

ON THE PROBLEM OF THE «GREEK WONDER»

In the review of the IInd Scientific Conference on the *Problems of Ancient Greek Philosophy* («Aristotle Readings»), which took place in September 1981 in the Greek city of Tsalka in the Georgian SSR, the following in particular was noted: the Athenian state (the free population of which comprised about two hundred thousand people) «within a period of one century (the Vth Century BC) gave humanity such eternal «fellow travelers» of its history and culture as Socrates, Plato, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes, Phidias and Thucydides, Themistocles, Pericles and Xenophon». This phenomenon, termed the «Greek wonder», is still waiting for its «explanation» today¹.

The Russian scientist A. I. Zaytsev in his book *The Cultural Revolution in Ancient Greece of the VIIIth-Vth Centuries BC*, 1985, tried to answer the question posed, which researchers in the XIXth century had glossed over with a «fleeting reference» to the giftedness of the ancient Greeks.

According to Zaytsev's concept, the «general reason» for the radical shifts in the Greeks' history, which permit us to speak of a «Greek wonder», was the «expanding availability of iron and the social upheaval associated with it»². A. I. Zaytsev also makes reference to F. Engels, who characterized iron as the «last and most important of all forms of raw material, which played a revolutionary role in history – right up to the appearance of the potato»³. Incontestably, the smelting of iron and the growing of potatoes have played and continue to play a big role in the economic life of the peoples of the world. However, the «explosion of intellectual energy» in Greece in the VIth-Vth centuries BC is impossible to explain by the «spread of iron», just as you cannot explain the appearance of Marxism by potato consumption.

A.I. Zaytsev put himself in a difficult position when he excluded from his study such a key concept, in our view, as national character due fact that this concept itself needed explaining⁴. Moreover, contesting the hypothesis about the national («racial and genetic») giftedness of the ancient Greeks, the author came to the conclusion that their giftedness was purely a result of favorable social conditions⁵ and, especially, the establishment of a democratic regime⁶.

1. V. DRACH, O.N. SOKOLOVA, *Aristotle Readings, Questions of Philosophy*, 8, 1982, p. 155.

2. A. I. ZAYTSEV, *The Cultural Revolution*, *op. cit.*, p. 204; cf. also pp. 24-26.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

4. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 7.

5. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 124

6. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 27, 36, 38.



However, the complexity of the problem rests in the fact that these favorable social conditions, including democracy, were not created in spite of the will and consciousness of the ancient Greeks and out of the context of their national character and their active goal-oriented activity. Otherwise there would be no problem.

History is created by people themselves. However, they do not make history by whim, but only by conforming to the circumstances that have arisen and their own capabilities. In other words, the historical process is not predetermined by the capricious intentions and desires of people, although it cannot be said that the intentions and desires of people (and even the whims of those in power) play no role in history. However, in precisely the same way, it is not possible to assume that the historical process is governed by fate, i.e. is predetermined by the material (including geographical) conditions of people's lives, their genetic disposition or the social and political orders that have formed, although it is hardly possible to contest the influence of these factors on the fates of peoples.

History is manifold; it has different possibilities and tendencies. Moreover, man himself has an internal autonomy, a free will, relative independence from surrounding conditions. Man is free in his choice of value orientations and forms of activity within the framework of the given historical circumstances. This is the source of the responsibility that a man, and people in general, bears for the choice made. Therefore, in the historical process, there is no whim or doom. A man's way of acting is neither like the behavior of the gods of Olympus, who often acted on caprice (as they randomly chose), nor like that of animals, and even more so, not like the law of falling rocks and physical bodies in general.

The historical fates of peoples are determined, when other conditions are equal, by the variety of national characters, each of which is the result of biological inheritance, traditions and preferences formed, accumulated historical experience and upbringing. Thus, while being a product of the unique historical path traversed by a nation, national character is at the same time the result of inheritance, the transfer of natural characteristics that distinguish (just like acquired historical experience) the mindset of one nation from another. Put more simply, national character (specifics of the mindset) is a social and biological phenomenon, a product of inheriting genetic traits and upbringing, of culture in the broad sense of the word.

