

WHAT HAVE THE SPARTANS DONE FOR US?: SPARTA'S CONTRIBUTION TO WESTERN CIVILIZATION*

By PAUL CARTLEDGE

If I hate the manners of the Spartans, I am not blind to the greatness of a free people . . .

François-René, Vicomte de Chateaubriand, *Travels in Greece, Palestine, Egypt and Barbary* (1806, tr. F. Shobel 1811)

Older than we are by however many ages,
it doesn't need defending against anything.
No more do air or fire, earth or water.
Not even in our empty times. Neglected, it will
go underground, or into interstellar space.

Until out of the blue someone calls it up,
like the Greek who cut my hair last week.
Where was he from? 'Spar-ta', he said.
'You are a Spartan!' I exclaimed. 'Oh no',
he said, 'there are no Spartans anymore'.

Andrew McNeillie, 'In Defence of Poetry',
first printed in the *TLS*, 16 August, 2001

It is an ill wind, proverbially, that blows nobody any good, and terrible and ghastly as were the tragic events of '9/11' – 11 September 2001 – they have also provoked a salutary spate of Western reflection on just what it is to be 'Western', on what 'Western civilization' is or might be.¹

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Several audiences on both sides of the Atlantic, and of the St George's and English Channels, have heard various versions of this paper, and one or two others have very kindly read and commented on various written versions. To all of these, too numerous to enumerate exhaustively here (but I must mention Johannes Haubold and David Pritchard), I offer my heartfelt thanks.

¹ Invidiously, perhaps, one might mention R. Fletcher, *The Cross and the Crescent: Christianity and Islam from Muhammed to the Reformation* (London, 2003) and A. Wheatcroft, *Infidels: the conflict between Christendom and Islam 638–2002* (London, 2003), jointly reviewed by A. C. Grayling, *Financial Times Magazine*, 3 May 2003.

One ancient Greek exemplar of that civilization is famously reported to have said that 'the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being';² and the process of re-examining and rethinking what is distinctive and admirable – or at any rate defensible – about Western civilization, values, and culture seems to me both to have been in itself a wholly good thing, and to have had some notably positive outcomes.

For instance, it has made us realize that we in the West do not necessarily have all the best tunes. It has come to be better appreciated that concepts and practices often imagined to be uniquely 'Western', such as reason, freedom, and democracy, have had, and still do have, their active counterparts within Eastern cultures as well. Indeed, the tradition of Western civilization has been decisively shaped or enriched by Eastern, including not least Islamic, contributions. Thus, had it not been for Arabic scholars, in both East (especially Baghdad) and West (Moorish Spain), in what we conventionally call the Middle Ages, a number of key works of Aristotle would have been lost to us, and Aristotle is about as central to any construction of the Western cultural tradition as it is possible to get.³

Some of us Westerners, post 9/11, were provoked specifically into wondering aloud whether any definition of our civilization and its cultural values would justify our dying for them, or even maybe killing for them – as the suicide hijackers of September 11, or the suicide bombers of the West Bank and Gaza, clearly were and are prepared to die for their brands of freedom and Islam.⁴ Those of us who are historians of ancient Greece wondered that with especial intensity. For the world of ancient – or Classical – Greece is one of the principal taproots of our Western civilization, as I have already implied in quoting Socrates's famous aphorism, and the Spartans' behaviour at Thermopylae in 480 raises sharply the question of ideologically-motivated suicide.⁵

² Plato, *Apology* 38a.

³ G. Lloyd & N. Sivin, *The Way and the Word. Science and Medicine in Early China and Greece* (New Haven & London, 2002), xiii, observe that modern science evolved from the strengths of China, Greece, India, Islam, and other civilizations, which converged first in the Muslim world c. AD 1000 and then in Renaissance Europe.

⁴ To avoid any possible misunderstanding, I should say that my views of the suicide-homicide bombers in Palestine coincide pretty much with those of the Israeli novelist and peace activist David Grossman, as quoted in an interview in the *Guardian*, 29 March 2003: 'I don't understand suicide bombers but I do understand that an occupied people would try to resist occupation. I would do the same'. See further the final paragraph of this article.

⁵ M. I. Finley (ed.), *The Legacy of Greece. A new appraisal* (Oxford, 1981); O. Taplin, *Greek Fire* (London, 1989); J. Griffin, 'What is special about Greece and Rome?', in *Two Lectures on Classics* [the other by S. Saïd] (Oslo, 1997), 3 ff.

The connection between the ancient Greeks and Us was forcefully expressed by John Stuart Mill, in a review of the first volumes of George Grote's pioneering, liberal-democratic history of ancient Greece (1846 ff.). As Mill put it, with conscious paradox, the battle of Marathon – which was fought in 490 BC by the Athenians, with support only from the neighbouring small city of Plataea, against the invading Persians – was more important than the Battle of Hastings, *even as an event in English history*.⁶ So too, arguably, or so at least I should want to argue, was the battle of Thermopylae, fought ten years later between a small Spartan-led Greek force and an even more massive force of invading Persians.⁷ Unlike Marathon, of course, Thermopylae was formally a defeat for the Greeks, a 'trauma' (*trôma*), as Herodotus (8.27.1) called it. Yet it was none the less glorious or culturally significant for that, since it was soon converted into a moral, that is a morale, victory. And as Napoleon once put it, in war the morale factor is three times as important as all the other factors put together. He of all people ought to have known what he was talking about. . . .

