

**Race and Class**, April-June 2004, pp. 83-89.

**Is another renaissance possible?**

By E. G. Vallianatos

Following the defeat of the Persians in the early fifth century BCE, the Greeks formed a federation to keep their Persian enemies in check. Athens and Sparta, the strongest Greek states primarily responsible for the Greek victory over the Persians, did their best to see that Persia would no longer pose a threat to Greece. But Sparta soon withdrew from the Greeks' strategic alliance, with the result that Athens was left the indisputable leader of the Greek world. Athens had a naval force in the Aegean and the Mediterranean strong enough to guarantee the security of Greece. Athens' Greek allies simply paid Athens for their protection and safety. And Athens, under the leadership of Perikles, used that new treasure to rebuild Athens, in particular erecting the magnificent Parthenon and the other temples on the Acropolis.

But in the absence of a unified Hellas, the monopoly of Greek power by Athens had other consequences, one of which proved fatal to Greek liberty. Athens tried her own 'Athenaisation' project. She spread her products and hegemony everywhere. The fertile lands bordering the Black Sea became her granary. Her military might was felt all over Persia, the Greek states on the Ionian coast of Asia, those in Italy, Sicily, France, Spain and North Africa and in Greece proper. Promising students and intellectuals from all over the Greek world went to Athens to study and teach. Perikles was right: Athens was the school of Hellas.

Yet, with the ascendancy of Athenian influence and power and not a little arrogance on the part of Athens, there also arose jealousy, hatred, antagonisms, ideological warfare between Athens, her faithful or fearful allies and Sparta and her followers. The entire Greek world sided either with Athens or Sparta. Indeed, fifty years after the Greeks crippled the vast Persian Empire, they declared war against each other. Sparta, with most of the states of Peloponnesos joining her anti-Athenian coalition, decided in 431 BCE to humble Athens, thus launching the Greeks into the fatal Peloponnesian War. The Greeks, 2,500 years later, are still paying a humiliating price for that deadly confrontation.

### **Lessons of Greek history**

The first lesson of Greek history is for the Greeks: Athens made an unsuccessful bid to create one nation, one political Hellas. Sparta was left out of that experiment and she wrecked it. The tragedy is that the Greeks failed to realise a nation despite their discovery of political theory and practice of democracy, and, most tragic of all, despite their common culture. After all, all Greeks, no matter where they lived, spoke Greek, worshipped the same gods and had the same civilisation. The Peloponnesian War, their greatest civil strife, sapped their strength, corrupted their culture and diminished their courage to follow Aeschylus' advice that it is better to die on their feet than live on their knees. The result was that mainland Greece, about three centuries after the Peloponnesian War, became captive to Rome. The semi-barbarian pupil was now in charge of his Hellenic teacher. The

consequences were all unpleasant. The Greeks had to put up with Romans telling them what to do for centuries.

The protracted and merciless tyranny of Rome and, particularly, the systematic destruction of Greek culture by Rome's new state religion, Christianity, had bitter consequences for the Greek people and their civilisation. After all, becoming Christian was not taken lightly by the Hellenes or the Roman Christian rulers of the Hellenes. The first resisted fiercely, the latter used savage violence to 'convert' the Greeks into people marked by the loss of their identity and culture. Embarking on such a ferocious project dissolved any civilising pretence the Christians might have had, so they became barbarised. Ammianus Marcellinus, the great Greek historian who wrote with accuracy, passion and distinction on the political and military life of the Roman Empire in the years 354 to 378, said that, for the barbarians, might was always right. So, too, for the Christians. They plundered and smashed Greek temples and left virtually nothing standing or intact of the material culture of the Greek people -- statues, others work of art, theatres, stadia, schools, libraries and government buildings. They even brought northern European barbarians to Greece to assist the black-robed monks in their destruction. The Christians in the Roman Empire and Greece translated their hatred of Greek culture into laws and policies that extirpated even the name Hellene from the official records and the memory of the Greek people. For more than a millennium, those Greeks who survived the Christian onslaught dared not admit that they were Greek. They had become 'Christian Greeks' and described themselves as Romans.

Another lesson of Greek history speaks to the twenty-first century. The United States is playing the role of Athens in a world that is neither Greek nor American. The twenty-first century world is a child of the twentieth century, which, like the fourth century, was one of the most violent eras in human history. America was one of the two arbiters of the twentieth century, the other being Russia, now prostrated and angry at the loss of her empire and dignity, yet still a nuclear power.

