Competition and Democracy in Burckhardt and Nietzsche

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In their highly influential studies of ancient Greece, both Jacob Burckhardt and Friedrich Nietzsche maintain that Greek life and culture centered on competition and conflict. Competition was institutionalized in a variety of contests for which the general term was *agon*. In this paper I want to frame their accounts of Greek life in the context of the German Graecophilia that can be traced back to the mid eighteenth century, showing how an idealized view of Greek civilization yielded in the course of the nineteenth century to a more sober, grim, and unappealing picture. For both Burckhardt and Nietzsche, the Greeks provided material for a harsh critique of modern democratic society. Sometimes the Greeks were said to anticipate the deplorable tendencies of modern society; sometimes they provided a foil and a counter-ideal to aspects of modernity. I shall survey what Burckhardt and Nietzsche have to say about competition in Greek culture, with two texts inevitably in the foreground – Burckhardt's *History of Greek Civilization* (published posthumously in 1898-1902) and Nietzsche's short essay of 1872, *Homer's Contest*. I want to argue that Nietzsche moved beyond his mentor Burckhardt in not only identifying the repugnant aspects of Greek society, but also, in his later writings, arguing that the very qualities that moderns find hardest to accept in the Greeks are potentially the most valuable for the alternatives he imagines to modern democracy. Finally I shall take Adam Smith as a spokesman for modern economic competition and discuss a passage in which Nietzsche criticizes such competition by the implicit standard of the Greek agon.

German Graecophilia

The early Enlightenment was still inclined to prefer the more polished Virgil to the often crude and inelegant Homer. The mid eighteenth century, however, saw a major shift in taste. Its principal instigator was Johann Joachim Winckelmann and his essay *Thoughts on the Imitation of the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks* (1755), which he followed with a monumental *History of the Art of Antiquity* (1764-7). Winckelmann redirected attention away from the Romans to the Greeks. In the Renaissance, despite excitement over the rediscovery of Greek manuscripts, it was chiefly the study of Latin that was reinvigorated. Winckelmann, however, argued that the Romans had little originality and owed the bulk of their cultural achievements to the Greeks. Under his influence, classical studies developed at German universities. Their leading figures included Christian Gottlob Heyne who ran his graduate seminar at Göttingen from 1763 to 1812, and over the same period directed the University Library, which by 1800 was the largest academic (as opposed to princely) library in the world, with 200,000 volumes; and Friedrich August Wolf, who defined classical philology as the study of the Greek spirit which was reflected in language, art, and political and social life. To know it, the student must not just master the language but also acquire twenty-four disciplines that informed us about the ancient world, beginning with grammar and textual criticism and going on to geography and mythology. The Greeks were not just studied but idealized. Famous examples include Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, Schiller's *Die Götter Griechenlands (The Gods of Greece)*, and Hölderlin's poems *Der Archipelagus (The Archipelago)* and *Brot und Wein* (*Bread and Wine*).

This neohumanist idealization had a lasting influence on nineteenth-century German culture. Appointed minister of education in Prussia in 1809, Wilhelm von Humboldt established the humanistic Gymnasium or secondary school, in which the study of antiquity was the essential tool in the shaping of modern citizens. The much-read *Greek History* (1857-67) by Ernst Curtius presents a sunny view of the Greeks and never mentions slavery. Richard Wagner idealizes ancient Greece in *The Art-Work of the Future* and *Art and Revolution* (both 1849), seeing it as an integrated society embodying cultural and moral perfection, based on the public performance of tragedy, and thus antithetical to the commercial, fragmented, and in Wagner's view Judaized society of nineteenth-century Europe. We find this idealization of the Greeks even in such a hard-headed individual as Karl Marx. He tries to explain the paradox whereby, though art is shaped by economy and society, the art of such a relatively primitive society as the Greeks has not been surpassed. His explanation is that the peoples of the ancient world were all children, mostly ill-bred or precocious children, but the Greeks were normal:

> There are ill-bred children and precocious children. Many of the ancient peoples belong to these categories. But the Greeks were normal children. The charm their art has for us does not stand in contradiction with the undeveloped stage of the social order from which it had sprung. It is much more the result of the latter, and inseparably connected with the circumstance that the unripe social conditions under which the art arose, and under which alone it could appear, can never return. (Marx, 1973, 137-138)

Earlier in the nineteenth century, however, a less rosy view of the Greeks was occasionally voiced. We find it in an utterance by the seventy-five-year-old Goethe, recorded in 1824 by his secretary Eckermann:

> Greek history offers little that is pleasing. Certainly, whenever this people opposes external enemies, it is great and glorious, but the fragmentation of the Greek states and the constant internecine warfare, where one Greek turns his weapons against another, is all the more unbearable. (Eckermann, 1999, 124)

Here Goethe criticizes the Greeks for the very tendency that we noted in the *Iliad* – the individualism that encouraged people to quarrel without concern for the good of their larger social unit, whether it was an army or a nation.

