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The Fetish for a Subversive Jesus

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Abstract

What does it mean to say Jesus was subversive? This article engages in meta-critical analysis of the use of 'subversion' in historical Jesus research. It argues that the neoliberal lives of Jesus in particular have increasingly fetishized a cultural mainstreaming of subversion in which certain forms of containable subversion are tolerated within late capitalist society, as part of a broader strategy of economic and ideological compliance. On the one hand, J.D. Crossan's Jesus spun subversive aphorisms which constituted the radical subversion of the present world order. On the other hand, N.T. Wright has frequently intensified the rhetoric of subversion, claiming a 'profoundly', 'doubly', 'thoroughly', 'deeply', and 'multiply' subversive Jesus, while simultaneously distancing him from traditional subversive fixtures like militant revolutionary action. Through its discursive mimicking of wider cultural trends, this rhetorical trope has enabled Jesus scholarship to enjoy both popular and academic success in Western, neoliberal society.

Keywords

Jesus – subversion – N.T. Wright – John Dominic Crossan – critical theory – Marxism – neoliberalism – ideology

Introduction

What does it mean to say Jesus was subversive? The politically radical Jesus—the one Hugo Chávez had in mind when he claimed Jesus 'was the greatest socialist in history'¹—is not the carefully crafted Jesus of most contemporary

1 'Chavez Promises a Socialist Venezuela as He Starts New 6-Year Term,' *USA Today*, October 10, 2007, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/2007-01-10-chavez-venezuela_x.htm.

biblical scholars.² Nevertheless, the rhetorical trope of subversion appears fairly entrenched within New Testament studies today. From counter-cultural Jesuses and canonical gospels which apparently subvert empire at every turn,³ to the rise in popularity of non-canonical gospels which, accordingly, subvert the canonical ones,⁴ even Paul is claimed for the cause of subversion: for N.T. Wright, Paul can ‘only be construed as deeply counter-imperial, as subversive to the whole edifice of the Roman Empire’.⁵ In light of all this, the recent book by Alan Streett, *Subversive Meals: An Analysis of the Lord’s Supper under Roman Domination*, which argues that gathering together for a home-cooked ritual in a private household somehow constitutes the non-violent (albeit cannibalistic!) radical upheaval of the Roman imperial system, seems not so far-fetched as it once might have just half a century ago.⁶

What lies behind this recent fascination for subversion? Biblical scholars have rarely thought it necessary to define what they mean by the term, assuming it self-evident. In a similar vein to his comments on Paul, N.T. Wright asserts that ‘[i]t is beyond question that Jesus was acting subversively’.⁷ Such a blanket statement should immediately ignite suspicion. Indeed, the claim something is ‘beyond question’ itself raises a number of questions: does this mean comparisons between Jesus and other subversive dissidents (like terrorists) are appropriate? If not, why not? Furthermore, why assume a subversive Jesus is necessarily a good thing? Surely, emphasizing Jesus’ dutiful obedience to God is more important for Wright than championing his ability to ‘act subversively’. One might suppose it is no longer fashionable to be loyal and obedient. Is it not then ironic that this rhetorical trope usually assumes fidelity to the biblical text itself? It is after all Jesus’ claim to messianic kingship that is

2 The radical Jesus is politically disruptive, a prophetic agent of chaos, deployed with the intent of inspiring revolution by harnessing the collective power of the faithful. His roots can be traced through Thomas Muntzer and the peasants’ revolt, via appropriations by the early Christian socialists, and features prominently in Liberation Theology. See: David Burns, *The Life and Death of the Radical Historical Jesus* (Oxford: OUP, 2013).

3 For a critical overview, see: Stephen D. Moore, ‘The “Turn to Empire” in Biblical Studies,’ *Search* 35, no. 1 (2012): pp. 19–27.

4 See, for example: Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford: OUP, 2003).

5 N.T. Wright, ‘Paul’s Gospel and Caesar’s Empire,’ in *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000), p. 161.

6 R. Alan Streett, *Subversive Meals: An Analysis of the Lord’s Supper under Roman Domination in the First Century* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2013).

7 N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), p. 190.

deemed subversive and not the actions of antagonistic characters like Satan, the scribes and Pharisees, or Judas Iscariot. Is it not also intriguing that the New Testament's adoption of imperialist language ('Jesus is Lord') is rendered subversive when this same language has been utilized historically to undergird the ideology of Christian empires? Such questions and contradictions prompt meta-critical reflection on the emergence of subversion as a widely used but poorly understood category in historical Jesus research, something this article seeks to progress in a modest way.