Like Athens and Sparta, the US and Russia have dreamed of becoming masters of Europe. But one has always been on the periphery of Europe, and the other is thousands of miles distant. Their experts study Thoukydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, but fail to understand it. Thoukydides' genius is inimitable but his message is straightforward. The Peloponnesian War began over Sparta's fear of expanding Athenian power.

But what can Russia this giant country and civilisation learn from Thoukydides? In 1989, she gave up her empire and communist ideology (an offshoot of Christianity) but kept her bombs. Russia is trying to become like her arch-enemy, the US, but, instead, is evolving into a ruthless oligarchy verging on tyranny. Nevertheless, Russia resents America's hegemony no less than Sparta resented Athenian hegemony. And much of the rest of Europe resents America's one voice in world affairs.

This is particularly the case since September 11, 2001, when Islamist fanatics, converted American planes into giant bombs and killed thousands in New York and Washington, DC. In a vain effort to avenge her unknown Islamic enemies, now dubbed 'terrorists', the US lashed out violently against

Afghanistan and destroyed the fundamentalist Taliban regime that harboured the bombers. By September 2002, the US had promulgated a national security strategy according to which unprovoked 'pre-emptive' war was to be integral to US policy for maintaining its supremacy in world affairs.

Like the Roman Empire in its declining years in the late fourth century, the US does not obey international law when inconvenient to its imperial interests. Having equated global hegemony with its national security, the United States informed the world that Iraq, too, was a terrorist state. So, ignoring the United Nations efforts to disarm it without violence, the US invaded in March 2003, bombing Baghdad and other cities and forcing Iraq into the position of an American colony.

The UK is alone among European powers for the enthusiasm with which it follows the US in its aggressive global policy. Most go along with the United States, with varying degrees of commitment, because they have little choice, grumbling, however, at the hubris of the US peddling them its McDonald culture through that ingenious Americanisation project dubbed 'free trade'. But they also resent seeing the United States arrogating to itself the role of global policeman, behaving as the sole imperial state in charge of the planet.

The US cannot do in Europe what Athens could not do in Greece. To persist in telling the Europeans, for example, they have to eat hormone-loaded American beef and bio-engineered corn, or that they should have fought in Iraq on America's say-so, is to intensify the image of the ugly American in the European imagination. Is it conceivable that Russia could

ever be Europe's own Sparta? The European Union states (even without Russia) may also begin to think about – if not humbling – at least standing in their own strength apart from the North American giant. Plans, slow to come to fruition but nonetheless significant, are already being laid for a common European defence force outside American-dominated NATO. But any Peloponnesian War against the US in the distant future would have nothing to do with atomic bombs, but everything to do with competition, hatred, ideological confrontation and separation – expelling the US from Europe.

### **A partnership for ecopolitical security**

One imaginable alternative to America's fake globalisation project and imperious illusion of global dominance would be for the US and Europe (including Russia) to create a genuine partnership that would eclipse the military project of NATO. Such a move would be proof that civilisation still matters. What if those vast resources currently put to planning the slaughter and destruction could be put to peaceful use, to address Europe's and the US's social and ecological problems – and could go to solve the problems that fuel global terrorism?

Imagine an ecological and political alliance between North America and Europe that gave birth to a World Nature Organisation for the protection of the global environment. Imagine that nothing in international relations, including world trade, could take place if it caused ecological harm. That way, people would learn to respect nature as the very foundation of life on earth. Imagine such an organisation funding substantive programmes aimed

at reversing the environmental decline of the planet, particularly the warming of the earth, which threatens all species.

Such a task would be both daring and demanding because, as in Greece's golden age, the human effort of the twenty-first century must be to invent a new science and a new politics to solve human problems, but without destroying the world. Twentieth-century science and economic development (in the unitary capitalist models in use in the twenty-first century) are obsolete and dangerous because they have been tainted and moulded by the violence of the nuclear bomb fused with the rigidity of monotheism. For science itself has become another version of Christianity; even more violent, more absolute and – if it were not a contradiction in terms – more monotheistic.

Industrialised agriculture demonstrates the consequences for western culture of such an approach. With this mechanical agriculture, science has brought into being systems of death rather than life. The immense one-crop plantations are artificial deserts that devastate biological diversity. The poisons that farmers spray over them control insects, diseases and grasses only as an afterthought, because these toxins are primarily political. They enable landowners to be sole masters of huge plantations while, at the same time, emptying rural areas of small family farmers and peasants. They are toxic chemistry for the preservation of corporate political power in the world's countrysides, tainting crops with substances deleterious to both nature and people. Agriculture with poisons in mind is factory agriculture, an industrialisation of the very face of the earth.