Each nation is distinct only in the combination and interrelationship of temperament, way of thinking and worldview that is inherent in it alone. The value of any nation as a biological and social community of human beings and a cultural phenomenon consists of the unique nature of the nation's internal world, the stability of its mindset, which organizes the information it receives in a specific fashion. And, if the task is to discover the reasons of the «Greek wonder», then it is clear that we cannot successfully do so without establishing

the distinguishing traits of the ancient Greeks', and, above all, the Athenians', national character. Moreover, A. I. Zaytsev himself, counter to his concept, adduces facts (the life-affirming attitude of the Greeks, their competitive spirit, and their heightened sensitivity to approval or censure of their deeds by those around them, etc.), that are actually national character traits as «prerequisite conditions».

In all of human history, it would seem, there has never been a people with a more competitive (polemical) spirit in the name of seeking glory than the ancient Greeks: competitiveness permeated almost all areas of their life and activity, whether it was the public discussion of laws or the Olympic Games, theatrical productions or court hearings. Even the Greeks' gods competed. Moreover, according to Greek mythology, the observable world order arose as a result of Zeus' victory over Cronus and then over the Titans. In honor of this glorious victory, the immortal Zeus commanded that mortal men be made to compete on Olympus as a sign of worship for the gods and their abode on Mount Olympus. This competitive orientation is also clearly denoted in the Homeric epos, in the tribal period of Greek history: «always to be first and superior to others» we read in Homer's *Iliad*⁷. It is well-known that the ambitious Themistocles could not sleep because of Miltiades' glory⁸. The philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus, who proclaimed struggle to be the source of everything that happens, said that «the best people prefer one thing to all else: eternal glory to perishable things»⁹. His fellow citizen Herostratus, consumed with desire for fame, burnt down the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus (one of the Seven Wonders of the World).

The Greeks' pursuit of glory and the achievement of immortality in the memories of generations was one of the bright emanations of their acute feeling of the «brevity» of human life and their uncontrollable desire to overcome death. This is the source of the Hellenes' heightened sense of history, their tendency to immortalize the temporary, to extract (you could say save) people and their acts from the inescapable flow of time. Herodotus, the «Father of History», begins his work with the thought «... in order that, with the passing of time, past events not be forgotten, and not just the Hellenes, but the barbarians' great deeds worthy of remembrance not become unknown...». Plato disclosed the deepest (anthropological, ontological) roots of the Hellenes' obsession with achieving «immortal glory». He places these words in the mouth of the Mantinean woman Diotima: «Immortality – that's what they [the people], thirst for»¹⁰. In other words, the cult of glory and the uncontrollable desire to preserve

7. Z', 203.

8. Cf. PLUTARCH, *Lives, Themistocles*, III.

9. DIELS - KRANZ, 22 B29.

10. PLATO, *Symposium*, 208 c.

one's name (ὄνομα) in the memory of generations were, for the Greek, that elevated (spiritual) way of life that was not subject to the law of death.

For the ancient Greeks, a glorious name (ὄνομα καὶ κλέος, μέγα ὄνομα) was neither perishable nor ephemeral; it was valuable (more precisely, invaluable) of itself, it could not be bought or sold; a glorious name surpassed any material reward. According to legend, when Thales of Milet was asked what reward he wished for his great mathematical discovery, he responded that the greatest reward for him would be the preservation in the memory of the generations of precisely his name, and no one else's, as the author of this discovery. The priority valued by Thales testifies to the fact that, for the Greeks, spiritual, moral and intellectual pursuits were of greater importance than material ones. Speaking of wisdom (σοφία) as knowledge and the speculative understanding of things that are sublime in nature, and about reasonableness (φρόνησις) as the ability to understand the matters of life and derive benefit from them, Aristotle notes: «... Anaxagoras and Thales, and those like them, are acknowledged as being wise, but not reasonable, since it is obvious that they do not know their own benefit»¹¹. The wise, continues Aristotle, know about exceptional objects worthy of astonishment, which are complex and divine, but all the same useless, for «they do not explore human benefit». When translated into modern language, this statement means that wise researchers are those whose scientific discoveries, usually useless from a practical point of view, are aimed at satisfying their theoretical interest and intellectual needs and are, so to speak, disinterested mental games. Thus, if we can believe the ancient authors, Thales, who discovered the theorem that in every isosceles triangle the angles at the base are equal, and Pythagoras, who proved the theory that bears his name, were considered wise. It is true that Pythagoras considered god to be wise and himself to be only a lover of wisdom and one who was drawn to wisdom (a «philosopher»).