In the introduction to his book on Greek culture Burckhardt appeals to *The Economy of the Athenians* by August Böckh, who had taught him at Berlin, to support his view that the Greeks were much more unhappy than their latter-day admirers like to think. Early in his study of the Athenian economy, Böckh pays tribute to the spiritual legacy of the Greeks that has shaped subsequent generations, but insists that it is justified to examine also the Greeks' faults. A preoccupation with money inevitably leads to certain failings, and in the Greeks' case these failings ultimately ruined their civilization:

> Should the classicist conceal the fact that then, as now, everything under the sun was imperfect? Let us rather confess that many of the outstanding figures of antiquity suffered from the common faults of humanity; that in their passionate natures these faults emerged all the more powerfully and crudely, since their hearts received no pious influence from the mildness and humility of a gentle religion of which they felt no need; finally, that it was these faults, protected and indulged, that undermined and overthrew the magnificent edifice of antiquity (Böckh, 1817, 2).

Greek pessimism is a major theme whenever Burckhardt and Nietzsche write about the Greeks. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche quotes the myth that the satyr Silenus was caught by King Midas and forced to disclose his wisdom. His message, accompanied by a harsh laugh, was: 'The very best of all things is completely beyond your reach: not to have been born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best thing for you is – to meet an early death' (BT 3). Silenus gives the same message as Sophocles in the chorus of *Oedipus at Colonus*:

> Say what you will, the greatest boon is not to be;
> But, life begun, soonest to end is best,
> And to that bourne from which our way began
> Swiftly return. (Sophocles, 1947, 109)

Evidently this was a commonplace among the Greeks, for it can also be found in the fragments attributed to the sixth-century poet Theognis which were the subject of Nietzsche's earliest philological research (published in the *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* in 1867). Theognis writes:

> It is best of all for mortals not to be born and not to look upon the rays of the piercing sun, but once born it is best to pass the gates of Hades as quickly as possible and to lie under a large heap of earth. [And elsewhere:] One man is wretched this way, another that, and no one of all whom the sun looks down on is truly fortunate. (Theognis, 1999, 235, 197)

The Greeks' unhappiness was no doubt based partly on the hard conditions of material life. Burckhardt points out that Greek authors constantly lament human misery, the absence of virtue in the world, and the obligation to work which Zeus

imposed on humanity as a curse. He refers to the passage in the *Iliad* where Agamemnon says: 'we too must work hard ourselves: such is the heavy burden of hardship Zeus must have laid on us at our birth' (Homer, 1987, 152). Another early author, Hesiod, laments in his *Works and Days* that the gods have made it difficult for humanity simply to keep alive:

> For the gods keep the means of life concealed from human beings. Otherwise you would easily be able to work in just one day so as to have enough for a whole year even without working, and quickly you would store the rudders above the smoke, and the work of the cattle and of the hard-working mules would be ended (Hesiod, 2006, 91)..

Burckhardt and the Greek Agon

Both Burckhardt and Nietzsche quote a famous passage from Hesiod about the centrality of Eris, strife, in human existence, Hesiod says there are two goddess of strife, or Erides:

> […] upon the earth there are two Strifes. One of these a man would praise once he got to know it, but the other is blameworthy; and they have thoroughly opposed spirits. For the one fosters evil; war and conflict – cruel one, no mortal loves that one, but it is by necessity that they honor the oppressive Strife, by the plans of the immortals. But the other one gloomy Night bore first; and Cronus' high-throned son, who dwells in the aether, set it in the roots of the earth, and it is much better for men. It rouses even the helpless man to work. For a man who is not working but who looks at some other man, a rich one who is hastening to plow and plant and set his house in order, he envies him, one neighbor envying his neighbor who is hastening towards wealth: and this Strife is good for mortals. And potter is angry with potter, and builder with builder, and beggar begrudges beggar, and poet poet. (Hesiod, 2006, 87, 89)

We note that the good Eris is the elder sister; that even she is unattractive, being the daughter of Night, and it is only on close acquaintance that one appreciates her good effects. She represents a competitive drive that springs ultimately from material scarcity but helps to motivate all civilized achievements. It is heightened by envy and rage, but that is valuable because it impels people towards achievement. Nevertheless, Hesiod adds that the competitive drive needs to be tempered by justice: 'let us decide our quarrels right here with straight judgements, which come from Zeus, the best ones' (Hesiod, 2006, 89).

German Graecophilia of the late eighteenth century naturally shows awareness of competitive games, but gives them no particular emphasis. Thus Schiller's famous ballad *Die Kraniche des Ibycus (The Cranes of Ibycus)* begins with its protagonist travelling to the Isthmian Games:

> Zum Kampf der Wagen und Gesänge,
> Der auf Korinthus' Landesenge
> Der Griechen Stämme froh vereint,
> Zog Ibycus, der Götterfreund (Schiller, 1992, 91).

> To the contest of chariots and songs that on the Corinthian isthmus joyously unites the Greek tribes went Ibycus, the friend of the gods.

