



Toynbee's "Hellenism"

Author(s): Victor Ehrenberg

Source: *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Oct., 1959, Bd. 8, H. 4 (Oct., 1959), pp. 491-496

Published by: Franz Steiner Verlag

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/4434636>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Franz Steiner Verlag is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*

JSTOR

TOYNBEE'S HELLENISM

On revient toujours à ses premiers amours. Professor Arnold J. Toynbee, after all his vast journeying through the world past and present, has now published a book which, according to the preface, was commissioned in 1914¹. Its first as well as its second beginnings (in 1951) had the blessing of Gilbert Murray, though he did not live to see the completed book. This unusual story of the book's origin is certainly a remarkable contribution to the author's biography; but it seems to me of little importance for the book itself. That draft of 1914, which included the first four chapters, must since have been considerably changed, though occasionally we find a reference to T.s travels in the Greek world of 1911-12.

What we are not told, but would be most eager to know, is whether what was planned in 1914 was actually concerned with the same subject, with "Hellenism" as "the History of a Civilization". If the general concept in 1914 was identical with that of 1959, it would show that one of the leading ideas of *The Study of History* was present in Dr. Toynbee's mind at a very early stage when his scholarly interest belonged almost exclusively to ancient Greece. I very much doubt whether that is so. When using the French tag at the beginning, I assumed something that, as we shall see, is untrue. The present Professor Toynbee does not love Greece and Greek civilization. It is well known by now that he has turned his back on the West and looks to the East for the future. He no longer shares the views of Philhellenists such as Gilbert Murray. It must have been different when he drafted his book for the first time.

Be that as it may, the true begetter of the book as we read it now is the famous writer of today, one of the most controversial persons in the world of scholarship, the man whose staggering knowledge far outranges that of any other living historian or sociologist, and who in general could perhaps be described as 'more than a historian and less than a philosopher', or – with less indulgence – as neither the one nor the other.

The present book appears in a series of popular appeal. It will chiefly be read by people interested in the historical foundations of our civilization, but unable to distinguish between generally accepted facts and bold assumptions which are pronounced with the same dogmatic assurance. It might be well to warn readers not to accept T.s message too easily as gospel truth. This, however, should not prevent us from realising that the book, at least in large parts, makes fascinating reading.

It has been a kind of pastime for ancient historians to point out the mistakes – some fundamental, some of less importance – in works like those of Spengler and Toynbee. That is an understandable and justifiable action, though such attacks by specialists often hardly touched the wide universality and the essence of those imposing attempts at historical construction and frequently led to misjudgments. It is different with Toynbee's new book. Although it is clearly shaped by the ideas of his major work, it is definitely confined to the history of Greece and Rome, and it is therefore the duty of an ancient historian to ask to what extent the specialist can agree, and of course in what respects he can learn something from it.

'Hellenism' is not a clear-cut concept in English. It is well known that it has not the meaning of 'the Hellenistic age', as its equivalents have in German or French. The Concise Oxford Dictionary provides the following explanations for the word: Greek idiom or construction; imitation of the Greeks; Grecian culture; Greek nationality. Obviously, the only meaning T. had in mind is the third one, although it is by no means clear what difference there is supposed to be between Grecian and Greek; perhaps, Grecian here indicates what T. calls 'Hellenic'. At any rate, he rightly felt that he had better define his title more strictly. The first words of the first chapter make one thing clear: "Hellenism was a civilization". It

¹ *Hellenism. The History of a Civilization.* By Arnold J. Toynbee. (The Home University Library, vol. 238) London, Oxford University Press, 1959. XIII, 255 pp.

lasted from "the end of the second millenium B.C. until the seventh century of the Christian era". The publishers, in their blurb, describe this period of about 1800 years by the far more commonplace expression of Graeco-Roman culture; but that is contrary to T.s own ideas. The unity of his so-called 'Hellenic society', in which Rome loses her independent character and the Greeks lose their special appeal, is one of the fundamental ideas in T.s major work. It has been strongly challenged², and we must understand that in this more popular work T. once again tries to make his idea clear and perhaps more palatable. 'Hellenism', he tells us, cannot be replaced by 'History of Greece', as Greece is a geographical name, connected with pre- and post-Hellenic civilizations alike, while, on the other hand, the Hellenic civilization was not confined to Greece alone. This, of course, is true though a little pedantic. 'Greek civilization', he further explains, is closely associated with the Greek language, and neither the Mycenaean Linear B nor the modern Greeks belong to that same civilization. He also points out that some Greek-speaking peoples, e.g. north of Greece or in Cyprus or Asia Minor, were not "members of the Hellenic society", although some non-Greek-speaking peoples like the Romans and before them e.g. the Etruscans and the Lydians were. I do not feel that this argument leads to any clear distinction between those within and those without, and we naturally are the more keen to hear what is the positive and common characteristic that binds the Hellenic society together.

We are told that its essence was social and cultural, "a distinctive way of life which was embodied in a master institution, city-states." This definition, however, is at once corrected, because there were non-Hellenic city-states before and after, from the Sumerian cities of 3000 B.C. and the Phoenician cities of Canaan to the Italian, Flemish and German city-states of the Middle Ages, down to today's Hamburg, Geneva, Berne, San Marino! I very much doubt the cogency of this argument. The early Eastern city-states, it is true, were different indeed from the Greek Polis because they were ruled by kings and priests, and were not communities of free citizens. As to the late examples, there is no convincing reason why Venice or Siena, who largely perpetuated Roman traditions, should be excluded (as, of course, they must be), while Rome is not. The difference might be called one of degree only.