Modern man, with his orientation to the practical use of knowledge gained (not speaking of ideology, according to which the useless has no right to exist), it is very difficult to understand the ancient Greek, who valued knowledge for the sake of knowledge and truth for the sake of truth. Meanwhile, one of the psychological prerequisites of fundamental discoveries and creative achievements in general is a selfless love for truth and an attraction to wisdom, speaking in the spirit of the ancient philosophers. The ancient Egyptians knew Pythagoras' Theory as empirical knowledge, but it was only Pythagoras who proved theoretically that in a rectangular triangle the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides.

Thales and Pythagoras were among the first to operate not only with facts and

11. *Nicomachean Ethics*, H', 1141 b 3-8.

experimental information, but also with concepts and categories – i.e. to think theoretically. The transition from empirical concepts to conceptually substantiated knowledge marked the discovery of science as a new form of intellectual pursuit. It is indisputable that the spirit of competition and the pursuit of glory, characteristic of the ancient Greeks, demanded a great exertion of spiritual and physical strength, thus fostering the achievement of many outstanding results in various realms of life and culture. However, many things should be approached dialectically – by seeing, so to speak, both sides of one and the same phenomenon. For example, patience in itself is a positive character trait, which cannot be said about long-suffering. The ancient Greeks were wise, calling upon us to observe «measure in all things». (It is said that the apophthegm μηδὲν ἄγαν was chiseled on a column at the entry to Apollo's Temple in Delphi). But they themselves very seldom followed this rational rule, manifesting in doing so much character traits as an excessive provocation for rivalry, extreme ambition and a thirst for glory.

When reading ancient Greek historians, and especially Thucydides, it is difficult to rid oneself of the impression that the life of the ancient Greek city-states was a fierce battle between parties, which at times reached the point of open violence, and almost unending discord and wars between the city-states, each of which valued its own independence higher than common Greek interests. Unlike the ancient Romans, the ancient Greeks were a people of a civil community, but not of a state in the pure sense of this word. In any case, the Greeks were not successful in uniting in any form of state, federative or confederative, speaking in modern terms. And it is a totally astounding fact in the history of the ancient Greeks that this most talented of peoples cold-bloodedly annihilated itself precisely due to this rivalry of parties and states. This competitive spirit, which stimulated an energetic activity and creative quest, was not just a constructive force, but a destructive one as well. The ill-fated Peloponnesian War, which turned out, according to the prophetic words of Thucydides, to be a great calamity for all Hellenes, is a brilliant example of this. Speaking in the spirit of the historian Herodian, the age-old disease of the Greeks – their «love» for discord – ruined ancient Hellas.

At last, we should note that ambitious and self-seeking demagogues (populists, as we would say today) appeared more frequently in the political arena of the Greek city-states than statesmen like Aristides or Pericles. Aristides was guided in his activities «not by an aspiration for popularity and glory, but by the good of the State»¹². Pericles on the other hand «did not indulge the citizenry, but could, based on his authority, vehemently object to them... Not a single one of Pericles' successors stands out as a statesman among

12. PLUTARCH, *op. cit.*

the others, but each of them aspired to be first, and therefore was prepared to indulge the people and even sacrifice state interests»¹³.