Indeed, some would even say – and I am tempted to include myself in their number – that Thermopylae was Sparta's finest hour. In any case, it is Sparta's Thermopylae experience that provides me with my starting point and constant point of reference in trying to answer the question posed in this discussion: what have the Spartans done for us? Before I try to answer that, let me just remark that there has been lately a quite remarkable focus of academic and popular interest on the society and civilization of the ancient Spartans. Two Hollywood movies inspired by Thermopylae are allegedly under active development, one by the Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.⁸ Two television series have been devoted to them, one that was aired in over 50 countries simultaneously on the History cable channel in autumn 2002, one in November–December 2002 on Channel 4 (and again on the Discovery cable channel in May 2003).⁹ There were two discussion

⁶ J. S. Mill, *Collected Works*. Vol. XI. *Essays on Philosophy and the Classics* (Toronto, 1978), 273, (my italics). On Grote's *History*, see my introduction to his *A History of Greece: From the Time of Solon to 403 BC* (eds.) M. O. B. Caspari and J. M. Mitchell (London, 2000 [originally 1907]).

⁷ The bibliography on Thermopylae is immense: e.g., N. Hammond, 'Sparta at Thermopylae', *Historia* 45 (1996), 1 ff.; cf. M. A. Flower, 'Simonides, Ephorus and Herodotus on the Battle of Thermopylae', *Classical Quarterly* 48 (1998), 365 ff. Also, briefly, P. de Souza, *The Greek and Persian Wars 499–386 BC* (Oxford, 2003), 54 ff.

⁸ The familiar story of the Spartan boy and the fox is told at Plut. *Lyc.* 18.1–2.

⁹ For this I must claim – or perhaps admit – a certain amount of responsibility. Bettany Hughes and the Director, Tim Kirby, were largely responsible for the visual format and the script, but I was the consultant and wrote the accompanying 'tie-in' book: *The Spartans: An Epic History* (Channel Four Books, London, 2002; 2nd edn., Pan Macmillan, 2003).

panels on Sparta at international scholarly conferences last year, one held in the States (the Berkshire Women's History Conference),¹⁰ the other in Scotland; and there was the first ever international colloquium held actually in or near modern Sparta itself, organized last summer by Greek scholars, and including members of the Greek Archaeological Service who do crucial work there.¹¹

So what can there possibly still be to talk about that merits focusing all this media and other attention on ancient Sparta? Perhaps we might begin by asking – as Great King Cyrus II, founder of the Achaemenid Persian Empire, was supposed once to have asked, in about 550 BC – who are these Spartans?¹² One answer is that they were the Dorian (Doric-speaking) inhabitants of a Greek *polis* or citizen-state in the Peloponnese that for many centuries was one of the greatest of ancient Greek powers.¹³ Another answer, as one of Cyrus's successors, Xerxes, found out all too painfully, is that they were a fighting machine strong enough, skilful enough, and sufficiently iron-willed to play the key role in resisting and eventually repelling even his vast hordes and so frustrating his attempt to incorporate the mainland Greeks in an oriental empire that already stretched from the Aegean in the West to beyond the Hindu Kush. Xerxes discovered these facts about Sparta in person, at Thermopylae,¹⁴ and his appointed commander-in-chief, Mardonius, discovered them again at Plataea the following year, when it was the Spartans under Regent Pausanias who played the lead role in that famous and decisive Greek victory.¹⁵

That in turn is one, not insignificant, answer to the question why today we should care who the ancient Spartans were. For they enabled the development of the civilization that we have chosen in crucial ways to inherit and learn from. What if the Persians had won in 480–479? Either that Greek civilization would have been significantly different

¹⁰ I must thank Professor Ellen Millender for convening this, and Professor Bella Vivante for chairing the panel. A book on the panel's topic, Spartan women and their perception through time, is in preparation.

¹¹ I must thank Dr Nikos Birgalias for his vital organizational role. There is one more Sparta-focused conference yet to come, to be staged by the British School at Athens, which has been actively involved in promoting research in and on Sparta one way or another since the very beginning of the twentieth century.

¹² Hdt. 1.153.1.

¹³ Sparta as 'great power': P. Cartledge, *Sparta and Lakonia. A Regional History 1300–362 BC*, new edition (London & New York, 2002); P. Cartledge, *Agesilaus and the Crisis of Sparta* (London & Baltimore, 1987, repr. 2000).

¹⁴ Hdt. 7.212.1.

¹⁵ In their excellent recent commentary on Herodotus Book 9 (Cambridge, 2003), J. Marincola and M. A. Flower deal fully with his account of Plataea; see also their introduction, 20 ff., and Appendixes A and D.

thereafter or/and we should not have been its legatees in the same ways or to the same degree.¹⁶ Another answer to the question why the ancient Spartans matter to us today concerns the impact of what has been variously labelled the Spartan myth, mirage, or tradition.¹⁷ That is to say: the variety of ways in which Sparta and Spartans have been represented in mainly non-Spartan discourses, both written and visual, since the late fifth century BC has left a deep mark on the Western tradition, on the understanding of what it is to belong to a Western culture.

