

Humanities I

Unit 15. Athens: Ideal and Reality

Geographic Setting:

Collect all the pictorial evidence possible, through National Geographic and other magazines, of Greek city and country settings.

- 1) What geographic features does Bowra single out for discussion? What importance does he attribute to these features?
- 2) Is there anything not represented on a map that Bowra singles out as important in forming the Greek character?
- 3) How might you go about evaluating Bowra's conclusions?
- 4) Just how far-fetched is the theory? How about the American pioneers of the plains? They were hardy and strong, but they lived on a flat land with rich soil. Doesn't that evidence refute Bowra?
- 5) Take another example from American History. New England has a rocky coast; it has hills and valleys and streams; it has many quarries; it is famous for its sea-faring Yankee sailors, fishermen and traders. In short it has many elements in common with Greece. What kind of character emerged there?
- 6) Bowra links Greek virtues to hardship. Do you believe that people must face hardship before they can develop good men and good societies?

Support your opinions by examples from history or personal experience.

Humanities I

Unit 16: The Athenian Economy:

Are the following Greek values appropriate for the twentieth century?

- a) That a greater share of wealth should be devoted to public purposes?
 - b) That this wealth ought to be used to refine the use of leisure rather than to extend technology or increase productive capacity?
- 1) Why did the Athenians spend their money on public works rather than on themselves?
 - 2) According to Zimmern, what didn't the Athenians spend their money on?
 - 3) What hypotheses could you make about the Greek conception of the good life from this evidence about the economy?
 - 4) What compromises may be made between the Athenian attitudes and position of our own governing bodies today?
 - 5) What must the average man most need to change in his way of life, presently, to assure a better future for his children? What ideas must be changes as well as values and attitudes?

Humanities I

Units 17 & 18: The Athenian Political System The Athenian Social System

Discussion questions and study notes:

- 1) What does Kitto mean when he says that the government was run by amateurs? What would be the exact meaning if we were to speak of political professionals - how would we define the difference?
- 2) What evidence does Kitto offer to support his contention?
- 3) Kitto says that the Athenian government "stimulated (the citizens) intellect and satisfied his spirit". Do you think this assertion is correct? Give examples and evidence to support your conclusions, especially references from texts and readings already used.

The Athenian Social System

- 1) According to Reading 18, how was the Greek social system altered when the ancient Greeks made the transition from tribal to urban culture?
- 2) What replaced the tribal kinship ties as social regulators? How did these new ways influence the roles, status, and norms of the Greeks? How did they influence social class arrangements and mobility between classes?
- 3) How were these social regulators related to the values of the Greeks?
- 4) Do you think a value system emphasizing fame and shame would be appropriate in modern cities? Do you think we should employ it today? If so, how?

Humanities I

Units 19 and 20: The Good Man and The Good Life

Discussion questions and study notes:

- 1) Do you think that Bowra's definitions of the good man and good life adequately summarize Greek ideals?
- 2) Are there qualities you wish to add to Bowra's definitions? Can you justify the addition of these qualities by citing evidence from earlier readings?
- 3) Do Greek definitions of the good man and the good life define any values you hold?
- 4) Are there any values that the Greeks felt were important that you do not think are very important? Why?
- 5) Give examples of modern men who are models of goodness; give examples of good societies in our modern times.

The Good Society: The Polis

Discussion questions and study notes:

The objectives of the reading are:

To know the social values the Greeks held such as:

- a) the community should assume responsibility for the total well-being - economic, moral, aesthetic, political, and social - of its citizens.
- b) That each individual citizen should make a direct, personal contribution to the good of the entire group, therefore, that a good society is composed of citizens who feel a strong sense of responsibility to the whole group.

Consider this knowledge and compare the social values of the Greeks with social values practised (or not practised!) in our modern society. How close is the Greek example being practised in countries which are socialized? (e.g. the Scandinavian countries)

- 1) According to Kitto, how did Greek social ideas differ from ours?
- 2) Do you think the works of Pericles, Plato, and Sophocles support Kitto's definitions of Greek social values?
- 3) Do you think that government should take an active interest in the total well-being of citizens? In what areas of your lives do you think the government should not interfere.
- 4) Do you think individuals today assume enough responsibility for the good of the entire group? Do you think the Greeks stretched this idea of responsibility too far?

- 5) Do you think a small unit such as the polis is more likely to promote the good life than a large unit like a major city?

Is it possible to bring social well-being to every individual in the huge sprawling overcrowded areas of our modern cities? How may this human problem be solved? Do we find any kind of a solution to this problem in the Greek example of democratic government?

CLASS HANDOUT A-3 ATHENS, READING 20

ANOTHER VIEW OF ANCIENT GREECE

The excerpts which follow are from a book entitled The Uses of the Past by a contemporary historian, Herbert J. Muller. Professor Muller, who teaches at the University of Indiana, points out that in romanticizing the ancient Greeks, many historians have failed to consider their limitations. This failure, he argues, distorts the true contributions of these people to the history of freedom and democracy.

Compare Professor Muller's position with the material you have been studying. Which of his points do you think are valid? Which do you think are invalid? Be prepared to explain your answers and to support them with material from the text.

. . . (I)t is a mistaken piety that glosses over the many embarrassing customs and convictions of the brilliant Greeks. Simply as we value their way of life we need to see clearly both their shortcomings and their inherent limitations, the defects of their virtues.

