientific' view, and unexamined reference to 'the Orient' came to be problematised by scholarship following Edward Said. Historically rigorous approaches to Byzantine eunuchs began in earnest with French scholar, Rodolphe Guiland, who in an array of papers in *Revue des études byzantines* meticulously examined evidence in surviving court records and imperial protocols for imperial courtly roles and other eunuch-reserved positions (Guiland, 1944, 1945, 1953, 1955, 1956, 1962; summarised and explored: Sidéris, 2003).

The prevalence of eunuchs was further historically investigated in Alexander Kazhdan and Michael McCormick's classic essay, 'The Social World of the Byzantine Court.' (Kazhdan, McCormick, 1984). This essay included a statistical analysis of the prevalence of eunuch courtiers, showing that their numbers diminished with the rise of the Komnenoi dynasty (which nepotistically granted full bodied males from their own lineage, and those in marriage alliances with them, choice administrative positions).

In the later 20th and early 21st century, Shaun Tougher spent the better part of his career attempting a comprehensive working through of primary sources identifying eunuchs (Tougher 1999, 2002, 2004, 2004, 2008, 2010, 2013, 2013, 2015). Finally, on the political level, the work of Judith Herrin on Byzantine empresses has demonstrated how those who secured power relied on eunuch courtiers to solidify their often tenuous position. (Herrin, 2002, 2015; James 2001)

There has been rather less theoretical work exploring and explaining how eunuchs were included in Byzantine society's gender relations, an upshot of the 'post-positivist' bent which shapes Byzantine Studies more generally. In recent decades, however theoretical accounts of Byzantine eunuchs have greatly improved, and begun to draw from cultural theory: Kathryn Ringrose's research considers eunuchs as an instance of 'gender construction', and as 'cultural mediators' (2003 and 1995). In Ringrose's account, eunuchs serve as a discrete gender category, relationally positioned as compared to Byzantine aristocratic men and women. Ringrose theorises eunuchs as 'socialised' into a gender via castration, attire, mannerisms, etc., resulting in them appearing as a distinct gender position. This view places eunuchs as part of social construction, in relational view of Eunuchs as defined by their place within the overall whole of Byzantine gender relations. Ringrose's account is compelling, if lacking both in historical materialist approaches (as outlined above), or the Butlerian 'performative' conception of gender.

Matthew Kuefler's *The Manly Eunuch* (2001) serves as a rare example of fully theoretically informed conceptualisation of eunuchs as historical figures. While this monograph concerns the post-Roman West eunuchs, rather than the Byzantine Empire, but is still worth mentioning here given the rich methodological blend it deploys. Kuefler introduces gender as a dialectic,

deploying Butler's performativity theory to present gender not as a set of fixed constructs or categories, but rather a field of continual contestation. Kuefler is closely informed by the materialist conception of gender elaborated by Raewyn Connell, who juxtaposed 'hegemonic' and 'insurgent' masculinities, in an attempt to provide a basis for the *multiplicities* always present in manhood's formation. Especially relevant for research into eunuchs, Connell's schema argues masculinity defines itself against effeminacy. In this view, it's easy to see that eunuchs could play an unsettling role (for male authors of Roman history), given their advanced social standing and ambiguous embodiment.

Eunuchs and Class Society

Eunuchs left us no confirmed material written by them first hand, meaning that the bulk of surviving written information about them was written by (full-bodied) males. Despite this 'speechless' quality, historical reconstructions of eunuchs in the Byzantine Empire have been possible given the prominent role they played in this literature society. Male authors, particularly in the empire's metropole Constantinople, would have encountered eunuchs on an everyday basis, with their condition perhaps not unremarkable, but by no means exceptional. From this material, as well as architectural and art historical sources, we can determine the role of eunuchs in society requires examination of Byzantine society as a whole, and from this process of **salvage** we can draw conclusions about the developments within 'Byzantine patriarchy', or if indeed such a term has much explanatory power. One approach is that of Charis Messis, who has recently used a mixture of literary and historiographical sources to discern how eunuchs appear in the imagination of the Byzantines. Messis (2014). Messis's gender historical uses the prevalence of male-written sources to focus on the eunuch as historical figure, rather than historical subject. A similar approach was taken by art historian Myrto Hatzaki, whose study of Byzantine beauty included a consideration of eunuchs perspective. From this view, eunuchs appear twinned with angels as a key instance of effeminated male liminality (Hatzaki 86-115, 2009).⁸