Apart, however, from enabling Schiller to insert the motif of Greek unity, the Games provide only a backdrop against which the murder of Ibycus can be revealed and punished with the maximum of publicity. Hölderlin in his elegy *Brot und Wein* mentions in passing the Olympic Games and chariot races, but to say anything more

about competition would have defeated his purpose of portraying ancient Greek culture as unified, in contrast to the fragmentation he discerned in his Germany.

In Burckhardt, the theme of competition is central. The positive value of strife, contest, and the agon is explored in Burckhardt's account of the earlier period of Greek history, which he calls the agonal age (roughly the sixth century BCE). He compares it to the European Middle Ages with their emphasis on chivalrous sports. It was the agon, the competitive search for glory in every prestigious activity, that enabled the Greeks to realize their potential and to develop as individuals. The agon was not fully developed in the heroic world depicted by Homer. On the island of Scheria the young men, at Alcinous' suggestion, compete in racing, jumping, wrestling, throwing the discus and boxing (*Odyssey,* Book VIII). Odysseus takes part in all these sports, except the foot race, and comes off the winner. But in Homer these games are an amusing diversion. In the agonal age, however, Burckhardt tells us:

> after the decline of heroic kingship all higher life among the Greeks, active as well as spiritual, took on the character of the agon. Here excellence (*arete*) and natural superiority were displayed, and victory in the agon, that is noble victory without enmity, appears to have been the ancient expression of the peaceful victory of an individual. Many different aspects of life came to bear the marks of this form of competitiveness. We see it in the conversations and round-songs of the guests in the symposium, in philosophy and legal procedure, down to cock- and quail-fighting or the gargantuan feats of eating (Burckhardt, 1998, 165-166).

Gymnastics, because they lent themselves so readily to competition, became central to education. The sons of freemen received their entire education from the teacher of gymnastics, apart from the instruction given by the lyre player and the grammarian. In some cities, the practice of gymnastics was a condition of citizenship.

Among all competitions, the most highly ranked was the chariot race, which was also dangerous and led to frequent injuries and deaths (like Formula One motor racing nowadays). Panhellenic games were founded, beginning with the Olympics in 776 BC, but with others such as the Pythian, Isthmian, and Nemean games. These occasions brought all the Greeks together and reduced enmity between tribes and countered the danger of fragmentation into mutually hostile city-states. These competitions produced great athletic celebrities such as the wrestler Polydamas, the boxer Eurythmus, Milon of Croton (six times victor in wrestling at the Olympic Games, six times at the Pythian), and the all-rounder Theagenes who excelled in every sport. Artistic agons were also held. We know that Hesiod was the victor in a poetry contest at Chalcis. Poetry developed under the influence of the agon. Performers on the lyre, the cithar and the flute were judged at every public appearance. Even philosophical oratory could be the subject of competition. Education was training for the agon.

Modern scholarship confirms that music and poetry were competitive activities. The Pythian Games included three kinds of musical competition and a painting competition. In Athens tragedies, comedies, and choral songs were performed in competition at the City Dionysia. Beauty contests, drinking contests, and even a wool-carding contest are also recorded (Hornblower and Spawforth, 1996, 41-42). Burckhardt's definition of the agonal age has been confirmed as an original and valid discovery by modern scholars (Momigliano, 1977; Murray, 2006).

Burckhardt acknowledges the dark side of the athletic career. Athletes, like modern tennis champions preparing for Wimbledon, had to focus their entire psychological energies on a brief contest which could bring them glory or humiliation.

> No true happiness could result from the concentration of the whole of life on a few seconds of terrible tension; the suspense must have meant anticlimax, or profound anxiety about the future, for those involved. In their lifetime enmity and envy were naturally their lot and could continue after death – hence the nocturnal whipping inflicted on the statue of the famous Theagenes (Burckhardt, 1998, 175).

The positive value of the agon, however, was that it channelled the aggressive energies of the Greeks into competitive sports. It was after the decline of the agon that the era of destructive wars began, culminating in the Peloponnesian War.

During his account of the agon, Burckhardt pauses to consider how much it differs from modern forms of competition. First, the agon was a public spectacle which the entire (male, free) population attended, whereas artistic performances are offered to a public which is free to attend or not. Thus power is transferred from the performer to the public. Competition for excellence may be encouraged among schoolboys, but only to a very limited degree, and, in contrast to ancient education, ours is narrowly focused on the acquisition of knowledge. In adult life, people do not seek recognition for their talents, but success in business. It is not the development of individual talents that matters, but the acquisition of a fortune (Burckhardt, 1998, 183-84).

Burckhardt associates the decline of the agon with the advent of democracy. The agon depended chiefly on the higher social classes, who now lost their power and often their wealth. The spirit of Athenian democracy, as Burckhardt describes it, was envious, mean-minded, and litigious. Wealth and pre-eminence were resented. He speaks of a ‘spirit of feverish litigation encouraged by idleness’, which ‘was aroused in many citizens by court proceedings, the glamour of public speaking and so on’

(Burckhardt, 1998, 229). Athletic pursuits now brought less prestige than oratory and rhetoric. The populace continued to enjoy spectacle, but rather than admiring outstanding achievements, they developed a cult of celebrity which was seen especially in the popular fascination with the playboy and soldier Alcibiades. Fame was now a matter of individual self-glorification: Burckhardt quotes examples of naïve self-praise by poets and artists.