To begin with, Sparta, like some other ancient Greek cities or places, impinges upon our everyday consciousness through enriching our English vocabulary. The island of Lesbos, for conspicuous example, has given us 'lesbian', the city of Corinth 'corinthian',¹⁸ the city of Athens 'attic'. But ancient Sparta, prodigally, has given us not one but two English adjectives: 'spartan', of course, and 'laconic'.

To choose an illustration almost at random, a newspaper profile of Iain Duncan Smith (then leader of the official Opposition Party in Parliament), referred casually to his naval public school as being 'spartan' – and aptly so, in this sense: the British public school system, as invented virtually by Thomas Arnold of Rugby in the nineteenth century and continued by, for instance, Kurt Hahn's Gordonstoun in the twentieth, was consciously modelled on an idea, or even a utopian vision, of ancient Sparta's military-style communal education.¹⁹

The Spartan etymology of 'laconic' is not so immediately transparent, but it comes from one of the ancient adjectival forms derived from the name the Spartans more often called themselves by: Lacedaemonians or

¹⁶ Significantly different and, some would say, probably significantly inferior, at least in one respect: Athens' post-479 cultural achievements – in theatre, for example – were crucially influenced by their democratic context. These were the achievements that rendered Greece 'classical' to subsequent epochs of Western civilization, and it is extremely unlikely that, had Persia then had a free hand, the Great King would have tolerated the sort of democracy that Athens already was in 480, let alone that which it went on to become after 479. On the other hand, the Athenians never seriously contemplated extending democracy to the female half of the citizen population, and their appalled representations of the women of Sparta have more than a whiff of patriarchal sexism about them: see P. Cartledge, 'Spartan wives: liberation or licence?' (1981), as reprinted in and cited from *Spartan Reflections* (London & California, 2001), 106 ff.

¹⁷ On the Spartan myth/mirage, see F. Ollier, *Le mirage spartiate*, 2 vols (Paris, 1933–43, repr. in 1 vol. Chicago, 1973); Elizabeth Rawson, *The Spartan Tradition in European Thought* (Oxford, 1969; paperback 1991); A. Powell and S. Hodkinson (eds.), *The Shadow of Sparta* (London, 1994); and *Sparta Beyond the Mirage* (London, 2002).

¹⁸ 'Corinthian' tends to be applied only to soccer players of a (sadly) bygone age, who either were amateurs or played the game more for love than for money: see, e.g., the obituary of Denis Saunders in *The Independent*, 22 February 2003.

¹⁹ T. Copley, *Black Tom. Arnold of Rugby, the myth and the man* (London, 2002).

Lakones. The Spartans indeed perfected the curt, clipped, military mode of utterance, which they used alike in sending written or oral dispatches from the front or in snappy repartee to an insistent teacher at home, so much so that we still call that manner of utterance 'laconic' in their honour.²⁰

Even less obviously, and much less happily, the Spartans have bequeathed us also a third English word: the noun 'helot'. This is used by us – some of us, anyway²¹ – to refer to a member of an especially deprived or exploited ethnic or economic underclass. It thus reflects, accurately, the dark underside of the Spartans' more positive achievements. The Greek word *heilôtês* probably originally meant 'captive', and certainly it was as captives and enemies that the Spartans treated the unfree subordinate population of Helots – that is, as prisoners of war whose death sentence they had merely suspended so as to force them to labour under constant threat of extinction, in order to provide the economic basis of the Spartan way of life.²² Other Greek cities, not least Athens, were also of course crucially dependent on unfree labour for creating and maintaining a distinctively politicized and cultured style of communal life.²³ But the slaves of the Athenians were typical in that they were a polyglot, heterogeneous bunch, mainly 'barbarians' or non-Greek foreigners, and were mostly owned individually. The Helots of Sparta, by contrast, were an entire Greek people, or perhaps two separate peoples united by a common yoke of servitude, and they were subjugated collectively.²⁴

These three little words – spartan, laconic, helot – are just a small, linguistic token of the fact that English or British culture, indeed Western culture as a whole, has been deeply marked by what the

²⁰ David Ridgway, *THES* 4 April 2003, 30: 'no more than a laconic reference'; Hilary Finch, *The Times* 11 April 2003: 'a reluctance to characterise vividly enough the bittersweet and the laconic within the music'; cf. my 'Literacy in the Spartan oligarchy' (1978), as repr. in *Spartan Reflections* (n. 16), 49.

²¹ Michael Burleigh, (London) *Evening Standard*, 7 April 2003, 44: 'The oil-rich good old days of yachts and Pakistani or Filipino helots are nearly over.'

²² A lively ongoing debate concerns the precise nature and significance of the relationship between Spartans and Helots: see the introduction to my 'Rebels and *sambos* in ancient Greece: a comparative view' (1985), as repr. in *Spartan Reflections* (n. 16), 127 ff.; also 'Raising hell? The Helot Mirage – a personal re-view', in S. Alcock and N. Luraghi (eds.), *Helots and their Masters in Laconia and Messenia. Histories, Ideologies, Structures* (Washington, DC, 2003), 12 ff. See also below (n. 24).