Here, primarily for reasons of space and holding the attention of historical materialists, we will take a more institutional view. The privileged position enjoyed by eunuchs with relation to the Byzantine state, ensured them an elevated role in the economic mode that prevailed across the imperial territories, just as their formal inability to found conventional patriarchal households ensured they had a more precarious (and unclear) relation to the core economic unit of this gender-divided class society.

Eunuchs and "Patriarchy" As A Legal Principle

⁸ See also on Byzantine angelology Glenn Peers, *Subtle Bodies: Representing Angels in Byzantium* (2001) and Sidéris (2003).

While themselves existing in an unclear gendered state (at least for contemporary analysts), eunuchs were clearly excluded from a key dyadic convention: Eunuchs were forbidden from marriage by Roman Law (long predating the Empire's Byzantine phase), and given the formal centrality of biological reproduction in that institution, would have been a poor fit even without this legal restriction. They were, however, permitted to adopt following the reforms of Leo III to civil law in the 720s. (In practice, adoption could include adult 'sons'.)

This left eunuchs males in grammatical terms, but rarely patriarchs in legal ones: their social and civic life did not include normative opportunities to head a family, that were available to lay men (including lower ranking clergy). Eunuchs were in this respect non-viable heads of household in the conventional sense of the word, but still not altogether without opportunities for 'vertical' kinship. This is likely to have played some role in their formally granted advantages within the Byzantine state and its administration, which we will now briefly introduce.

Historical Materialism and Byzantine History

In recent years, a range of historical materialist scholarship has provided accounts of Byzantine economic relations, and state. I will provide a brief overview of recent debates here.⁹

Research Marxist historical research has done much to improve on the classic work of Yugoslavian Byzantinist George Ostrogorsky, whose ambitious history of the Byzantine State was for many years one of the field's most popular works (Ostrogorsky 1940/1951). This great work is now dated in various ways (its claims concerning the military-administrative reforms the Byzantine Empire underwent are accepted by no contemporary Byzantinists, and its account of Arab-Byzantine warfare especially features some strikingly dated orientalism). Until the 21st century however, the lack of introductory overviews of the Byzantine Empire written by professional historians ensured that this monograph was for many decades the closest the field had to a 'textbook'.

In the 1980s, Alan Harvey defended a conception of the Byzantine Empire as 'feudal'. As Harvey defined it, this was understood in terms of the peasantry being the economic base of the Byzantine 'social formation'. Although his Marxism remained a minority methodology amongst economic historians of the Byzantine Empire, Harvey was more broadly convincingly in arguing the case for economic expansion (from population size to surplus expansion) which began in the 10th century (Harvey, 1989). This argument has come to be accepted by the field's majority of non-Marxist scholars.

⁹ For a more comprehensive view of Anglophone scholarship, see my forthcoming essay 'Byzantine Historiography, Byzantine Household'.

By the early 1990s (a uniquely unpromising juncture for Marxist theoretical research), John Haldon sought to replace the existing Marxist conception of pre-capitalist class societies in *The State & The Tributary Mode of Production* (1993).¹⁰ Having previously defended (along with Harvey) a view of the Byzantine Empire as ‘feudal’ (Haldon 1985, 1989), Haldon’s new formulation of the ‘tributary mode’ sought to retain the systemic explanation of Marxist, in new terms. A tributary mode economy as defined by Haldon is distinctive in two key ways: firstly that rents and taxes become modally undifferentiated, in a context where extraction of surplus is central to economic activity. Secondly, the state is obliged to fulfill the role of transcendent actor. Through comparative analysis Haldon considers instances where various pre-modern states (and periods of the Byzantine Empire) had achieved this more or less effectively.