In writing about Greece, Burckhardt also expresses his disapproval of modern democracy – something which, as we shall soon see, he had in common with Nietzsche. He spoke from his own experience. Switzerland shared in the disruption resulting from the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. In 1798, the revolutionary French government conquered Switzerland and imposed a new unified constitution. The new regime, known as the Helvetic Republic, was highly unpopular. It had been imposed by a foreign invading army and destroyed centuries of tradition, making Switzerland nothing more than a French satellite state. In 1803 Napoleon organised a meeting of the leading Swiss politicians from both sides in Paris. The result was the Act of Mediation which largely restored Swiss autonomy and introduced a Confederation of nineteen cantons. Relations among the cantons, however, were uneasy, especially between the more liberal, Protestant cantons, which were inspired by the July Revolution of 1830 in France, and the more conservative, Catholic cantons. In 1839, the appointment of the controversial German theologian David Strauss to the theological faculty of the University of Zürich by the liberal government provoked the ‘Züriputsch’, an attempt by the rural conservative population against the liberal rule of the city of Zürich. Two years later the radical regime in the canton of Aargau forced eight convents to close. The Catholic government of the canton of Lucerne responded by repealing the anti-Jesuit laws and

inviting the Jesuits to take over their schools again. This outraged the Protestant liberal cantons. 'In December 1844 and again in April 1845, brigades of volunteers from all over Switzerland, known as *Freischaren*, were organized for a march on Lucerne to bring pressure on the cantonal government.' (Gossman, 2000, 128-129).

Burckhardt wrote about these events in the *Basler Zeitung*, which he helped to edit in 1844-5, stressing the indissoluble link between freedom and respect for law. In private letters he was still more forthright in deploring popular liberalism and the power of the people, which he called a 'Brüllmasse' or roaring mob. Democratic freedom, he wrote, must lead eventually to the extinction of freedom by the despotism of the masses:

> The word freedom has a satisfying ring, but one only has a right to comment if one has seen with one's on eyes the slavery imposed by roaring mob called the 'people' and has lived through civil unrest as a suffering spectator. […] I know too much history to expect anything from this despotism of the masses except a future rule by violence (Burckhardt, 1949-94, II, 158).

This diatribe against crowds and their malign influence on politics links Burckhardt with such later writers as Hippolyte Taine, who denounced the behaviour of the crowd in his account of the French Revolution in *Les Origins de la France contemporise* (1875-93), and Gustave Le Bon, whose treatise on the crowd, *La Psychologie des foules* (1895), was read eagerly by both Freud and Mussolini (McClelland, 1989). They all saw modern mass society as a new and dangerous development, incompatible with orderly government by a recognized elite.

The Swiss Civil War (the *Sonderbundskrieg*) broke out in November 1847 when some of the Catholic cantons tried to set up a separate alliance. The war lasted

for less than a month, causing fewer than 100 casualties. The antagonism was not only religious but also economic. The conservative cantons, reliant on subsistence agriculture, wanted to retain as much autonomy as possible and forestall the development of Switzerland into a modern capitalist nation with banking and trade. Burckhardt looked on this development with the same forebodings as his friend and contemporary the great Swiss novelist Gottfried Keller did in the novel *Der grüne Heinrich* (1854). He came thoroughly to reject the 'ideas of 1830'.

During the agonal age, competition provided a precarious way of channelling violent energies into culturally valuable activity. After the agonal age, competition no longer served this function. Violence became naked and all-pervasive. Burckhardt, with the agitation of 1840s Switzerland in mind, paints a grim picture of Greek democracy, when Athens was full of sycophants who prosecuted people with the help of false witnesses and claques to shout down opposition; he compares it to the Reign of Terror in revolutionary France, and concludes that 'in Athens there must have been utterly depraved yet capable people in far greater numbers than could proportionately be found in any modern city' (Burckhardt, 1998, 303). Disagreeing with Ernst Curtius, who attributes such developments to inbreeding, Burckhardt puts the blame squarely on democracy: 'I believe that Athens herself ruined her own people by democratically conditioned freedom and its consequences' (Burckhardt, 1998, 291).

Nietzsche and Greek Cruelty

The aggressive energies of the Greeks are also prominent in the work of Nietzsche. Like Burckhardt, Nietzsche found analogies to modern social developments in his study of Greek history. His work on Theognis revealed the poet as the spokesman for

a declining aristocratic society who is constantly lamenting that the 'base' are getting the upper hand and marrying into the nobility. Nietzsche's reading of Theognis has been suggested as the origin of his concept of 'master morality', explored much later in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (Small, 2005, 113).

Nietzsche arrived in Basel in 1870 as a very youthful professor of Greek. He soon got to know Burckhardt well. He attended Burckhardt's lectures on the study of history in autumn 1870, as well as those on Greek civilization, which began in the winter term of 1872 and attracted an audience of 54 matriculated students (almost half the student body) along with several visitors from the town (Gossman, 2000, 303).