²³ See my 'Greek civilization and slavery', in T. P. Wiseman (ed.) *Classics in Progress: Essays on Ancient Greece and Rome* (London, 2002), 247 ff.

²⁴ There is debate also over the degree or nature of individual Spartans' 'possession' (a better term than ownership) of 'their' Helots; as far as the reliable evidence goes, only the Spartans collectively, the Spartan *polis* as such, could legally manumit them: D. M. MacDowell *Spartan Law* (Edinburgh, 1986), 35.

French scholar François Ollier neatly dubbed 'le mirage spartiate'. He coined that phrase in the 1930s, an era when Sparta – or rather ideas of how Sparta had supposedly worked as a society – exercised a particular fascination for totalitarian or authoritarian rulers, most notoriously for Adolf Hitler and pseudo-scholarly members of his Nazi entourage such as Alfred Rosenberg.²⁵ Discipline, orderliness, soldierly hierarchy, and subordination of individual endeavour to the overriding good of the state were among the Spartan virtues that the Nazis and other fascists were most attracted by – but only to put them to the most perverted uses. There are indeed still neo-fascist organizations (one, disturbingly, in France) that are proud to follow along this same shining path.²⁶

It is this modern totalitarian or authoritarian reception of ancient Sparta that has tarnished Sparta's reputation as a political ideal or model in modern western liberal-democratic societies, probably irreparably. Yet Sparta's idealized reputation had not always served such sinister or heinous purposes. In the eighteenth century, for instance, one of the many internal debates that flourished among Enlightenment intellectuals was between the proclaimed paradigmatic virtues of Athens and those of Sparta, and each attracted superstar champions. In the Athens corner, predictably, was Voltaire, the advocate of learning and luxury. Sparta, which notoriously had rejected both, at least in theory or ideology, was hardly calculated to appeal to a thinker like him. Yet in the Sparta corner stood, equally redoubtably if not so predictably, the surely no less enlightened and progressive thinker, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau was a huge fan of 'the wisdom of Sparta's laws', and if anything an even greater fan of its legendary lawgiver Lycurgus. In Lycurgus's Sparta, Rousseau saw a society that was devoted to implementing the general will in a collective, self-effacing, law-abiding, and above all thoroughly virtuous way.²⁷ Voltaire and Rousseau ensured a key role for ancient Greece in the making of the modern world.

Nor was Rousseau by any means the first, or the last, intellectual to deploy an image or vision of Sparta as an integral component and driving force of a whole programme of social and political reforms. Among the first on record to do so was Plato, and through him Sparta has a very good claim to be the fount and origin of the entire tradition of

²⁵ A. Demandt, 'Klassik als Klischee', *Historische Zeitschrift* 274.2 (2002), 281 ff.

²⁶ The website of the Scottish National Party has been known to be (dis)graced by racist appeal to ancient Sparta.

²⁷ P. Cartledge, 'The Socratics' Sparta and Rousseau's', in S. Hodkinson & A. Powell (eds.), *Sparta: New Perspectives* (London, 1999), 311 ff.

utopian thinking and writing (utopiography).²⁸ Utopia, too, of course acquired a bad name in the twentieth century; but in principle, the principle of hope that things can be and will be made better, it is not in my opinion as bad a place as all that.²⁹

In any case, it is not only for what intellectuals and others have made of Sparta, from the Classical period of ancient Greece down to our own centuries, that Sparta remains a choice subject of study. It is also for what the Spartans really did achieve, most conspicuously and effectively on the battlefield during the Persian Wars of 480–479 BC.

Thermopylae in 480 was indeed a defeat but, as argued above, it was soon converted into a morale victory and as such formed a vital and integral part of the eventual total Greek victory. That overall victory, moreover, would not have been attained but for the Spartans – for three main reasons. First, had it not been for their remarkably successful organization of their society into a well-oiled military machine, and their diplomatic development of a rudimentary multi-state Greek alliance, well before the Persians came to mainland Greece, there would have been no core of military leadership around which any Greek resistance could have coalesced. Second, had it not been for the Spartans' suicidal – heroically suicidal – stand at Thermopylae, which showed that the Persians could usefully be resisted, it is unlikely that the small, wavering, and uncohesive force of patriotic Greeks would have had the nerve to imagine that they might one day win. And, third, but for charismatic Spartan commanders of the character and calibre of King Leonidas and Regent Pausanias, behind whom they could unite, the effectiveness of the Greeks' land forces would have been critically weakened.

What, then, was it that the Spartans brought to the Greek cultural feast, beyond playing a (I should say the) vital role in winning the war that made the feast possible at all?³⁰ Put another way, is it possible plausibly to defend the claim that the real historical Sparta of the Classical period was anything more than a society dedicated to the infliction of terror and violence?

Different interpreters of course stress different aspects of the classical Greek cultural achievement, in order to emphasize either those that they

²⁸ The precise nature and extent of Plato's 'laconism' are of course subject still to much legitimate dispute: for references, see my article (n. 27).

²⁹ Ample literature on Utopia/Utopiography may be found in R. Schaer, G. Claeys & L. T. Sargent (eds.), *Utopia. The search for the ideal society in the Western world* (New York & Oxford, 2000); cf. my *Agésilas* (n. 13), 413 ff.