«Competition in speeches», to use Plato's words, the struggle of opinions and the freedom to criticize and, in particular, dialectics as the art of proving and refuting any thesis, was the ideological and spiritual atmosphere in which Greek philosophy and science were born. The ancient Hebrew historian Flavius Josephus¹⁴, who saw only a destabilizing factor in the Greeks' eternal disputes, noted that the Greeks did not acknowledge any authorities and did not respect the precepts of their ancestors and the covenants of old. If we bear in mind the broad layers of the *demos*, then Flavius Josephus is hardly right, ascribing the nihilism of the ancient Greek intellectuals to all Greeks; nevertheless he was right when he spoke of the passion of the Greeks for dispute as a trait of their character, as well as the absence of indisputable authorities for them – even that of Homer himself, on whose works all of Hellas was brought up.

It is well known that Xenophanes of Colophon spoke harshly of Homer because he ascribed all human foibles and even vices to the gods, and Heraclitus of Ephesus even demanded that the performers of Homer's verses be «punished». The Sophists found a contradiction in the *Iliad*, which begins with the words «Wrath, o goddess, sing the song of Achilles...»: If Homer respected the goddess, then he would not have addressed her in the imperative.

Dialectics is indeed an original product of the Greek national culture. The metaphysical (ontological) foundation of the thesis that «truth is discovered in dispute» was the high value the Greeks put on freedom as an incomparable gift, and confidence in the fact that a free man can find happiness, within the realm of possibility, through his own efforts. Freedom was the trait of the Greeks that distinguished them from other peoples. It is precisely this high value placed on freedom that explains a «sensational» event in the ancient world (and not just in the ancient world): the victory of these small city-states over the Persian colossus in the Greco-Persian War. Furthermore, an inscription-aphorism of the IIIrd Century B.C. states: ΟΥΘΕΝ ΜΕΙΖΟΝ ΑΝΘΡΩΠΟΙΣ ΕΛΛΗΣΙΝ ΕΛΕΥΘΕΡΗΣ (= Among men, only the Greeks respect freedom above all else).

An external expression of the internal freedom of the Greeks was their democracy. The coming into being of Greek democracy, beginning with the «military democracy» of Homeric times, then the reforms of Solon and Cleisthenes and, finally, the Athenian democracy of Pericles' «Golden Age» – all of this is nothing more or less than stages in the battle of the *demos* in the Greek city-states for freedom, the winning of civil rights and the establishment of a democratic political system. However, it has long since been noted that

13. THUCYDIDES, *History*, II, 65, 8-10.

14. FL. JOS., *Contra Ap.*, 3-4

there are no virtues without shortcomings, and often these shortcomings are merely a continuation of our virtues. I have in mind the fact that the object of Greek pride, freedom (and democracy, which is based on it), frequently, so to speak, overflowed its «banks» giving rise to complete license and, to use the words of Plato, the «need» for tyranny. What has been said also implies that the Greeks were unable to overcome (or at least to limit the influence of) the shortcomings inherent in their democracy, and more precisely, the tendency towards «total equalization», which meant equality not just before the law, but also the equality of unequal people with respect to property, not to mention the practice at the time of appointing people to many important state posts by casting lots, i.e. independent of the given person's competence.

Nevertheless, as a political system, Greek democracy was a rare phenomenon, if not to say an exclusive one, in the ancient (and not only in the ancient) world. It can be said that the ancient Greeks achieved something incredible for their time, and for the times that followed. Having come to believe in freedom as the highest value, they chose a social and political system that they called democracy. Along their democratic path of development they achieved successes in various spheres of their life and activities that are unparalleled in history. The democratic paradigm of the Greeks inspired people in the period of the Renaissance and of Western-European bourgeois revolutions. Even today it inspires confidence in human abilities. By the way, the mutation, which gave rise to the «universal giftedness» of the ancient Greeks, is unique; it is hardly possible that it could repeat itself by chance.