The path of navigation is relatively straightforward. The influx of subversive Jesuses will be contextualized according to broader cultural shifts that have taken place over the latter half of the twentieth-century. In doing so, I demonstrate just one way in which historical Jesus research is implicated by its ideological context. As will be argued, subversion has become fetishized in historical Jesus research over a period in which certain forms of gestural subversion have become more common and tolerated. Fetishism, as Karl Marx describes, is 'the religion of sensuous appetites'; a fantasy which 'tricks the fetish worshipper into believing that an "inanimate object" will give up its natural character to gratify his desires.'⁸ In the case of commodity fetishism, abstract values produced by the market are transformed into objective qualities that people believe have intrinsic value. To say that New Testament scholars have made Jesus their fetish is perhaps to state the obvious. But the construction of a distinctly subversive Jesus, as has increasingly taken place in biblical scholarship over the past three decades, raises broader questions concerning the relationship between the production of biblical scholarship to its wider socioeconomic and political contexts. In what ways might the attribution of this particular relative value—subversion—function to mask or obscure other political realities as they relate both to Jesus and to the scholars who study him?

It should hopefully come as no surprise that the most influential studies on Jesus are precisely those works that retain scholarly rigour whilst capturing the zeitgeist of an age. Jesus scholarship is distinctive for its mainstream appeal, having carved out niche audiences across both populist and academic markets. Accordingly, I focus on two influential works published during the 1990s, the decade in which subversion loudly enters the stage. First, the Jesus constructed by Irish-American scholar John Dominic Crossan in *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*.⁹ Crossan, a high profile member of the

8 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Religion* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1957), p. 22.

9 John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).

Jesus Seminar, was active in promoting scholarly work on Jesus to the American public through print and televisual media. Crossan's major technical work was published with a major publisher (Harper) and he has continued to write popular level books for the remainder of his career. Second, I turn to the Jesus of the former Bishop of Durham N.T. Wright in *Jesus and the Victory of God*, the second volume in his Christian Origins and the People of God series. Wright is also a successful populariser of biblical scholarship and has a large fan-base among certain types of conservative American Evangelical Christians.¹⁰

While Crossan and Wright's Jesuses are indeed different, they nonetheless occupy two sides of the same coin—what I call the 'neoliberal lives of Jesus'. This phrase intentionally evokes Albert Schweitzer's meta-critical demarcation of the 'liberal lives of Jesus' in the nineteenth-century, in which Jesus had become domesticated to then dominant forms of liberal ideology. The term 'neoliberal' also connotes ideas about political governance, individualism, surveillance, and the free-market that, as we will see, are paramount for contextualizing the fetish for a subversive Jesus within the cultural fabric of late capitalism.¹¹ According to Wendy Brown, neoliberalism is best understood 'not simply as economic policy, but as a governing rationality that disseminates market values and metrics to every sphere of life... [I]t formulates everything, everywhere, in terms of capital investment and appreciation, including and especially humans themselves.'¹² Neoliberalism is intensely focused on the individual, specifying entrepreneurial conduct everywhere, and constraining the subject to act in a capital-enhancing fashion. Since the late 1980s, neoliberalism has increasingly functioned as a dominant ideology or 'hegemonic mode of discourse'¹³ that saturates the conditions under which historical Jesus research is produced, marketed, and consumed.

10 As James G. Crossley suggests, '[i]t might even be worth speculating that SPCK [Wright's publisher] could stop selling all books except those of Wright and still make a comfortable profit for all the massive popularity of his books.' James G. Crossley, *Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism: Quests, Scholarship and Ideology*, BibleWorld (Durham: Acumen, 2012), pp. 88–89.

11 Within Marxist criticism political, ideological and cultural trends, beliefs, and structures are regarded as being in dialectical tension with an economic base. Because the dominant ideas of an age are the ideas of the ruling class, it is crucial to explore how political labels like 'subversion', when applied to the historical Jesus, also function as rhetorical deployments which refract ideologies of class and power in contemporary society.

12 Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), p. 176.

13 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), p. 3.