³⁰ In Herodotus' considered judgment, the Athenians were 'the saviours of Greece' (7.139.5); but I shall attempt to argue for the Spartans' overall priority in a forthcoming book on Thermopylae.

personally find most admirable and imitable, or the ones that they consider to have been the most influential on subsequent cultures of the European, or more broadly Western, tradition. I myself would privilege three qualities or characteristics above all, as distinguishing and differentiating the civilization of ancient Greece: first, a devotion to competition in all its forms, almost for its own sake; second, a devotion to a concept and ideal of freedom; and, third, a capacity for almost limitless self-criticism as well as unstinting criticism of others, not least other Greeks.

The first two qualities or characteristics might be identified equally strongly in either of the two main exemplars of ancient Greek civilization, Sparta and Athens. The third, however, specifically self-criticism, was a distinctively, indeed peculiarly Athenian cultural trait and apparently not a Spartan trait at all – or so contemporary Athenians liked to claim, and many have subsequently agreed. Pericles, for example, in Thucydides's version of his Funeral Speech, sneered at Sparta's merely state-imposed courage,³¹ Demosthenes asserted that it was forbidden to Spartans even to criticize their laws,³² and it is undoubtedly the case that there were no Spartan equivalents of the Athenians' democratic Assembly and popular Lawcourts, nor of their annual tragic and comic drama festivals, which provided the Athenians with state-sponsored opportunities for self-examination and self-criticism.³³

On the other hand, the Spartans were not quite the unhesitatingly obedient automatons that ancient Athenian and modern liberal propaganda made them out to be. On occasion, grumbling might turn into open defiance of authority, both individually and collectively. Even Spartan kings, who were perched at the very pinnacle of the hierarchy of birth, wealth, and prestige, might be brought low, by being tried and fined – or, worse, exiled under sentence of death.³⁴ It would therefore be fairer and more accurate, I think, to say that the Spartans' culture was not one that favoured, let alone encouraged, intellectual argument or even open dissent in the Agora or any other place of public assembly.³⁵

³¹ Thuc. 2.39.

³² Dem. 20, *Against Leptines*, 107.

³³ P. Cartledge, 'Deep plays: Theatre as process in Greek civic life' in P. E. Easterling (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1997), 3 ff.

³⁴ E. David, 'The trial of Spartan kings', *Revue internationale des droits de l'antiquité* 32 (1985), 131 ff.

³⁵ Besides the Assembly, a number of less public forums or bodies also played a key role in Spartan political decision-making: the Gerosia, the Little Assembly, and the messes; and Sparta was a society in which patronage and clientelism continued to count for a great deal: P. Cartledge, *Agésilao*s (n. 13), 139 ff.

Let me, however, expand a little, first on Greek, and especially Spartan, competitiveness, and then on Greek, and especially Spartan, attitudes to and practices of freedom. All Greeks, probably, were passionately keen on a good contest. Their word for competitiveness, *agônia*, has given us our word 'agony', and that etymological connection well suggests the intense, driven quality of ancient Greek competition.³⁶ A war was for them an *agôn* (contest), obviously enough, as was a public debate, whether real or fictional. But so too was a lawsuit, and so also was any religious festival that involved, centrally or otherwise, athletic or other kinds of competition – a festival such as the Olympic Games, for example. It was in fact the Greeks ultimately who invented our idea of athletic sports, just as they invented the prototype of our idea of the theatre, and both of them within a context of religiously-based competition.³⁷

The Spartans yielded to no other Greeks in their passionate, almost fanatical attachment to competition. They even made the very act of survival at birth a matter of public competition.³⁸ Likewise, adult status for Spartan males could be achieved only as the outcome of the series of largely physical competitive tests that constituted the unique education or group socialization known as the *agoge* or 'upbringing'.³⁹ Finally, becoming a full adult Spartan citizen in terms of political standing and participation was made to depend on passing a final acceptance test – admission by competitive election to a communal dining group or mess at the age of twenty. Those unfortunates who failed any of those educational or citizenship tests were consigned to a limbo of exclusion, of non-belonging, to permanent outsider status. Nor did internal competition for status end at the age of twenty for those who did achieve full citizenship status: far from it. Not for one moment did they cease to compete amongst themselves and against others, both at home – for membership of the elite 300 Royal Bodyguard, or election to high office, or in local equestrian and athletic contests – and abroad, in war,

³⁶ J. Burckhardt, *The Greeks and Greek Civilization* (Oxford, 1998 [German original 1898–1902]), Part II ch. III ('The Agonal Age'); A. W. Gouldner, *Enter Plato. Classical Greece and the Origins of Social Theory* (New York, 1965).

³⁷ P. Cartledge 'The Greek religious festivals', in P. Easterling & J. Muir (eds.) *Greek Religion and Society* (Cambridge 1985), 98 ff., 223 ff.

³⁸ The 'eldest men of his tribe' (Plut. *Lyc.* 16.1), rather than the child's natural or social father, decided whether or not a newborn should be raised, judging according to ideal criteria of physical and social fitness.