It has been a matter of controversy whether and how far Burckhardt influenced Nietzsche's ideas. The consensus has been that there was little or no such influence, and that Burckhardt at most encouraged Nietzsche to reject the state as such and to become a cosmopolitan 'good European' (Murray, 2006, 258). Recently, however, Martin Ruehl has argued persuasively that even if Burckhardt implanted no new ideas in Nietzsche's mind, 'Burckhardt's impact on Nietzsche's thinking […] in many ways radicalized his anti-democratic, anti-modern views' (Ruehl, 2004, 81).

Both writers agree that the state originates from violence. Burckhardt speaks of the violence required to found a *polis* – 'of the abandonment of the cultivated fields in a wide region, of the destruction or brutality inflicted on smaller inhabited places for the sake of the new settlement' (Burckhardt, 1998, 51) – a violence symbolized by legends of human sacrifice. Nietzsche has much to say about Greek violence and cruelty, especially in *The Greek State*. This text, originally part of an early draft version of *The Birth of Tragedy*, is a polemic against many aspects of modernity, particularly the concepts of human dignity and the dignity of labour; these, according to Nietzsche, serve simply to delude present-day workers that their labour has some

other purpose than mere survival. Modern workers are effectively, though not formally, slaves, and much worse off than medieval serfs. The Greeks knew, what we try to deny, that culture can only exist on the back of slavery – something Nietzsche also asserts, though as a brief aside, in *The Birth of Tragedy* (BT 18). The dominance of a cultivated elite over a labouring majority is secured by the state. The state in turn, the expression of humanity's natural instinct to form a society, can only be established through violence and the will of a conqueror:

> Here again we see the unfeeling rigidity with which nature, in order to arrive at society, forges for itself the cruel instrument of the state – namely that conqueror with the iron hand, who is merely the objectivation of the aforementioned instinct. (GSt, KSA 1.770)

This theme of Greek violence continues in *Homer's Contest*. Here Nietzsche describes the Greeks as 'the most humane people of ancient times' but also stresses their cruelty, their 'tiger-like pleasure in destruction' (HC, KSA 1.783). Sketching the general characteristics of Greek life, Burckhardt similarly emphasizes the Greek passion for revenge. An unconditional right to revenge is often asserted and even adduced as a motive before the courts. The Greeks had a 'passion for inflicting destruction on enemies or rivals' (Burckhardt, 1998, 80).

Nietzsche mentions in passing the extraordinary violence practised during the revolution in Corcyra, as Thucydides describes. It is worth recalling what happened. Corcyra was divided between an aristocratic and a popular party. The latter sided with Athens. The Athenians defeated the forces of the aristocratic party, took them prisoner, and kept them under arrest till they could be sent to Athens. The popular party in Corcyra, however, feared that on arriving in Athens the prisoners might not be executed, so by deception they managed to get the prisoners into their own power:

> When they had the prisoners in their hands the Corcyraeans shut them up in a large building, and afterwards took them out in batches of twenty at a time and made them pass between two lines of hoplites drawn up to form a lane along which the prisoners went bound together, and were beaten and stabbed by those between whom they passed when anyone saw a personal enemy among them (Thucydides, 1954, 257).

This brings out not only the cruelty but also the malice that Burckhardt and Nietzsche attribute to the Greeks.

In *Homer's Contest* Nietzsche quotes Hesiod on the twofold Eris, though he frames the poem in an account of how Pausanias found it engraved on weather-worn lead tablets; the historical distance separating Pausanias from Hesiod enables the poem to appear not only ancient even to the Greeks, but also as one of the foundational writings of their culture (HC, KSA 1.786). Nietzsche's argument is, in brief, that the Greeks deployed the good Eris (whom Nietzsche, perhaps using a different text, calls the younger one) as defence against the bad Eris. Or, as we might say, given the basic spirit of competitiveness, malice, and envy, they channelled these feelings into competitive sports and artistic contests and away from destructive internecine war. It saved them from falling back into what Nietzsche calls 'that pre-Homeric abyss of hideous savagery of hatred and pleasure in destruction' (HC, KSA 1.791). For this to work, however, it was necessary that no-one should emerge as the unchallengeable and supreme victor. There always had to be several champions who contended against each other. Nietzsche maintains that ostracism, or banishment, had the purpose of getting rid of anyone who made competition pointless by his excellence.

The contest or agon appealed to people's ambition and thus served to develop individuality. Although the object of competition was personal glory, this selfish passion had to be restrained within limits, and these limits were set by the good of the city. The Greek wished to excel, not for his personal satisfaction, but rather in order to contribute to the well-being of his city. Present-day educators, on the other hand, according to Nietzsche, are afraid to unleash individual ambition. This implies that the moderns differ from the Greeks for the worse in two ways: we lack a civic culture which gives meaning and purpose to the individual's life; and we fail to encourage the individual to excel. The Greek agon, however, struck a balance between the individual and the whole, which Nietzsche formulates succinctly in his notes: 'The contest unleashes the individual while simultaneously restraining him by eternal laws' (KSA 7.402).