It is important to stress that, more than anyone else, Crossan and Wright have managed to embed the trope of subversion at the centre of historical Jesus research. While construed as counter-cultural political and religious figures, however, their subversive Jesuses are simultaneously part of mainstream Anglo-American culture, and largely function as superficial points of resistance already contained within the totalizing framework of neoliberal rationality. Mark Fisher has famously described this kind of gestural subversion as a by-product of ‘Capitalist Realism’¹⁴—i.e. the dominant belief that there are no viable alternatives outside of the capitalist system. Even the counter-discourse of anti-capitalism is now widely disseminated through popular culture. How often does the villain in Hollywood films turn out to be the evil corporation? Far from undermining wider social formations like capitalism or neoliberalism, the rhetoric of subversion ultimately just reinforces them. As we will see, despite the well-intentioned appropriation of some features of the radical Jesus tradition, the concept of subversion is ultimately fetishized in the work of Crossan and Wright—and those influenced by them—to make Jesus palatable to broader and more politically conservative audiences.

Contextualizing ‘Subversion’ in the Neoliberal Lives of Jesus

The rhetorical trope of subversion was first applied to the historical Jesus in a major way during the 1990s. This decade and the one which preceded it were also a period in which subversion became fashionable academic terminology across a number of related disciplines, especially those employing so-called ‘postmodern’ or ‘poststructuralist’ methods like new historicism, queer theory, and deconstruction. While these approaches have far from taken hold in biblical studies,¹⁵ let alone historical Jesus research,¹⁶ the sub-discipline was nonetheless influenced by them in tacit and perhaps unconscious ways.

14 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (London: Zero, 2009), pp. 16–19.

15 This observation is made repeatedly in the meta-critical work: Stephen D. Moore and Yvonne Sherwood, *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar: A Critical Manifesto* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011).

16 Notable exceptions include Halvor Moxnes, *Putting Jesus in His Place: A Radical Vision of Household and Kingdom* (Louisville: WJK, 2003); Dale Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: WJK, 2006). It is also worth noting the implicit and explicit influence of postcolonial studies and feminist criticism on historical Jesus research. See, for example: Michael J. Sandford, *Poverty, Wealth, and Empire: Jesus and Postcolonial Criticism*, New Testament Monographs 35 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2014); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation*

Within literary and cultural theory, subversion refers to the ‘reversal of established values, or the insertion of other values into them’¹⁷ and discussions over the extent to which subversive texts or actions actually generate societal change are hotly contested. Indeed, ‘any debate on subversion normally takes place in close relation to a debate on its opposite: containment or recuperation.’¹⁸ Some approaches to subversion operate with the view that power itself produces subversive discourses in order to more efficiently exercise itself. In other words, subversion is already contained by the forces of power which actually generate specific forms of subversion in the first place.¹⁹ Outside of biblical studies, ‘subversion’ is strongly associated with the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies and theorists like Stuart Hall, who emphasized how texts are used subversively, to appropriate them in the creation and renegotiation of subcultures and counter-cultures.²⁰ Similarly, various post-structuralist thinkers like Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Michel Foucault have provided frameworks for conceptualizing subversion, in part, through the subversion of theoretical models, methods, and assumptions of Western philosophy. This in turn provided a foundation for later innovations in theories of race and gender. For example, in *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha advanced a postcolonial theory of how cultural and racial ‘hybridity’ subverts the binarized distinctions between privileged and subaltern cultures.²¹ Similarly, Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* pushed the idea that performances of gender identity that do not strictly align to conventional societal values function subversively.²² However, the meaning of subversion was here taken much more broadly—relating less to governmental and political structures, and more to the transgression of dominant cultural forces like patriarchy, heteronormativity, or individualism. Much

(New York: Continuum, 2000); Kathleen E. Corley, *Women and the Historical Jesus: Feminist Myths of Christian Origins* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge, 2002); James G. Crossley, *Jesus and the Chaos of History: Redirecting the Life of the Historical Jesus* (Oxford: OUP, 2015), pp. 134–162.

17 Gavin Grindon, ‘Subversion,’ ed. Michael Ryan, *The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2011), p. 867.

18 Grindon, ‘Subversion,’ p. 867.

19 Hugh Grady, ‘Containment, Subversion - and Postmodernism,’ *Textual Practice* 7, no. 1 (1993): pp. 31–49.

20 Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997).

21 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

22 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

of this has a Marxist or post-Marxist lineage, drawing on earlier thinkers like Antonio Gramsci whose theory of ‘hegemony’ broadened the concept of class struggle to include daily battles of cultural domination and subjugation.²³

Mainstream attitudes towards certain types of subversion also shifted in Western society over this same period. Certain forms of subversive activity were increasingly tolerated as the excesses of modernity and monopoly capitalism were re-adjusted into newer, emerging economic forms. The neoliberal revolution of the 1980s, for instance, saw the free-market reconfigured to privilege the individual entrepreneur. This also saw nonconformist identities subsumed into niche markets, facilitating the containment of political dissent. (One can rock the boat so long as it does not capsize!) Likewise, by the 1990s, those who had come to age during the counter-culture of the 1960s and 1970s were now embedded in the upper echelons of the establishment; the trope of subversion devoid of actual revolution had managed to become firmly entrenched.