³⁹ N. Kennell, *The Gymnasium of Virtue: Education and culture in Ancient Sparta* (Chapel Hill & London, 1995); P. Cartledge 'A Spartan education' (1992), as repr. in *Spartan Reflections* (n. 16), 79 ff.

of course, and no less famously and successfully at the Olympic Games.⁴⁰

As for the general Greek passion for freedom, it was said by a contemporary political writer and activist that 'In Lakedaimon [Sparta] are to be found those who are the most enslaved (*douloi*) and those who are the most free'.⁴¹ By 'the most free' Kritias meant the Spartans themselves, or more precisely the Spartan master-class, who were freed by the compulsory labour of their enslaved workforce from the necessity of performing any productive labour whatsoever, apart from warfare. By 'the most enslaved' he meant of course the Helots. These Greek people, as noted earlier, were treated with unusual severity by the Spartans, as a conquered population.

This harsh treatment at first puzzled and later deeply disturbed the more sensitive Greek observers of the Spartan scene. Plato, for example, remarked that 'The Helot-system of Sparta is practically the most discussed and controversial subject in Greece'.⁴² This controversy was heightened in Plato's adult lifetime, when, in the aftermath of a decisive defeat of Sparta by the Boiotians at Leuktra in 371, the larger portion of the Helots, the Messenians, finally achieved their longed-for collective freedom and established themselves as free Greek citizens of the restored (as they saw it) free city of Messene. Yet the Spartans were by no means untypical, let alone unique, among the ancient Greeks in seeing no incompatibility between their own freedom and the unfreedom of a servile class, and indeed in premising the former on the latter.⁴³

Those two aspects of Spartan culture and society – competitiveness and contested notions of freedom – almost by themselves make our Spartan ancestors worthy of our continued cultural interest and historical study. But they very far from exhaust Sparta's extreme fascination. Consider further the following, more or less well attested, Spartan social customs or practices: institutionalized pederasty between a young adult citizen warrior and a teenage youth within the framework of the compulsory state-managed educational cycle;⁴⁴ athletic sports including

⁴⁰ S. Hodkinson, 'An agonistic culture? Athletic competition in Archaic and Classical Spartan society', in S. Hodkinson and A. Powell (eds.), *Sparta: New Perspectives* (London, 1999), 147 ff.

⁴¹ The Athenian *über-oligarch* Kritias is not the most objective of witnesses, but here his characteristically sophistical claim is defensible: 88B37 Diels-Kranz, as translated in P. Cartledge, *Sparta and Lakonia* (n. 13), 301.

⁴² Plato, *Laws* 776c, as translated in P. Cartledge *Sparta and Lakonia* (n. 13), 299.

⁴³ M. I. Finley 'Was Greek civilization based on slave labour?' (1959), repr. in B. D. Shaw and R. P. Saller, *Economy and Society in Ancient Greece* (London, 1981), 97 ff.; discussed in my article above (n. 23).

⁴⁴ P. Cartledge, 'The politics of Spartan pederasty' (1981), as repr. in *Spartan Reflections* (n. 13), 91 ff.

wrestling practised officially – and allegedly in the nude – by the teenage girls;⁴⁵ the public insulting and humiliation of bachelors by married women at an annual religious festival; polyandry (wives with more than one husband each); and wife-sharing without either party's incurring the opprobrium or legal guilt of adultery.⁴⁶

One common factor runs through much of this: the unusual (indeed, by Greek and indeed most pre-modern standards, unique) functions, status and behaviour of the female half of the Spartan citizen population, the women of Sparta. The extant evidence is sufficiently plentiful, but also sufficiently controversial, to have provoked an entire recent book on them – one of many modern studies prepared to speak of 'feminism' in Sparta.⁴⁷ We should, I think, take at least some of this evidence with a dose of (presumably Attic?) salt, especially where the ideological or propagandistic intention is blatant. Our written sources are exclusively male, almost entirely non-Spartan and often heavily Athenocentric. Nevertheless, we may safely infer that Sparta really was, in certain vital respects, seriously different, even alien, from the traditional Greek norms of political and social intercourse.⁴⁸

And that surely does make Sparta perpetually worth studying not only by historians, but also by comparative cultural anthropologists and sociologists, among others. Herodotus, the father of (comparative cultural) anthropology as well as of history, declared famously that he agreed with the Theban lyric poet Pindar that 'custom was king', in this sense: that every human group believes that its own customs are not only relatively better than those of others but absolutely the best possible.⁴⁹ With the customs of Sparta, in which he took a special interest, Herodotus was on to a winner. Here are just a few related illustrations,

⁴⁵ The first volume of Larry Gonick's quirky *The Cartoon History of the Universe* (London, 1989), includes a depiction of such a scene, among many other amusing illustrations of Spartan life.

⁴⁶ P. Cartledge, 'Spartan wives' (n. 16).

⁴⁷ S. Pomeroy *Spartan Women* (New York, 2002). Unfortunately, she both misreports and misrepresents several of my own positions. For example, so far from 'treat[ing] Xenophon's works on Sparta with contempt' (p. 161), I wrote that his 'testimony can at least be used to modify and supplement that of the (in some respects) more scientific and objective Aristotle' ('Spartan wives', p. 113); as for my alleged 'Victorian stance' (p. 160) on Spartan female homosexuality, what I actually do is cite, without condemnation, Plutarch's unique and extremely idealized report of it and footnote among others Pomeroy's own suggested explanation for it ('Spartan wives', p. 113 and n. 38 on p. 214).