Nietzsche's critiques of democracy

Nietzsche always uses the Greeks, with varying degrees of explicitness, as a foil for his critique of modern European society. If the Greeks were a set of competitive individuals, eagerly developing their personal gifts through contests, combaters and warfare, modern Europeans are a herd of conformists, lacking in individuality, hostile to any outstanding achievement, and anxious to lead comfortable, undemanding, conflict-free lives.

Nietzsche's critique of modern Europeans is often anchored to his reflections on democracy (Siemens, 2009). These fall into two groups. Those of his middle period, mainly published in *Human, All Too Human*, are largely critical, but do find the occasional good word to say for democracy. Those in his late works, mainly

Beyond Good and Evil and *On the Genealogy of Morals*, are less nuanced, more sweeping, and more consistently negative. The emphasis also shifts from political institutions to the democratic mentality.

In *Human, All Too Human* Nietzsche maintains explicitly that the growth of democracy is unstoppable (WS 275). It is a manifestation of the decline of the state, which itself goes hand in hand with the decline of religion. In the past, people believed that the political order was divinely appointed, and religious institutions co-operated with the state in sustaining this belief. Now that religion no longer commands belief, the state no longer inspires awe. The functions of the state are increasingly being usurped by private persons (Nietzsche explicitly refuses to say 'individuals', because modern people are so deficient in individuality), and eventually they will all be conducted by private enterprise (HH 472).

Nietzsche does not entirely deplore this process, for he maintains that as human beings are inventive, especially where their self-interest is concerned, they will presently devise a new form of organization better suited to their needs; but people of the present, unable to imagine what such an organization will look like, can only think of it with foreboding, and it is to be hoped that the state will remain in being for a good while longer. Democracy is at least a prophylactic measure against physical and intellectual enslavement (WS 275) and a safeguard against tyranny, hence useful though extremely boring (WS 289). Although it is dull and grey, that may just indicate that the workers building the great edifice of democracy can't avoid getting their clothes covered with dust (WS 275). Here Nietzsche seems to be implying that democracy is going through a transitional phase, and when its construction is complete, it may become more interesting.

Imagining possible futures, Nietzsche maintains that governments, by giving the people new rights in order to prevent them from succumbing to socialism, will thereby ensure the victory of democracy (WS 292). The people will become omnipotent, and will then regard socialism as a mere passing danger. Once in power, the people will destroy the propertied classes by means of progressive taxation, and will create a European league of nations in which the nations will be reduced to the status that the cantons have in Switzerland. As democracy is keen on innovation and hostile to tradition, it will employ future diplomats to redraw the map of Europe with reference only to immediate practical considerations and none to historical memory.

The only factor that can delay the progress of democracy is war. Nietzsche notes (WS 281) that democracy seeks to hollow out the power of kings and emperors, making them like zero. Just as zero, added to a number, multiplies it, so kings and emperors serve to increase the power of democracy, though they in themselves are mere figureheads. However, kings try to retain their power by means of war, which requires them to be warlords ('Kriegsfürsten'). War requires real, not just nominal leadership, and in wartime the march of democracy pauses. So there is a potential conflict between democracy and war, and this motif will be developed in Nietzsche's later writings.

In the later texts we find a more broad-brush critique of democracy. Democracy is usually referred to not as a set of political institutions or ideas, but as a 'taste' or a 'prejudice' – one might say, a mentality. Nietzsche speaks of 'our democratic inclinations and basic taste' (BGE 239), about 'the soft and spoiled taste of a democratic century' (BGE 210), and the modern world's 'democratic prejudice' (GM I 4). Democracy is so much part of the modern mentality that it colours modern science: the supposedly immutable laws of physics just express the democratic

instincts of the modern soul which wants equality before the law (BGE 22). In this demand for equality, democracy seeks to level down. Its advocates are '*levellers,* loquacious scribbling slaves of the democratic taste and its 'modern ideas'' (BGE 44). In seeking to make people homogeneous, democracy is the heir of Christian morality (BGE 202), which sought to apply the same standard to eagles and lambs (GM I 13). It is a symptom of declining life, as are the religion of compassion, the feminist movement, and the attempt to substitute arbitration for war. In biological language, democracy helps to make modern humanity into a herd animal. Its inhabitants are conformist, cowardly, unmanly, comfort-loving, and spiritless. Individuality survives only among the few 'free spirits' whom the herd has not destroyed.

One reason why Nietzsche's later critique of democracy is broader and less sharply focused is that Nietzsche now places his critique within a larger framework. He is concerned not only about the present and future of Europe, but about the prospects for the human race. His arguments presuppose a concept of evolution, though not the Darwinian one. Gregory Moore has argued that Nietzsche shared the widespread German belief in the development of species, going back to early nineteenth-century *Naturphilosophie* and underpinned by Hegel, of which Darwinism seemed to be another, relatively unconvincing version (Moore, 2002, 27). Against this background, Nietzsche worries that modern democracy foreshadows the terminal decline of humankind as a whole, 'this degeneration and diminution of man into a perfect herd animal' (BGE 203).