In the first place, these ancients were very young, only a few centuries removed from barbarism. Their youthfulness is most apparent in the prehistoric superstitions that were embedded in their high culture as well as their folkways, and which influenced their national life to an extent difficult for us to realize . . .

. . . (I)n the fatal campaign against Syracuse, the turning point of the Peloponnesian War, the Athenian expedition was on the point of sailing home to safety when an eclipse of the moon occurred, and their soothsayer prescribed a wait of thrice nine days, so the Athenians waited, to be utterly destroyed by the Syracusans. . . .

. . . To follow for a moment Spengler's* analysis of the Classical spirit, (the Greeks) lived in a tidy Euclidean world, finite, static, complete. They had no feeling for horizons, prospects, or backgrounds, and no word for "space"; they had such a horror of infinity that the idea was virtually taboo. They had no desire to explore the whole world, to convert it, or to master it by technology. They had no Protestantism, no Romantic Movement, no stirring revolutions in art and thought; they had critics and reformers but no great rebels or missionaries consciously in advance of their time. They did not look to the future, or when

*Oswald Spengler (1880-1936) was a German philosopher whose studies touched many fields, including history. His theory of the life cycle of cultures, from youth to maturity to old age to decline, was applied to western culture in The Decline of the West, first published in 1918.

they did they saw endless cycles repetition rather than change. . . .They had so little interest even in keeping time that they were slow to make use of the clocks and calendars developed by Egypt and Babylonia. In general, their world was a world of forms, not of forces, and their main effort was to keep it small, clear, orderly, statuesque.

Spengler goes on to show how this effort shaped all the major creations of the Greek genius. Their political ideal was the well-ordered little polis, the state as statue. Their Olympic gods were superlative shapes, not omnipotent wills or superlative forces, and their mode of worship was a pious observance of forms, not a soaring aspiration. Their science was based on the concepts of matter and form, not of mass and energy; always true to form, Nature "abhorred a vacuum." Their mathematics was plane and solid geometry; they had no dynamics, no differential or infinitesimal calculus, no irrational numbers, no zero as a number. Their great ethical systems, such as the Stoic and Epicurean, alike held up an ideal of "Statuesque steadiness; their common aim was to limit rather than fulfillment, to order rather than expand life. Their painting had no horizon or perspective, no sense of space or depth. Their architecture concentrated on the temple, the smallest of the great architectural forms, and to the end was based on the simple post and lintel. "Everything that is Classical," Spengler sums up, "is comprehensible in one glance." Greek culture has been so popular if only because it is the tidiest, most understandable of the great cultures.

As usual, Spengler ignores a great deal in order to keep this pattern neat. Like the classical scholars he derides, he falls into the error of identifying all Greece with its Apollonian ideal, slighting the strong Dionysian tendencies, the bold adventures in thought and political life, the restless, wilful spirit that led to endless war between classes and states. He becomes preposterous when he declares that "the Greeks willed nothing and dared nothing." Yet the Greek spirit was in fact considerably less daring and dynamic than the spirit of the Western world, . . .The Greeks. . .avoided the excesses of (the) "Faustian" spirit, the penalties of a reach that exceeds a grasp; but they had to pay a price for their kind of perfection. Their failure was not merely a failure to realize their ideal-it was due as well to the limitations of this ideal. . . .

. . .(T)he great danger that besets the classical ideal is classicism-it's tendency to a static, sterile perfection. Although the Greek temple became a marvel of harmony and proportion, it had no future; its basic form of post and lintel was suitable only for small buildings; yet Greek architects clung to this simple form to the end. Hence the very perfections of the Greeks were bound to paralyze art and thought. . . .As it was, the classical spirit led to an excessive generality, a lifeless formalism, an artificial dignity, a rigid repose, a restraint that restrained no emotion to speak of. It led to the kind of classicism that we

* Faustian refers to Faust, a German magician and astrologer who supposedly sold his soul to the devil in exchange for worldly experience and power. Faust has been immortalized by many writers, including Goethe and Thomas Mann. He is also the subject of many musical works.

find in later Rome, and in Europe after the Renaissance, but also in the decline of Greece itself. For centuries Athens continued to admire itself as the "school of Hellas" while it rehearsed the old lessons, and failed to learn its own lesson. .

. . . (The freedom-loving Greeks lacked a deep faith in the power of freedom. While they conceived man as essentially a rational animal and believed that he could order his private life, they did not believe that he could progressively improve the collective life. They had little sense of history as creation or actual adventure, little confidence in man's ability to make his own history. Their ultimate principle remained Moira—a Fate to which the gods themselves were subject. . .

All this is by no means to discredit the Greek genius. They were pioneers in the life of freedom, with no precedents to guide them, no settled democratic traditions to steady them. . . .

. . . Say the worst about their political philosophy, and then one must add with (Alfred E.) Zimmern that they made the all-important contribution to political philosophy—they invented it. Grant that their society was based on slavery, and that Aristotle defined a slave as an "animated instrument" who was "nothing of himself," it is much more remarkable that Euripides and other Greeks began to denounce this universal institution. . . . In all fields of thought the Greeks took the necessary first steps. We are more knowing than they because we have had the privilege of knowing them, and the wit to carry on their pioneering adventure. My point, again, is simply that in justice both to them and to ourselves we need to see the Greeks as they were. . .

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