In the 2000s, social historians Jarius Banaji (2007, 2010, 2015) and Peter Sarris (2005, 2006, 2009, 2010) researched the Late Antique and early Byzantine period (3rd-10th centuries).¹¹ Banaji’s research is particularly insightful concerning the varied means used by agrarian estate holders to maximise their exploitation, and has been particularly insightful in outlining how Byzantine monetisation allowed for hiring waged agricultural labourers. Sarris’ research has often focused on the papyri documents left by the early Byzantine Empire’s powerhouse economy in Egypt, and shares with Banaji a presentation of a proto “proletariat” as an under-acknowledged but prominent feature of Byzantine economic relations. Sarris emphasises the formal continuity which existed between the Ancient estate, and the Byzantine great estate until at least the 10th century.

More recently, Jarius Banaji has challenged John Haldon’s definition of the tributary mode, preferring a more minimal conception to what he sees as the risk of formalism implicit in centering surplus extraction. Whereas Haldon follows from a methodological tradition that owes more to the aftermath of western structuralism, Banaji sees the Byzantine Empire as an example of the differentiated labour deployment, which should be investigated through a theoretical framework continually responsive to empirical investigation. Banaji charges Haldon with lapsing into formalism, and overlooking the ‘laws of motion’ which Marx considered to govern each era. The subsequent debate between Banaji and Haldon is illuminating both concerning the nature and function of the Byzantine State, and the motivation behind modal analysis itself.¹²

¹⁰ For much more recent reflections see Haldon 2013.

¹¹ Sarris and Banaji also co-edited: *Special Issue: Aristocrats, Peasants and the Transformation of Rural Society, c.400–800, Journal of Agrarian Change* 9.1 (2009).

¹² The debate as a whole can be found in: *Historical Materialism* 21, Issue 4, 2013, the essays addressed here are: John Haldon, ‘Theories of Practice: Marxist History-Writing and Complexity’ and Jarius Banaji, ‘Putting Theory to Work’. Here we will use the tributary mode without committing fully to either Haldon or Banaji’s definition of the term, especially as the two appear to be largely in accord by my reading (perhaps more so than Banaji might accept.)

This brief survey has outlined considerable body of Marxist history which surveys various facets of the Byzantine Empire. Regrettably, none of these figures have written a great deal on gender (although Haldon's edited collection *A Social History of Byzantium* contains essays on this theme).

Teasing out the Contradictions - An Imperial State

The Byzantine Empire was an imperial state: Constantinople served as a centre for tribute collection both from territory controlled by the imperial armies, and less reliably from neighbouring regions, in the cultural-economic orbit dubbed by Dimitri Obolensky the 'Byzantine Commonwealth' (the Macedonians, Bulgarians, Ukrainians, Montenegrins, Serbians, Moldovans, Belarussians, Rus' and Georgians).

Ideologically and practically, the Byzantine Empire centred stated legitimacy around the authority of the Emperor as overseer of both tribute collection, and the wellbeing of the Empire as a Christian society. As a Middle Byzantine monk Kosmas Tzinilokas wrote, while attempting to resolve disputes at Mount Athos on behalf of Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos (1045):

'The thoughts of a truly lordly and sacred emperor are deeply concerned not only with political matters and plans for the army, with turning back hostile peoples and enslaving enemies, with subjugating populous cities beneath his hand, but also with upholding especially the divine ordinances and the sacred canons.' (1975/2010).

Eunuchs were ineligible as emperors, without exception. The same held true for men who had undergone other forms of mutilation (the one exception being Justinian II, who after being felled from the throne and mutilated returned with a silver nose, only to be dethroned once again, and beheaded). It seems that eunuchs were not appropriate as an embodiment of empire. In this respect, and given their aforementioned ineligibility to be direct partners to marriage alliances, eunuchs were reliable imperial administrative servants at least in the respect that they could not be direct claimants to the throne, nor develop the marital ties that were otherwise made heavy use of among the Byzantine ruling class.

Eunuchs and the State

The Byzantines did not conceive of themselves as having an 'economy' as such, with the word *oekonomia* instead meaning a ruling virtue best translated as 'discretion', or referring to household management.