⁴⁸ P. Cartledge *The Greeks: A Portrait of Self and Others*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 2002) 95 ff. See also E. Millender, 'Athenian ideology and the empowered Spartan woman', in Hodkinson and Powell (eds.), (n. 40), 355 ff.

⁴⁹ Hdt. 3.38: cf. P. Cartledge, 'Herodotus and "the Other": a meditation on empire', *Echos du Monde Classique/Classical Views* 9 (1990), 27 ff.; 'The reliability debate: truth, fiction, polarity', in H. van Wees (ed.), *A Companion to Herodotus* (Leiden 2002), 351 ff. [with E. Greenwood].

all taken from the seventh book of his *Histories*, and all of which go to establish the point that the Spartans were willing, indeed culturally educated, to die for their ideals: that is, to sacrifice their individual lives for the sake of some greater collective goal, whether local or national.

Shortly before the epic conflict at Thermopylae, it was reported to Great King Xerxes by a mounted spy that the Spartans in the pass were combing and styling their – exceptionally – long hair.⁵⁰ He simply refused to believe that men who coiffed their tresses like women before fighting would make serious opponents in the field. Or rather, in the case of Thermopylae, that they would put their lives on the line in the certain knowledge that they were going to be killed. For, that that was indeed what lay behind the Spartans' decision to send a specially selected task force of 300 Spartans under King Leonidas to Thermopylae in 480 is proven, not only by the way they fought and died,⁵¹ but also by the fact that the men chosen all had to have a living son, so as to prevent their family lines from dying out – in other words, after their own assured deaths.⁵²

That interpretation of their mission as suicidal self-sacrifice is supported further by another story in Herodotus Book 7, recounted significantly not long before he tells the story of Thermopylae.⁵³ In the run-up to the Persian invasion of 480 the Spartans considered how they might try to persuade Xerxes to call it off. Some years earlier, they had killed a herald sent to them by Xerxes' father, Darius.⁵⁴ Being a very pious people,⁵⁵ they thought that Xerxes' invasion was at least in part Heaven's way of punishing them for this sacrilege of killing a person whose office invested him with sacrosanctity. So they conceived the idea

⁵⁰ Hdt. 7.208; with E. David, 'Sparta's social hair', *Eranos* 90 (1992), 11 ff.

⁵¹ Whether at Thermopylae or elsewhere later: it is often not realized (de Souza [n. 7] is an honourable exception) that of the original 300 only 298 fought and died at Thermopylae. Two contracted severe eye-disease, of whom one elected nevertheless to fight, and the other, Aristodamos, died at Plataea in 479 after fighting like a berserker rather than as a disciplined Spartan hoplite should – see W. I. Miller, *The Mystery of Courage* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), 15 ff.; a third, Pantites, was sent on a diplomatic mission by Leonidas and did not return to the fray in time – he hanged himself in shame on his return to Sparta. In all three cases the state-imposed suicidal imperative transpires.

⁵² This point is often overlooked – or found insufficiently plausible: for example, the novelist Steven Pressfield in his *Gates of Fire* (New York, 1998) prefers to imagine that the key factor in what he sees as Leonidas's choice was the known public-spirited stoicism of the prospective widows of these men.

⁵³ Hdt. 7.133–4.

⁵⁴ The exact date is uncertain: see recently P. J. Rhodes, 'Herodotean chronology revisited', in P. Derow & R. Parker (eds.), *Herodotus and his World. Essays from a conference in memory of George Forrest* (Oxford 2003), 57 ff., at 61, 62, 71.

⁵⁵ See esp. Hdt. 5.63.2; 9.7, with R. Parker, 'Spartan religion', in A. Powell (ed.), *Classical Sparta: techniques behind her success* (London, 1989), 142 ff.

of making atonement to Xerxes, and of sending two Spartans to be killed by him as double restitution and compensation for the murder of the single Persian emissary.⁵⁶ The two noble Spartan citizens whom they sent (noble in more senses than one, being both aristocratic and virtuous) were volunteers. They had come forward after the Spartans had, exceptionally, held a string of public assemblies precisely for the purpose of discovering who would be willing to die for this communal cause. Call the Spartans naive – certainly, that was how their gesture was reportedly regarded by Xerxes (who simply dismissed the would-be patriotic suicides from his presence with contempt). But the spirit of self-sacrifice for a larger cause, in this case the good of all Greece, not just of Sparta, shines out from the episode.⁵⁷

In the event Xerxes did of course invade Greece and, after stiff Greek resistance, force the pass of Thermopylae. The epigram written by Simonides to hymn the heroic Spartan dead in this encounter begins, famously, ‘Go, tell the Spartans, . . .’. That phrase was borrowed, controversially, for the title of a Vietnam War movie; and the mark Thermopylae has made on American popular culture is attested also by the huge sales of Steven Pressfield’s epic novel of Thermopylae, *Gates of Fire*, and not least by the correspondence it generated (accessible *via* amazon.com), including messages from Korean War as well as Vietnam War veterans. As if we needed it, that is confirmation that the heroic ideal of military self-sacrifice on behalf of one’s country still flourishes in the States.⁵⁸ The Simonides epigram continues: ‘. . . stranger passing by, | That here obedient to their laws we lie’. The laws of Sparta were unusually rigorous, and rigid. But another emblematic passage of Herodotus makes clear, I think, how that last clause of the epigram was supposed to be read: that is, as illustrating the characteristically Greek civic quality of obedience to the laws, a quality that the Spartans embodied and acted upon to the full.