This broader cultural milieu, often referred to as ‘postmodernism’, is widely recognized for its subversive predisposition towards the old establishment. Terry Eagleton describes postmodernism as ‘a style of thought which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of the idea of universal progress or emancipation of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation.’²⁴ As a style of culture it ‘reflects something of this epochal change, in a depthless, decentred, ungrounded, self-reflexive, playful, derivative, eclectic, pluralistic art which blurs the boundaries...between art and everyday experience.’²⁵ The satirical aesthetic exemplified by the long-running television series *The Simpsons*, for example, often reveals an ironic and self-reflexive hyper-consciousness about its frame of televisual media. The appeal of so-called postmodern culture is that it regularly promotes transgressive ideas while simultaneously occupying the space of mainstream culture. In this sense, parody is utilized to both subvert and legitimate that which it parodies.²⁶

As we will see, the neoliberal lives of Jesus—in particular those of Crossan and Wright—simultaneously promote subversive ideals while upholding mainstream cultures, often in contradicting ways. What accounts for this sudden influx of subversion in historical Jesus research? Unlike most text-based

23 Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

24 Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Malden: Blackwell, 1996), p. vii.

25 Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, p. vii.

26 For more on how this relates to the interpretation of the Bible, see: Robert J. Myles, ‘Biblical Literacy and The Simpsons’, in *Rethinking Biblical Literacy*, ed. Katie B. Edwards (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 143–62.

disciplines, biblical studies in general and Jesus research in particular has largely avoided extensive engagement with critical theory. Rather, it appears the neoliberal lives of Jesus absorbed and mimicked the cultural mainstreaming of subversion in a way that manifested according to the confessional and ideological quirks of the discipline. In the remainder of this article I engage with the respective Jesuses of Crossan and Wright. It is argued that, far from being radical, seditious figures, their Jesuses align more closely to a diluted form of gestural subversion and identity-formation firmly rooted in the cultural milieu of late capitalism.

The Quest for a Subversive Hipster Jesus

[Y]ou cannot ignore the healings and the exorcisms, especially in their socially subversive function. You cannot ignore the pointedly political overtones of the very term *Kingdom of God* itself. It is, unfortunately, one of the abiding temptations of pastors and scholars to reduce Jesus to words alone, to replace a lived life with a preached sermon or an interesting idea. To remove, however, that which is radically subversive, socially revolutionary, and politically dangerous from Jesus' *actions* is to leave his life meaningless and his death inexplicable.²⁷

John Dominic Crossan was a major proponent of the 1990s subversive Jesus. Building on his earlier work on Jesus' parables and aphorisms, his historical reconstruction spun maxims designed to subvert his hearers' social and cultural worlds.²⁸ John's baptism of Jesus in the Transjordan desert 'had overtones, explicit or implicit, of political subversion.'²⁹ Through his healings, Jesus boldly challenged 'the religious monopoly of priests' which, according to Crossan, 'was religiopolitically subversive.'³⁰ Moreover, the performance of 'magic', which Crossan describes as a form of 'subversive, unofficial, unapproved, and often lower class religion,'³¹ and Jesus' strident proclamation of the Kingdom

27 John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), p. 93.

28 John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (Sonoma: Polebridge, 1973); John Dominic Crossan, *In Fragments: The Aphorisms of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983).

29 Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, p. 235.

30 Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, p. 324.

31 Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, pp. 305, 355.

of God, both constituted the radical upheaval of the present world order. Subversion was not just a quality limited to Jesus, however. Crossan's choice of primary sources such as apocryphal gospels like the Gospel of Peter, and the Jesus Seminar's curious methodological attempts at 'democratic' scholarship, of which Crossan was a high profile proponent, were at the time regarded as subversive to the academic establishment. Crossan and the Seminar's Jesuses not only subverted the conventional wisdom of the first-century Mediterranean, but also the conventional wisdom of twentieth-century America. By making Jesus subversive, Jesus was once again made relevant.