Industrialised farming rivals global warming in its global effects, converting everything to a machine. In the US, for example, it has abolished rural America, turning it into a gigantic mechanised plantation. About 98 per cent of America's food contains some toxins. In the state of Georgia, for example, not one farmer grows peaches without poisons. Domesticated animals exist in high-tech factory environments that resemble sterile concentration camps. In such violent places, pigs, chicken and cattle are no longer animals but units of machinery. And this science-based agriculture is undoing food itself, scrambling the genetic stuff of corn and soybeans to bring all food and crops under the dominion of a handful of global corporations.

That is why we need to invent a new science that is tainted not so much with power but with ethics, ecology and civilisation. Aristoteles argued that cataclysms repeatedly reduce human societies to a point where it is necessary to search in the rubble to rediscover human culture. We are not yet the refugees of a global catastrophe, but we are headed in that direction; industrialised agriculture is the first step in that decline and fall. The invisible toxins of our industrialised culture are warming the planet, making it slowly and in the distant future unfit for life. Alaska's permafrost is thawing and massive chunks of ice are disintegrating in the Arctic.

It is probably impossible to stop the warming of the earth. But we can slow it down, diminishing its chronic cataclysmic effects by steadfastly eliminating and ending our onslaught on the planet. We are clever enough but not moral enough to avoid committing suicide. Yet there's a way out of our current killer policies: first of all, solar and other renewable energy

resources can replace oil, coal and nuclear power. Second, nuclear bombs and other weapons of mass destruction are useless, unusable without provoking a holocaust. These are truly the ultimate biocides and should be abolished. Third, family farmers and peasants are willing to and capable of raising all the food we need, as long as we dismantle the monstrous agribusiness plantations and animal factories. Expanding the variety of our food crops from the rich diversity of traditional agriculture will go a long way to improving our diet, and lessen the need to dam rivers for irrigation. Such a change of direction would give a new lease of life to millions of villages in the tropics while bringing back to rural Europe and America the culture, democracy and nutritious food of prosperous small family farmers and peasants.

### **A renaissance is possible**

Finally, out of these struggles to renew and preserve civilisation, it should be possible to bring back science to its original Greek sense of *episteme*, that is, knowledge that stands up in defence of the good in society and integrity in nature. Science for the Greeks satisfied and stimulated their curiosity, expressed piety for the gods and served the public purpose. Their gods, as part and parcel of a polytheistic cosmos, helped the Greeks relate cause and effect and bring into being science itself. Bringing science back to its Greek purpose, gives us a chance to build on the wisdom of traditional culture, merging the profound insights of that millennial human experience with the findings of ecology and other softer paths of science for understanding nature and society. In that way, a model of agriculture arising from the marriage of the old with the new may even have the seeds for a

new approach to nature and culture, giving birth to a new science, a renaissance.

And like the Arabic renaissance of the eighth to tenth centuries and the western renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, this necessary cultural rebirth in the twenty-first century must start with re-reading Thucydides and the Greeks. For the Greek texts that lighted the enthusiasm of Arab and European scholars for Greek wisdom can do the same now. The renaissance classicists, particularly those of Italy, turned to the Greeks in order to break out of the millennial dark ages. Now, in the twenty-first century, we are in the midst of another dark age of unimaginable violence. Our bombs alone can freeze the planet, deforming and extinguishing life, making this sole world of exquisite beauty in the cosmos, the Greeks' goddess Gaia, mother of all life, into a lifeless desert. We need the Greeks to help us undo this new technological barbarism that we dare call civilisation.

Civilisation has always been a delicate play between culture and nature. Reason and science helped the Greeks explain and understand the workings of nature and the cosmos. Their polytheism, their piety for the gods inspired and complemented their respect and veneration of the natural world; the gods, too, were the embodiment of all that was of value and good in Greek culture. Out of these materials, out of this balance, the Greeks created an exquisite civilisation, expressed in science, philosophy, literature, the theatre and democratic government in hundreds of poleis all over Greece and the Mediterranean. They practised their way of life for thousands of

years; piety for the gods restrained any hubris they might have entertained about their own importance.

It was that Greek model of reasoned life, tempered by piety, that triggered the renaissance effort to check the tyranny of Christianity - till the renaissance too, in the religious conflicts of the seventeenth century, was brought to a premature end.

The tyranny of the twenty-first century is not so much that of Christianity; the ugly forces of that religion have largely spent themselves out. The present and clear danger is that global factory ceaselessly producing industrialised culture, weapons of mass and unimaginable destruction and bio-engineered food. This sword of Damokles is hanging by a single thread.

Imagine.

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