Irrespective of this lack of theorisation immanent to their thinking, the Byzantine state was comparatively sophisticated next to most of its neighbours (other than the Persian Empire for its early history, and Caliphates for its later), featuring an administrative state apparatus including centralised minting of coins, centralised standards for commercial activity, and imperially overseen taxation of foreign traders. The role of the state shifted significantly in some ways throughout the Empire's long history: until the loss of Alexandria (the 'workhouse of Europe') in 641, the state oversaw providing free daily bread to the inhabitants of Constantinople. But throughout its history, administering the imperial fisc ensured a structural tether between Constantinople as an economic centre, and the agrarian estates of the provinces. The bureaucratic demands of the empire required a large civil service (the source of 'Byzantine' as a pejorative in modern parlance). Tasks would be overseen from a pool of educated members of the urban elite, who the Emperor would extend formal titles that included responsibilities to his court. Within this system of imperially centred administration, eunuchs played a privileged role, with several prominent titles reserved for them, including that of chamberlain. Courtly eunuchs were not a consistently prominent feature across the Empire's history, with their popularity declining with the rise of provincial dynasticism, then recovering for the final 13th to 15th centuries.

Eunuchs also served other gendered roles of state, most notably as generals — helpful for insecure emperors and empresses who could at least rely on not being directly deposed (Herrin, 2002).

Prejudice Against Eunuchs

Despite their prominence in the Byzantine state, there was no straightforward acceptance of eunuchs by Byzantine Society. Despite their widespread employment in institutionally elevated positions, prejudices against them remained commonplace. Surviving written sources recurrently exhibit negative views of eunuchs, with Kuefler, Tougher, Sideris, and Ringrose each noting how frequently jibes, negative insinuations and dismissive comments appear in sources concerning eunuchs described by our historical sources. Eunuchs were often presented as: unvirtuous, untrustworthy, libidinal, and immoral. Ringrose notes that eunuchs were often defined negatively, a flourish especially apparent in Greek (which uses an alpha prefix) For example, eunuchs might be described as unmanly (anandros). They were also more favourably characterised by some writers as filled with 'apatheia', or without passions.

Despite this conventional disdain, eunuchs could serve male liturgical duties (performing the 'Divine Mysteries', or sacraments). That is, they ritually served male roles, and ones which were not permitted to women. Eunuch clergymen were found at all ranks, including Patriarchs of Constantinople (Theophylact, 10th century son of Emperor Romanos I). Tougher's work demonstrates the varied form these presumptions could take: with like features assumed by

(male) authors being cast in an either positive or negative light. One limitation on establishing the extent of these sentiments is our surviving evidence includes no testimony written directly by a confirmed eunuch author. As such, we rely almost exclusively on full-bodied male authors for written sources, presumably resulting in a bias towards hostile (or insecure) reactions. Even explicit defences of eunuchs would draw on familiar tropes of their liminal state, attempting to reverse an understanding of effeminacy while accepting the basic terms of eunuch critics (Mullett, 2002).

In a classic article, the Classicist and sociological historian Keith Hopkins compares eunuchs of the earlier Roman Empire to Jewish bureaucrats in the 17th and 18th century German states (Hopkins 1963). While effeminated they could be formally and substantively advantaged by their particular social position, a source of resentment for those who didn't share this state. Similarly in the Byzantine context, Evelyne Patlagean explored eunuchs as liminal figures in hagiographic devotional fiction, sacral ambiguity (Patlagean, 1976). This *ambiguity* is shown as in hagiography (writing about saints), a key genre for Byzantine cultural history. Until the Middle Byzantine era, one of the most commonplace *topos* (tropes) in these narratives was a female saint adopting the guise of a eunuch (appropriately beardless), in order to infiltrate an exclusively male monastery, and thus progress their career as a saint. As these narratives of virtuously effeminated women suggest, eunuchs were also found in many monasteries, with several existing solely for them — although certain banned them explicitly (Tougher, 2008). We'll turn to one episode where such a restriction met in conflict with the aforementioned high standing and state prominence of one Middle Byzantine eunuch, Symeon the Sanctified.