Rebekka King has shown through anthropological research how North American progressive Christians frequently utilize the popular works of scholars like Crossan, Marcus Borg, Bart Ehrman, and the Jesus Seminar to construct alternative, non-normative Christian identities.³² An implicit parallel is established between the historical Jesus, who, it is emphasized, subverted elements of his first-century cultural and religious environment, and contemporary progressive Christians, whose identities are formed in opposition to culturally dominant Evangelical and fundamentalist forms of American Christianity. Despite the rhetoric of counter-culture, however, most progressive Christians are not radical insurrectionists' intent on overthrowing the shackles of parliamentary democracy. According to King, progressive Christians are concerned rather to 'interpret religious texts through three lenses: historical context, scientific empiricism, and liberal morality.'³³ In other words, their embodiment and experience of subversion is limited to possessing specialized knowledge of biblical criticism that enables them to reject traditional and/or dominant Christian understandings about, for example, the uniqueness of Christ or the role of women within early Christianity.

Despite its counter-cultural predisposition (not to mention the implicit Marxist influence) Crossan's major work on Jesus is nonetheless overwhelmingly influenced by liberal-capitalist assumptions. Such thinking is not unique to Crossan but rather reflects a wider set of assumptions about economic and moral agency in Anglo-American biblical scholarship. Part of this is simply a consequence of writing in the genre of historical biography which almost inevitably heightens the role of individual agency in generating cultural, political, and religious change. For example, in keeping with the basic tenets of neoliberal rationality, Jesus' homelessness is repeatedly framed as a *lifestyle choice*

32 Rebekka King, 'The Author, the Atheist, and the Academic Study of Religion: Bourdieu and the Reception of Biblical Criticism by Progressive Christians,' *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* 41, no. 1 (2012): pp. 14–20.

33 King, 'The Author, the Atheist, and the Academic Study of Religion,' p. 15.

rather than a consequence of, or retreat from, inhospitable social, economic, and political conditions.³⁴ He was not poor or destitute due to broader societal circumstances. Rather, inspired by God, he morally *chose* to identify with the destitute and downtrodden. This is an assumption that easily takes root within the middle-class and liberal mind-sets of North American progressive Christians, who are themselves not usually poor, but stress the importance of helping the less fortunate. The assumption is then read back into the biblical text. Jesus is in some sense regarded as separate from and economically superior to those among him and to whom he ministers.

We can also observe how Jesus' supposed marginality also becomes an important part of his individual exceptionalism in the work of John P. Meier, for example. Near the beginning of the first volume of *A Marginal Jew* Meier asserts that:

[t]o a certain degree, Jesus first marginalized himself. At the age of roughly thirty, Jesus was an ordinary carpenter in an ordinary hill town of lower Galilee, enjoying at least the minimum of economic necessities and social respectability required for a decent life. For whatever reason, he abandoned his livelihood and hometown, became "jobless" and itinerant in order to undertake a prophetic ministry, and not surprisingly met with disbelief and rejection when he returned to his hometown to teach in the synagogue.³⁵

Moreover, '[r]elying basically on the goodwill, support, and economic contributions of his followers, Jesus intentionally became marginal in the eyes of ordinary working Jews in Palestine, while remaining very much a Palestinian Jew himself'.³⁶ The phrase 'for whatever reason...' which begins Meier's description implies the actual reason for Jesus' abandonment of work and hometown is not as important as the fact that he himself *chose* to pursue it. The characterization of Jesus' supposedly intentional actions, however, are both premature and overstated. It reflects an implicit hermeneutical framework rooted in capitalist (and perhaps also theological) assumptions about the individual as an autonomous economic and moral agent divorced from broader social, political, and economic forces.

34 See further: Robert J. Myles, *The Homeless Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew*, Social World of Biblical Antiquity 2/10 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2014), pp. 9–10.

35 John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), p. 8.

36 Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, p. 8.

So too, the very first pages of Crossan's *The Historical Jesus* present a Jesus who co-opts aspects of poverty culture to progress an ethical programme undergirded by liberal values. The physical description of Jesus is that he 'looks like a beggar, yet his eyes lack the proper cringe, his voice the proper whine, his walk the proper shuffle'.³⁷ Crossan paraphrases Jesus' instructions to his disciples: 'Dress as I do, like a beggar, but do not beg'.³⁸ So for Crossan, Jesus is like a beggar, but not quite a beggar. While the kingdom Jesus proclaims is for the poor and destitute, Jesus only identifies as poor—he is effectively pretending. In spite of the extensive space in *The Historical Jesus* devoted to examining the social, political, and economic upheaval of first-century Palestine, of primary concern to Crossan is the symbolic meaning of Jesus' 'lifestyle choice' of poverty. Jesus' class position is reduced to a noble decision to identify with those who have been genuinely displaced and reduced to destitution. But it does not occur to Crossan that Jesus' 'beggar-like-appearance' might also be a by-product of these wider hostile social and economic forces, rather than a deliberate action of solidarity with those directly affected by the political turmoil of a peasant existence.