But such a future, though disturbingly possible, is not inevitable. Nietzsche also speculates about a historical irony in which democracy will unwittingly pave the way for tyranny: 'the democratization of Europe is at the same time an involuntary contrivance for the breeding of *tyrants* – understanding the word in every sense, even

the most spiritual' (BGE 242). By reducing the bulk of humanity to an obedient herd, the advocates of democracy will have made it easy for a new breed of tyrants to subjugate them. These tyrants will renounce compassion for the individual in order to benefit the human race as a whole. They will thus elevate the human type in a manner which has only ever been achieved by aristocracies (BGE 257).

We must not try to make too concrete the hints about the future that Nietzsche throws out in his later writings. Otherwise we risk getting into futile debates about whether Nietzsche anticipates fascism (Golomb and Wistrich, 2002). Such readings are inevitably selective and at best simplistic and reductive. My point is that in these imaginative visions, certain motifs survive from his earlier discussions of Greek civilization. Prominent among them are tyranny, war, antagonism, and cruelty.

The word 'tyrant' deserves attention, for it creates a link with the ancient world. It was used for the kingships set up by usurpers in many Greek states in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE, and for later dictators such as Dionysius of Syracuse. Not all tyrants were bad; the word owes its negative connotations to Plato – who hoped vainly to act as philosophical adviser to Dionysius – and Aristotle (Hornblower and Spawforth, 1996, 1518). Nietzsche says that the ancient tyrants, who emerged in periods of moral and political decline, were the first individuals:

> […] when 'morals decay', those beings first appear who are called tyrants: they are the precursors and as it were the precocious first growths of *individuals*. A little while longer, and this frit of fruits hangs ripe and yellow on the tree of a nation – and it was only for the sae of these fruits that this tree existed! If decay has reached its height, along with the conflict of all kinds of tyrant, there always comes the Caesar, the final tyrant, who puts an end to the exhausted struggle for sole dominance by letting exhaustion work in his favour (GS 23).

This is another way in which the ancient world promoted the individual: by making it possible for him to rise to supreme power by developing his political talents to the full.

When the later Nietzsche thinks about the future, a frequent motif is war. War is antithetical to the tame, unadventurous life of modern Europe's domesticated animals. Nietzsche surmises that he and his contemporaries have entered the classic age of war, inaugurated by Napoleon, in which virile men will regain their mastery over merchants and philistines (GS 362; CW 11). Zarathustra notoriously proclaims war as an end in itself: 'I say to you: it is the good war that hallows every cause' (Z I War).

Besides praising war, the late Nietzsche also asserts the value of antagonism, and of an agonistic approach to experience. The peace of the soul, so much lauded by Christianity, is mere bovine passivity and self-congratulation – 'ruminant morality and the luxuriant happiness of a good conscience' (TI Morality 3). Enemies are valuable; enmity heightens the quality of one's life: 'Renouncing war means renouncing *great* life' (TI Morality 3). Nietzsche makes clear that he is not talking just about physical combat. Intellectual antagonism is valuable in politics: each party realizes that it needs its antagonist in order to sustain its own strength. Conflict can also be internal: it is valuable to contend with the 'enemy within', with contradictory aspects of one's own nature. 'One is *fruitful* only at the price of being rich in opposites; one stays *young* only on condition that the soul does not have a stretch and desire peace' (TI Morality 3).

The aristocrats of the future will be devoid of Christian compassion. Nietzsche associates cruelty with the height of Greek civilization. In the notorious passage from

On the Genealogy of Morals about the 'blond beast' his examples of such savagery include the Roman, Arabic, Germanic and Japanese nobility, along with Scandinavian Vikings and Homeric heroes; and a moment later he finds traces of this savagery in Periclean Athens. He quotes Pericles as saying in his funeral oration (reported by Thucydides): 'wherever our boldness has given us access to land and sea, we have established everlasting monuments of good *and wickedness*' (GM I 11) But the Greeks, Nietzsche has also argued, transformed or channelled their aggression into civilized activities. His notes for *Homer's Contest* give some examples under the heading '*How the Greeks' nature manages to make use of all* ***frightful*** *qualities*' (KSA 7.399). The first example given there is the transformation of their tiger-like destructiveness into the agon. Following through the implications of Nietzsche's later writings, we may imagine that the aristocrats of the future will practise cruelty not for its own sake but to save humanity from degeneration. To this end they will cast aside Christian compassion and impose suffering on themselves and others. 'The discipline of suffering, *great* suffering – don't you know that this discipline *alone* has created all human greatness to date?' (BGE 225).

In sum: Nietzsche in his earlier writings rejected the idealization of the Greeks in favour of a much more disillusioned account; but he also argued that the qualities that seem most repellent to modern people were actually prerequisites for the civilization that we admire so much. Now, giving a hostile analysis of modern civilization and imagining possible future alternatives, Nietzsche returns to the seemingly repellent qualities of the Greeks, and imagines the productive role these qualities may play in saving humankind from the danger of degeneration.