The further passage in question purports to relate one of the several conversations between Great King Xerxes of Persia and a member of his

⁵⁶ The notion of double restitution was a well-established part of Greek judicial thinking and practice.

⁵⁷ Sparta had not participated in the Marathon battle, having been prevented by an alleged religious scruple; it was at any rate certainly against Athens that the Persians’ desire for revenge was principally directed. Cf. Hdt. 6.61.1, where he specifically commends Spartan king Cleomenes I (whom he otherwise derogates) for acting in about 491 ‘for the common good of Hellas’.

⁵⁸ Curiously, a different translation of the Simonides epigram is included in *101 Poems Against War*, M. Hollis and P. Keegan (eds.) (London, 2003), an anti-war collection published to coincide with the Iraq War. But, as one reviewer of that collection rightly observed (Tom Payne in *The Daily Telegraph*, 29 March 2003), ‘These aren’t the words of a Greek peacenik. It is a tribute to men who did what their state requested, even if that request was that they face certain death’.

intimate circle of advisers, who was a Greek, and so formally a traitor, and yet more relevantly a Spartan, in fact, most relevantly of all, a deposed Spartan king, ex-King Demaratus. Of course, the conversation is entirely fictional, which makes it all the more significant as Herodotean propaganda or as value-judgment.⁵⁹ Xerxes, as we have seen, could not believe that the Spartans would actually stand up to him when put to the test. Demaratus here reassures him that they will, for this reason: that they fear the law more even than Xerxes's subjects fear him.

Yet there was a key difference between the two fears, a difference in kind, as Herodotus presents them. The Spartans had a choice, a relevantly free choice. They made their laws by collective agreement, and they chose to obey them. They were not compelled by sheer terror or force to obey the arbitrary and lawless whim of a human despot or autocrat. That, certainly, was a biased, ethnocentric judgment on the part of Herodotus. But it also, I would argue, contains an essential truth, about the ancient Greeks as a whole and so, not least, about the leading Greeks of the Persian War period, the Spartans.⁶⁰

Envoi

Sparta, as we have noted, occupies a central place in the utopian tradition. But Utopia, as the coiner of the word, Thomas More, knew very well, is formally ambiguous. It can mean either 'No-Where' (*ou-topia*) or 'Place of Well-Faring' (*eu-topia*). The news from the Spartan Nowhere is admittedly not all good. A recent article in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, featuring my *Spartans* book and TV series, was introduced editorially as follows: 'They hurled babies into ravines and culled their workforce yearly. Historian Paul Cartledge thinks we could learn a thing or two from those Spartans!'⁶¹ Nevertheless, I should still

⁵⁹ Herodotus could have talked to Demaratus's descendants, living in the Troad, but neither they nor he are likely to have preserved accurately the content of any particular conversations; besides, this particular conversation was peculiarly emblematic.

⁶⁰ Sara Forsdyke, in her reply to an oral version of this essay delivered at the University of Michigan, challenged my reading of Hdt. 7.104.4, on the grounds that it implied a more negative view than I allowed of Sparta and its attitude to civic lawfulness; cf. her 'Athenian democratic ideology and Herodotus' *Histories*', *American Journal of Philology* 122 (2001), 329 ff., at 341 ff. ('Demaratus and Xerxes'). But the very fact of Demaratus' self-exile at least tells us that not even a king in Sparta occupied anything like Xerxes' supra-legal position. The Persian constitution was a case of autocracy tempered by assassination – as in the case of Xerxes himself. I am most grateful to Professor Vassilis Lambropoulos for engaging Sara Forsdyke and me in fruitful dialogue.

⁶¹ *THES*, 15 November 2002. Happily the article itself, by Jennifer Wallace, author of *Shelley and Greece. Rethinking Romantic Hellenism* (London, 1997), was above such journalistic sensationalism.

like to think, and like readers to think, that a Thermopylae-inspired *eutopia* might not be too bad a place to be – minus, of course, the exposure of infants and the existence of Helots.

For the ancient ideal encapsulated in the myth of Thermopylae still resonates today. It is the ideal concept that there are some values that are worth dying for, as well as living for. That notion, however, to return to my starting-point, can be a two-edged sword. It is very far from my purpose to resort to orientalist stereotypes, but I have to say that, as applied by certain suicide-bombers, for example, however justified their cause, it seems to me to be wholly repellent. On the other hand, when developed in the direction taken by the Spartans and their founder-law-giver Lycurgus, it can generate ideals of communal co-operation and self-sacrifice that qualify properly and justly for the honorific label of (e)utopia.⁶²

⁶² It is a particular pleasure to publish for the first time in *Greece & Rome*, the origins of which are handsomely documented by Christopher Stray in Stray (ed.), *The Classical Association. The First Century 1903–2003* (Oxford, 2003), 115 ff. I am most grateful to the editors for helpful corrections and suggestions.