Crossan's framing of Jesus' poverty as a lifestyle choice partly stems from the desire to situate him and his followers against the background of Greco-Roman Cynics. The philosophical school of thought known as Cynicism had its own anti-society undercurrent and it is easy to see the appeal for those wanting to formulate alternative identities in opposition to a perceived societal mainstream. A fairly potent criticism of the Cynic-Jesus hypothesis, however, is that the Cynics' poverty was again a *chosen* way of life typically adopted by the educated elite, and not one they were necessarily born into, as were peasants.³⁹ Richard Horsley perceives that, in seizing on the Cynic hypothesis, '[l]iberal scholarly interpreters could...relish some of the pithy "countercultural" aphorisms of Jesus, while avoiding... "the hard hitting sayings"...which were safely pushed to the margins as having pertained only to the radical itinerants, and the judgmental prophetic sayings, which were dismissed as secondary'.⁴⁰

Even Crossan's account of Cynicism betrays this point: being a cynic involved 'practice and not just theory, life-style and not just mind-set in opposition to the cultural heart of Mediterranean civilization, a way of looking and dressing, of eating, living, and relating that announced its contempt for honor

37 Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, xi.

38 Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, xii.

39 Myles, *Homeless Jesus*, p. 9.

40 Richard A. Horsley, 'Why Bother with Biblical Studies?' in *Reading the Bible in an Age of Crisis*, ed. Bruce Worthington (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), p. 335.

and shame, for patronage and clientage'. As he puts it, Cynics 'were hippies in a world of Augustan yuppies'.⁴¹ Crossan, quoting Leif Vaage, repeatedly describes cynicism as a 'way of life': their uniform 'was a cloak, a wallet, a staff. Typically, their life included barefooted itinerancy viz. indigence, sleeping on the ground'. This sounds eerily familiar to a hipster-like Jesus—from a privileged socioeconomic background—co-opting aspects of poverty culture to bolster an alternative consumerist identification towards capital. Indeed, according to Jake Kinzey, '[t]he hipster was born in the era of globalization driven by free-market fanaticism; they represent the socio-economic realities around them'.⁴² Crossan's Jesus was birthed at a similar moment; much like the idealized middle-class individual, his alternative Jesus makes isolated economic and moral decisions in a way that corresponds quite neatly to the interpellated consumer of late capitalism.

The Quest for a Doubly-Subversive Jesus

Jesus held out the true, subversive wisdom, in opposition to the spurious conventional wisdom of his day. At the heart of that subversive wisdom was the call to his followers to take up the cross and follow him, to become his companions in the kingdom-story he was enacting.⁴³

Although N.T. Wright went to great lengths to distance himself from Crossan and the Jesus Seminar, even expressing the opinion that Crossan's *The Historical Jesus* was 'almost entirely wrong',⁴⁴ Wright nevertheless intensifies the extent of Jesus' subversiveness in his book *Jesus and the Victory of God*. In fact, Wright consistently heightens the rhetoric to extraordinary levels: his Jesus is described numerous times as 'profoundly subversive',⁴⁵ 'doubly subversive',⁴⁶ 'thoroughly subversive',⁴⁷ 'deeply subversive',⁴⁸ 'powerfully subver[sive]';⁴⁹ and

41 Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, p. 421.

42 Jake Kinzey, *The Sacred and the Profane: An Investigation of Hipsters* (London: Zero, 2012), p. 3.

43 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 564.

44 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 44.

45 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 235.

46 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, pp. 466, 594.

47 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 441.

48 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, pp. 278, 369, 565.

49 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 471.

even ‘multiply subversive’.⁵⁰ As mentioned above, a fetish represents a kind of totality in a single object; part of the condition of focusing on something so intently, we lose sight of the bigger picture. While it may or may not be the case that Jesus was in some sense acting subversively, it is not difficult to imagine scenarios which could be deemed *more* subversive (for instance, if Jesus had actually made explicit statements about toppling Rome). Even so, Wright repeatedly claims that Jesus was ‘as subversive as anything could be’ and that ‘nothing could have been more subversive than the apocalyptic message of the kingdom which Jesus articulated, and the invitation, welcome, challenge and summons which went along with it.’⁵¹ He continues:

This message subverted, of course, the normal power-structures of the world, the Herods, Pilates and Caiaphases of the day, and the Caesars who stood behind them. This is what all kingdom-announcements did, and do. It also subverted the kingdom-announcements of other alternative would-be prophets and messiahs.⁵²

To be sure, even when Wright’s Jesus acts in ways that on the surface appear unsubversive, Wright continues to underscore subversion as a potential secondary feature. For example, he contends Jesus intended his “mighty works” of healing to be understood symbolically as a fulfilment of...expectation. They were not simply socially or religiously subversive, though clearly they were that as well.⁵³ Wright’s determination to frame almost every aspect of Jesus’ life and mission as subversive, however, leads him down the path of a number of ideological conundrums, as we shall see below.