Symeon the Sanctified: State Administration, Gender Transgression¹³

By the late 1070s, the eunuch Symeon had enjoyed service to his Emperor Nikephoros Botaneiates as a high ranking administrator (*megas droungarios*). Symeon arrived at Athos, perhaps at imperial request with an entourage of three other eunuchs (Eusebios, Kandidatos and Hilarion). Symeon, and particularly his young companions, caused offence at Athos shortly after their arrival in 1081 at the traditional annual meeting, for their 'arrogance' and beardless (*agenios*) appearance.

¹³ This brief recounting of a Middle Byzantine aristocrat (and eunuch), will add little to Rosemary Morris' comprehensive account of Symeon's subversive appearance at the monastic hub of Mount Athos (Morris (2009, edition: Papachryssanthou 1986) But for our particular gender integrative purposes, he serves as an exemplary case for how gender normativity could be strained by those who has ascended to the heights of state administration.

Beardless youths had been banned by John Tzimiskes in his foundational charter officially in the early 970s (with superiors forbidden to either permit eunuchs to join as brothers, or live in their monasteries' fields), then again by Constantine Monomachos' reforming intervention in 1054 (which had physically removed a group of eunuchs who had settled there since the first ban). This was in addition to a traditional ban of women, and explicit bans of female animals. Symeon and his trio of beardless (*agenios*) young men had attempted to entrench themselves in an exclusively male space. Much as with the 1054 episode, the eunuchs were once again expelled.

Having been ejected by Athos' monks, Symeon pleaded his case to the Emperor, and was duly re-instated as superior, and returned his lands. Symeon's return was a lavish one, to the tune of 36 pounds of gold coin. By 1089, Xenophon's archives record it as having 14 plough teams including 100 horses and asses, 130 buffalo, 50 cows and 2,000 goats and sheep in its vineyards, as well as donating estates beyond Athos itself (tethering the monastery to the process of surplus extraction that was the mainstay of the ruling class).

Rosemary Morris calls Symeon: 'a classic example of a refounder with obvious friends and patrons in high places.' We might add, an example of the value state service offered the effeminated in a tributary mode economy, and of imperial involvement in shaping the contours of the sacred.

As Go Eunuchs, So The World (The Contradictory Condition of Effeminated Manhood)

For the most part, Marxist Feminism has failed to account for effeminacy, or explain it, besides the Gramscian investigations of Raewyn Connell (1995). Marxist Feminism has also been commonly criticised by having little ability to grasp widespread gendered abuse (from rape and wife beating, to street harassment). Whereas many schools of feminism, and queer studies, have brought violence as delimiting gender normativity into view, at its worst Marxist Feminism has sought to rationalise these contours as *post hoc* functions of economic imperatives. The castration of slaves and the sons of aspirational parents could fit easily into a model which emphasises cycles of regulatory violence as definitive to gender, and it remains for Marxist-Feminism to prove itself equally flexible. Another challenge has been posed by post/decolonial feminists, who've argued that dyadic gender was imposed across the world as a feature of colonial domination, with a western model of differentiation only one feature of a thoroughgoing cultural imposition.¹⁴

¹⁴ This association of the dyadic genders and modernity/colonialism has become something of a 'common sense' or assumed base knowledge in certain critical circles. It was most concisely and rigorously advanced in Lugones, which developed the framework of Quijano (2007) A similar argument was previously advanced concerning the African context by Oyewumi (1997).

I would suggest that the continued merit of materialist feminism rests in Marxism's unique emphasis on **contradictions**. So far, eunuch scholarship has largely not been able to present a satisfying answer to whether Byzantine eunuchs were men (with their male gendering on a linguistic, and often institutional, despite their unmistakable phenomenological particularity, and so many 'full bodied' male authors feeling the need to depict them as effeminate, and unnatural). I would propose that a solution to this problem is neither possible, nor necessary. Eunuchs were particularised as eunuchs through a mesh of contingency, convention, and custom; much like any other gender.