Here I would like to touch upon the genetic prerequisites of the ancient Greeks' giftedness, and especially that of the Athenians. We are speaking of the discovery of a functional asymmetry of the brain. It has been established that logical thinking is localized in the left hemisphere, and artistic capabilities in the right. The «average» person possesses both types of thought, i.e. the ability to organize materials (verbal and symbolic versus figurative) and a means of processing information. Things are quite different when we encounter an artist, who primarily thinks figuratively, and a scientist, who thinks mostly in concepts. «Left brain» thinking is discrete and analytical, or logical, and quite keenly reacts to contradictions in judgment, something which cannot be said about artistic thought, which is «right-brained». This is understandable: right-brain thinking is figurative, continuous and synthetic, permitting one to simultaneously «grasp» the unity of both differences and of opposites and thus provide a holistic perception. In an artistic image, the phenomenon reproduced is given at once in its totality and entirety.

To all appearances, this universal giftedness of the ancient Greeks was due to the fact itself that both types of thought were extraordinarily developed. This fact is one of the most unique phenomena in the history of mankind. Furthermore, Plato serves, as it were, as the personification of this Greek genius. In

Plato's personality and creative endeavor the features of a poet and thinker, a dreamer and a politician, a speculative philosopher and the founder of the «ideal» state – the paradigm of all future social utopias – are united. Plato is an unequalled stylist and a subtle dialectician who operates with concepts like a virtuoso.

This may seem paradoxical, but in this «universal giftedness» in the Greeks' type of thought, their temperament and character traits resides not only the source of their successes, but of their calamities. Put otherwise, the ancient Greeks were not the favorites of fortune. To be convinced, it is sufficient to compare them to the Romans and, in particular, to juxtapose the way of thinking and value orientations of both peoples.

For example, the Greeks' sporting games were directed primarily at winning glory, at becoming famous, and not at utilitarian military goals. The Romans, who created the most powerful army in ancient times and conquered practically the entire world known at the time, not only were not interested in athletic competitions, but even considered them to be an activity unbecoming a Roman and a warrior¹⁵. With extremely rare exceptions, Roman citizens did not take part in the gladiator fights, which were so popular with them¹⁶.

As has already been noted, for many Greek thinkers, the intrinsic value of knowledge, intellectual curiosity, in a word – a «meditative life» (βίος θεωρητικός) without regard to utilitarian notions, was the best way of life, since it was devoted to the pursuit of knowledge and the quest for truth, the highest form of creative activity¹⁷. The Romans, noted for their practical (rational) frame of mind, were quite distant from philosophizing, considering it an idle activity. If Socrates, abandoning all of his chores at home, devoted himself to the search for the truth, and especially for ethical definitions, then the famous Roman statesman, Cato the Elder, actively busied himself with his household, praising the peasant labor and despising philosophy. It is hardly surprising that the Romans were highly successful in politics and law.

The Hellenes' extraordinary flight of fancy gave the world a marvelously rich and original mythology, whereas the Roman's prosaic approach to life, it may be assumed, did not facilitate the creation of a more or less developed mythology. The ancient Hellenes put on plays where dramas, tragedies and comedies were performed; the Romans, with their characteristic, so to speak, naturalistic perception of life, preferred the circus to the theater, where there were often duels to the death between gladiators, or single combat with animals. It could be said that the Greeks were, in a sense, dreamers and theoreticians «with their heads in the clouds», who occupied themselves with

15. Cf. A. I. ZAYTSEV, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

16. Cf. M. E. SERGEENKO, *The Simple People of Ancient Italy*, 1964, pp. 100-101, 107.

17. Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Met.*, II, 988 a 10.

abstract problems, whereas the Romans were strict realists and calculating pragmatists. They remained true to themselves even when they turned to Greek philosophy, basically borrowing only its practical part – «teachings on morality and the State, i.e. that which was closer to their national taste and which they had been prepared by their own history to perceive»¹⁸. Thus the Greeks, surpassing the Romans in one respect, were inferior to them in another. The Hellenes, who gave the world great philosophers and scientists, poets and philosophers, were an extremely gifted nation. However, their exceptional giftedness did not secure them any advantages in the battle of history. Moreover, the Romans, who seemed less intellectually gifted, conquered the Hellenes, proving a sort of «superiority» oriented at practical reasoning over theoretical intellect. We enclose the word «superiority» in quotes, since the Romans conquered the Greeks in external social and political life, but not in the internal realm, i.e. in the area of culture *per se*. Precisely this victory resulted in the gradual dying out of cultural life in the Greek city-states.