A theme around which subversion is prominent within *Jesus and the Victory of God* is that of Jesus’ relationship towards Judaism. For Wright, Jesus is subversive both because he is Jewish but also because he supposedly subverts Jewish expectations. For instance, Wright suggests that ‘Jesus made a regular practice of retelling the story of Israel in such a way as to subvert other tellings’. This subversive practice was nonetheless a ‘characteristically Jewish activity’.⁵⁴ James G. Crossley has pointed out that scholarly rhetoric

50 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 596.

51 By contrast, in Wright’s recent two-volume work on Paul, Paul is described as ‘sometimes subversive’ and he merely engages in ‘implicit subversion’ of Caesar and Rome. See: N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 4 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), pp. 909, 2260.

52 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 316.

53 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 429.

54 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 201.

around the construction of Jesus' Jewish identity subtly maintains the older myth of Christian superiority over against Judaism. As he observes, 'Jesus is frequently seen to be "Jewish" or "very Jewish" but noticeably *different from* his Jewish context... [and] as Wright put it about his own reconstruction: "a very Jewish Jesus who was nevertheless opposed to some high-profile features of first-century Judaism."⁵⁵ We can also discern that Wright's attempt to make Jesus' Jewishness 'doubly' subversive essentially fails in that his subversive actions and speech are, according to Wright's own description, already accounted for and contained within the Jewish cultural framework out of which he operates.

Elsewhere, Wright associates Jesus' so-called subversion of 'Israel's story' with the emotively-charged terms 'dangerous' and 'revolutionary'.⁵⁶ But a violent Jesus who brings not peace to the Earth, but a sword (Mt. 10.34) is obviously *not* the good-natured Christian Jesus Wright has in mind. And so, Wright tempers the extent to which his Jesus is politically radical. Fernando Bermejo-Rubio has noted that even among scholars who label Jesus a 'revolutionary', 'most deny that he was involved in some kind of subversive armed activity.'⁵⁷ The same holds true for Wright. And yet, he still asserts that while Jesus is not 'militantly revolutionary' he is "'doubly subversive" nonetheless'. He elaborates:

I have argued throughout that Jesus did not expect, or proclaim, the end of the space-time universe. Nor did he take the normal option of the military revolutionary. Nor, I have suggested, did he envisage the rebuilding of the Temple, whether by humans or by supernatural agency. Rather, he announced the end of the present evil age; the real, doubly subversive, revolution; and the reconstruction of the people of YHWH on a basis that would leave no future role for the Temple.⁵⁸

It appears that precisely because Jesus eludes the supposedly 'conventional' revolutionary option of taking up arms, this somehow makes him even more ('doubly') subversive and radical.⁵⁹

55 James G. Crossley, 'A "Very Jewish" Jesus: Perpetuating the Myth of Superiority,' *JSHJ* 11 (2013): p. 116.

56 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 229.

57 Fernando Bermejo-Rubio, 'Jesus and the Anti-Roman Resistance,' *JSHJ* 12, no. 1–2 (2014): p. 4.

58 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 594.

59 The title of Wright's forthcoming book, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus' Crucifixion* (HarperCollins), continues to utilize politically-laden vocabulary emptied of its substantive content.

What primarily matters for Wright's Jesus, it would seem, is the symbolic and internal revolution of the individual believer. The gospel Jesus proclaims is subversive because it promises to reconstruct the people of God on a basis that leaves no future role for the institution of the Temple.⁶⁰ Wright notes that although Jesus' kingdom-announcement did manage to subvert 'the blasphemous claims of Caesar, and the compromises of the present Temple hierarchy', he 'was not engaged in subversion against Rome, with world domination in view'.⁶¹ This statement might strike the cautious reader as somewhat disingenuous given the totalitarian project envisioned by, for example, the Great Commission in Mt. 28.20, which, among other texts, laid foundations for Christian imperialism.⁶² In fact, in his recent work on Paul, Wright even suggests that '[w]hen Paul said that Jesus was now in charge, he meant something much more dangerous and subversive. He meant, in some sense or other, that Caesar was not the world's ultimate ruler.'⁶³ One is left to wonder: is theocratic world domination not precisely what Wright's Jesus has in mind?