Nietzsche, Adam Smith, and commercial competition

Nietzsche, as well as Burckhardt, considers modern economic competition as wholly different from the agon. The classic account of economic competition comes from Adam Smith. For Smith, competition in commerce is not so much a good in itself, as an inevitable part of the operation of the market. He does not so much praise competition as deplore the monopolies which constantly try to interfere with the functioning of the market. Monopolies take many forms. Merchants readily combine together in order to keep prices high. They press governments to restrict foreign trade and thus give a monopoly to businessmen in their own country. The misguided philosophy of mercantilism, which maintains that a nation should seek to maximize its exports and minimize its imports, has misled governments into thinking 'that their interest consisted in beggaring all their neighbours' (Smith, 1976, 493). Instead, international trade should be unrestricted by protective tariffs. Merchants clearly understand their own interest, but not the public interest. 'The interest of the dealers, however, in any particular branch of trade or manufactures, is always in some respects different from, and even opposite to, that of the publick. To widen the market and to narrow the competition, is always the interest of the dealers' (Smith, 1976, 267).

Moreover, in Smith's work economic competition is founded, not on mutual antagonism or on fundamentally opposed interests, but on the ultimate harmony of a complex and interconnected society. The market is a system of equilibrium which Smith imagined on the model of the Newtonian universe. Just as the dynamic forces of the physical universe hold each other in check, so the forces of supply and demand produce fluctuations around a 'natural price [which] is, as it were, the central price, to which the prices of all commodities are continually gravitating' (Smith, 1976, 75). This harmony obtains also at the level of human interaction. Commerce is an

extension of the sociability which eighteenth-century thinkers from Shaftesbury onwards saw as an essential aspect of human nature. Smith attributes the division of labour to a 'propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another' which is distinctively human (Smith, 1976, 25). Animals may be independent, but human beings constantly need help from one another, and since their natural benevolence is limited, it has to be supplemented by their self-interest. The division of labour is essential to the working of even a slightly complex society. It makes us all interdependent. Insofar as it leads to the distinction of ranks in society, it simply masks our common humanity: the difference between 'a philosopher and a common street porter, for example, seems to arise not so much from nature, as from habit, custom, and education' (Smith, 1976, 28-19).

While Smith's analysis of modern society reveals the interconnections which are invisible to the superficial observer, Nietzsche praises ancient Greek society in part because the polis was small enough to offer a visible object of loyalty. The impersonality of modern society is part of the critique of modern commercial competition that Nietzsche puts forward in WS 280. Here Nietzsche indicates that he is talking about an essentially different kind of competition from the agon by using not the word 'Wettkampf', but the *Fremdwort* 'Konkurrenz':

> Competition in work and among vendors makes the public into the judge over craft products. But the public lacks expert knowledge and judges by the *appearance* of quality. Under the rule of competition, therefore, the art of appearances (and perhaps taste) will grow, while the quality of all products must deteriorate. Hence, provided reason does not lose its value, competition must at some time cease and be defeated by a new principle. Only the master craftsman should judge craft, and the public should rely on its faith in the expert judge and his honesty. So there should be no anonymous work! At the very least an expert should be present as guarantor and offer *his* name as a token,

> if the name of the producer is absent or obscure. For the layman, the *cheapness* of a piece of work is another kind of deceitful appearance, since only *durability* can determine the real price of an article; but it is hard to assess durability, and, for the layman, impossible (WS 280).

Nietzsche complains that when producers compete with each other in order to market their products, the choice is left to the public. (This recalls Burckhardt's remark that modern society transfers power from the performer to the public.) But members of the public are not craftsmen and do not know how to judge the real merit of craft products. The public is taken in by appearances, and therefore goods must inevitably acquire an attractive appearance while their real quality declines. One ought to attend not to the appearance of a product, but to its durability, something which the casual observer cannot judge. This process is made yet worse by machine production, for machinery is better than a human craftsman in producing goods which attract the eye and are cheap.

Authority, in Nietzsche's view, ought to be taken away from the purchaser and restored to the producer. The craftsman, who can best judge the quality of his work, ought to tell the public which goods are the most valuable. Products should not be offered anonymously, but always bear the name of their producer, and be judged in accordance with his reputation. This would also be competition, but of a different kind. Instead of the impersonal and anonymous competition, in which purchasers are invited to choose between goods on the basis of their price and appearance, the producer of the goods would either come forward in person, or be represented by an acknowledged expert. In either case, the public would be told on expert authority what to buy. Not the product, but the producer, would be judged. The competition would have taken place beforehand, in the sense that the producer would have proved

himself better than his rivals. The successful producer would thus be the victor in an agon.

Nietzsche's argument here is already anachronistic, since it refers primarily to the products of individual craftsmanship, which must be an increasingly marginal part of the economy once manufacturing is dominated by machinery. But it shows once again how Greek institutions – in this case, the agon – are present to Nietzsche's mind when he criticizes their modern counterparts.

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