If the ancient Greeks, unable to respond to the challenge of history and overcome their particularism and their city-system, were therefore vanquished in the end, then the Romans were a people of statehood and, even more, an imperial people. Having conquered all of the Mediterranean Basin and created a kind of mass-consumer society by mercilessly exploiting the provinces, the Romans became a parasitic people who demanded «bread and the circus». It is no surprise that the Romans, degraded and corrupted in their hedonism, were unable to withstand the onslaught of the Barbarians: the Germanic tribes.

Thus, the primary reason for the «Greek wonder», as well as for the fall of the world they created, lies in the genetically and socially determined national character of the ancient Greeks. To paraphrase ancient Heraclitus, it could be said: «a people's character is its fate».

The circumstance that, to present, none of the antic scholars have braved to make the phenomenon described as the «Greek wonder» the subject of a special analysis can be explained not merely (and possibly, not as much) by the complexity of the problem, but due to the fear of self-discovery, the fright resulting from the fear of committing an «ideological sin»: racism, Eurocentrism and similar «-isms».

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18. G. G. MAYOROV, The Image of Cato the Elder in Cicero's Dialogues, *Antic Culture and Modern Science*, 1985, p. 55.

ΠΕΡΙ ΤΟΥ ΠΡΟΒΛΗΜΑΤΟΣ ΤΟΥ «ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟΥ ΘΑΥΜΑΤΟΣ»

Π ε ρ ί λ η ψ η

Κατά την παρουσίαση τοῦ Δεύτερου Συνεδρίου με θέμα τὰ *Προβλήματα τῆς Ἀρχαίας Ἑλληνικῆς Φιλοσοφίας*, ποὺ πραγματοποιήθηκε στὴν ἑλληνικὴ πόλη Τσάκα τῆς Γεωργίας τὸ 1981, ἐπισημάνθηκε ἡ περίπτωση τῆς Ἀθήνας ἡ ὁποία ὡς πόλις-κράτος ἔδωσε στὴν παγκόσμια Ἱστορία καὶ τὸν παγκόσμιο Πολιτισμό, σὲ διάστημα ἑνὸς μόλις αἰῶνα (τοῦ 5ου π.Χ.), πολυάριθμες σημαντικότερες προσωπικότητες. Αὐτὸ τὸ φαινόμενο ὀνομάστηκε «ἑλληνικὸ θαῦμα» ἡ δὲ παροῦσα μελέτη προσπαθεῖ νὰ ἐξηγήσει τὰ αἷτια τῆς δημιουργίας του μέσα ἀπὸ διάφορες προσφερόμενες κατὰ καιροὺς θεωρίες. Ἡ πλέον ἰσχυρή, ὡστόσο, στὴν ὁποία καλεῖται κάποιος νὰ καταλήξει λογικά, εἶναι ὅτι ἡ αἷτια ἐμφάνισης τοῦ «ἑλληνικοῦ φαινομένου» (ποὺ ὡστόσο ὑπῆρξε καὶ βασικὴ αἷτια τῆς παρακμῆς του) βρίσκεται στὸν γενετικά καὶ κοινωνικά προσδιορισμένο ἔθνικὸ χαρακτήρα τῶν ἀρχαίων «Ἑλλήνων». Γιὰ νὰ παραφράσουμε τὸν Ἡράκλειτο, λοιπόν, θὰ μπορούσαμε νὰ ποῦμε ὅτι «ὁ χαρακτήρας ἑνὸς ἔθνους εἶναι ἡ μοῖρα του».

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