The Free-Market Fetish for a Subversive Jesus

[W]hether his [Crossan's] Jesus is Reagan-critical, or comfortably late capitalist, is worth debating.⁶⁴

Marxist critics often contend that a 'purely cultural subversion may be less politically subversive as it is an isolated occurrence or does not affect underlying economic hierarchies and distinctions.'⁶⁵ It is in this sense that gestural subversion is built into the very ideological fabric of late capitalist culture. Eagleton, for instance, observes that 'a lot of postmodernism is politically oppositional but economically complicit.'⁶⁶ Political opposition is already contained and subsumed within the limits of commodity culture. As noted

60 Although speculative, we might detect echoes here to the neoliberal reconstitution of society as a community of individuals in which the more centralized welfare-state of Keynesian economics is similarly banished to the periphery.

61 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 459.

62 See, for example, the discussion of the 'Dictatorship of God' in: Crossley, *Jesus and the Chaos of History*, pp. 64–95.

63 Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, p. 1590.

64 Clive Marsh, 'Quests of the Historical Jesus in New Historicist Perspective,' *Biblical Interpretation* 5, no. 4 (1997): p. 413.

65 Grindon, 'Subversion,' p. 868.

66 Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, p. 132.

above, subversion within academic discourse is itself implicated in a form of containment. This is because 'as it takes place within the university system it moves the language and debate of refusal, subversion and critique away from actual political struggles...[and into]...the plane of a meticulous but disengaged academic discussion.'⁶⁷

This article has been concerned with the broader political context surrounding the quest for a subversive historical Jesus. Despite an increase in the rhetoric of subversion, neither the 'doubly subversive' Jesus of Wright, nor the subversive liberal-hipster Jesus of Crossan, are politically radical—in fact, they obfuscate ideologies to do with class and political radicalism. These subversive Jesuses can be mapped as superficial points of resistance already contained within a broader totalizing yet implicit hermeneutical framework of late capitalist ideology. The fact these historical reconstructions are especially marketable among particular audiences is in large part due to their presumed contemporary relevance. As Crossley maintains, each historical reconstruction itself represents a mass marketable image—and historical Jesus scholars really do sell books to liberal and conservative audiences.⁶⁸ The fetish for a subversive Jesus bears witness to the hunger of a free-market system yearning for more and more markets abetted by the perpetual neoliberal drive for anything new.

Crossan's Jesus is popular among progressive Christians precisely because he transgresses some of the central, conventional aspects of American daily life (Evangelical Christianity, for instance) while simultaneously occupying the space of mainstream liberal culture, thereby legitimating certain social institutions that naturalize bourgeois identity. Part of the appeal of Crossan's Jesus is that he might very well promote subversive cultural ideas, but his Jesus also conveniently obscures the centrality of class antagonism by *choosing* to identify with the poor. Similarly, a complication for Wright is that, like Crossan, his subversive Jesus is eerily compatible with his primary market, in his case, Evangelical Christians mildly threatened by the influx of liberal and secular culture in contemporary Western society. Wright's Jesus is, it would appear, subversive in a reactionary way that disrupts the dominant culture by challenging the 'spurious conventional wisdom' of a perceived secular and/or liberal hegemony (expressed, for instance, through Evangelical resistance to same-sex relationships, and so on). Neither Crossan nor Wright's Jesuses actually incite violent insurrection against the political establishment, however.

67 Grindon, 'Subversion,' p. 869.

68 Crossley, *Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism*, pp. 85–98. See also: Marsh, 'Quests of the Historical Jesus in New Historicist Perspective,' pp. 422–426.

Rather, revolution is merely contained to the individual lifestyle and morality of the believer and his or her community.

Of course, Crossan and Wright are just the tip of the iceberg of a much larger fetish for subversion in both the neoliberal lives of Jesus and New Testament studies more generally. So long as the gestural aesthetic of subversion remains popular, and Jesus scholarship remains a profitable niche for academic publishers, the rhetorical quest for a subversive Jesus will likely continue. Given the constraints of the free-market, the pervasive influence of neoliberal rationality, and the dominance of Anglo-American voices in shaping academic Jesus research, however, even the subversive Jesus cannot quite break through the iron-clad chains of Capitalist Realism. For that we would need an actual revolution.

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