Marxist Feminism may aid substantially in navigating between the Scylla and Charybdis of (defunct, yet still lingering) exotic Orientalist conceptions eunuchs as a signifier of the despotic 'East', and the new challenge of an over-simplified account of gender history. A wholly abstracted view of pre-colonial gender relations risks the 'new exoticisation' of relegating eunuchs to being merely one pre-colonial 'third gender' among many (the Other to the Self of colonial gender dyadism.) Eunuchs played an active role in sustaining and directing its imperial state. Through an approach which always keeps class in mind, we can best provide an account of these figures in their own right, navigating membership in class society and choosing within circumstances not of their own choosing, as did any other. Eunuchs are discontinuous with our own gender relations, while still quite relatable in this sense. Eunuchs deserve better than to be either overlooked as an integral feature of the Byzantine state, **or** treated as somehow exemplary of some pre-colonial radical freedom in gender relations.¹⁵ They were actors in pre-modern class societies, both troubling (particularly to male authors) in certain contexts, and fully complicit in its day-to-day social reproduction.

The Case for 'Casting the Net' Into the Pre-Modern

To return to the systems debate and Arruzza's 'Three Theses': 'Dual Systems' or 'sex class' approaches sought to emphasise patriarchal relations as transhistorical. Both the 'Indifferent' approach of Meiskins Wood and 'Unitary' schools, as outlined and endorsed by Arruzza, are founded on the particularity of Capital and its systemic domination — with gendered oppression as *ad hoc*, non-systemic, non-autonomous, and non-Logical. (Even if structurally normalised by the demands of Capital.) Neither of these views of pre-modern gender relations can be verified without comparative examination of pre-modern historical periods.

Whatever conclusions are reached about gender's contemporary (capitalism entwining, or subsumed) form must not be based on a conflationary displacement of a unified 'patriarchal system' (or non-explanatory 'patriarchal relations') to societies formed around pre-capitalist

¹⁵ For a detailed introduction to the risks of exoticising non-dyadic gendered subjects, see: Towle and Morgan (2002). While intended as an intervention to contemporary anthropology, many of the criticisms apply here, too.

modes. Is it analytically helpful to say that a 'patriarchal system' prevailed in the Byzantine Empire? I'm going to offer a tentative 'no'. Or at least that the Byzantine tributary modal economy (however we define this) serves poorly as an example of a generic 'agrarian society' to juxtapose capitalist gender relations against. Marxist Feminism should take care to remain responsive to work into Byzantine literary, medical and legal sources related to the experiences of women and private households, which have clearly challenged any straightforward assertion of consistent patriarchy as thoroughly binding juridical principle, or lived reality (Kaldellis, 2010; Laiou, 2011). This is not to deny that misogynistic gender ideals profoundly shapes both the content and form of surviving Byzantine historiography (Fledelius, 1982; White, 2003; Markopoulos 2004). Nevertheless, the complexity of the Byzantine state and its gender relations appears to be one case where attempts at systemic approaches to gender oppression might mislead, or at least brush over variations in development. Entrenched ideals must always be considered within the motion of historical experience (Mergiali-Sahas, 2000), with all the dissonance, mess and contradictory features that characterise actual societies. A necessary predicate for historical materialist investigation is establishing what remains to be explained by our investigations, rather than simply assumed.

In the quite particular role they played in Byzantine statecraft (and the troubling way they appeared to contemporary male ruling class authors), eunuchs are demonstrative of the contradictory variations thrown up by tributary mode societies, and must not be overlooked as historical subjects. Grasping the conditions of their lives (from formal privileges, to oppressive conventions of contempt) will improve the grasp of Marxist Feminism on gender more generally, and our theorisation of effeminacy (too often neglected), in particular. Historical Materialism is well equipped to recover a history of eunuchs, and other non-dyadic actors. But this demands a wider comparative 'casting of the net' than previously existing historical theorisation of patriarchy has tended towards.

To satisfactorily answer the question 'what has capitalism done to gender?', one task required of us historical investigations of how gender was marked out before it.

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