Still, we learn that the distinctive mark of the Hellenic way of life is "Man-worship or Humanism", not the only but "the most whole-hearted and uncompromising practice of man-worship that is on record up to date". Here we are in the centre of T.s fundamental ideas, for his outlook is essentially religious. He cannot any longer claim to be a Christian, his religiosity is fed from numerous sources, and yet it is in a sense narrow. This is how he describes Greek religion. Nature-worship is supposed to have gone underground when the barbarian Greeks of the post-Mycenaean age brought with them the Olympian gods. These "disreputable brigands" were "an unworthy object of worship" for a civilized society and were therefore soon "discredited and derided". Xenophanes is taken to prove what innumerable literary and artistic examples of religious fervour and pious intimacy or the great influence of Delphi are not supposed to disprove. We need not think of the idealised deities of earlier European poets or of the mystically glorified gods of Walter F. Otto, in order to know that T.s picture lacks all understanding of Greek religion, and thus of the Greek mind in general.

Toynbee's idea of Greek 'Humanism' is wrong in other ways as well. The Greeks "never succeeded in breaking away, unaided, from the man-worship that they had inherited from their barbarian sires". It seems hardly necessary to prove in detail how completely false this phrase is. It may suffice to emphasize the general error that lies in speaking of man-worship or (later) of the worship of the city-state. Even the oft-mentioned goddesses of the various Poleis were divine persons and not political symbols. Protagoras' famous sentence,

² e.g. by J. Vogt, *Saeculum* II 557ff.

here as usual misunderstood, serves as the first, and practically the last, evidence of that man-worship which is contrasted with Jewish-Christian beliefs. That contrast is, of course, right and well known, though T. himself admits that the idea of divine incarnation has been the Hellenic legacy which Christianity injected into Judaism. This, if anything, ought to have convinced him how mistaken his concept of Greek man-worship actually is. The fact that with the Greeks the borderline between man and god could be crossed (though often enough it was felt in all its serious impact), does not display man-worship; it reveals a divine world for which nineteenth century man (and T. seems far more of the 19th than the 20th century) had no understanding.

If, as I believe, the theoretical foundations of T.'s views on the Greeks are unsafe and mistaken, his book might still contain an impressive and important picture of what we may continue to call Greek civilization. We must try to learn a little more about the lay-out and the further contents of the book. The second chapter deals with the physical environment, the geographical facts which are discussed in some detail, with a few personal experiences thrown in, as e.g. about the cold Greek winter. T. thus to some extent explains the amazing ability of the Greeks to found their city-states in the most varied environments and climates. With the next chapter, the real 'history' begins. We are faced at once with the typical Toynbeian concept of 'challenge and response' which can be regarded as a useful aid in arranging one's historical material. Still, it fundamentally comes to about the same thing as the ordinary historian's cause and effect. The response to threats of 'anarchy and stringency' in the dark centuries after 1100 B.C. is an age of violence which, according to T., culminates in the victory of the lowland farmers over the highland shepherds. The evidence for this struggle is largely conjectural, though the appearance of Perioeci such as in Laconia and Thessaly may partly confirm the theory. Anyway, it was the natural growth of the city-states and their need for security that led to the inclusion of the hills which surrounded the plains. The lack of fertile soil, on the other hand, and the growth of the population were the main causes of the colonization, that magnificent response to the challenge of stringency. It met with another challenge, that of the Phoenician and Etruscan competition which eventually put an end to the Greek expansion. The Etruscans here appear, without the slightest proof or doubt, as "the Hittites' maritime representatives"! The arrest of Greek emigration meant an additional burden on the social situation in the city-states at home and had its impact on economic and political life. Even so, it seems a one-sided statement, out of touch with the results of more recent research, to say that "in an industrialised Hellenic world towards the close of the sixth century B.C., the oarsman and the artisan had won the key position in society that had been won about 200 years earlier by the yeoman-hoplite". At that moment it was not even true of Athens; of how few of the Greek city-states could it really be said!

In a previous chapter (IV) T. had dealt with "the emancipation of individuals by city-states"; this is later followed by "the emancipation of individuals from city-states" (ch. IX). The parallel indicates the well-constructed arrangement of the whole book. The liberation of the individual is rightly emphasized, though the names of the tyrants ought to have appeared alongside the names of the lyrical poets and the early philosophers. But what are we to think of the statement that the earlier development ended exactly in 431 B.C.? The importance of that year and the Peloponnesian War as a whole ("which wrecked the Hellenic civilization"!) is exaggerated beyond all reasonable limits. It is equally unhistorical to repeat the lament of the 19th century historians that the Greeks were unable to overcome the plurality of their Poleis. Of course they were, but that was one of the reasons for the greatness of their culture. It does not make much more sense than to complain that the British (though certainly not Dr. Toynbee) have never quite overcome their insularity.

Challenge and response are used again for the Persian attack on Greece. But what a

different challenge and what a different response from the kind we heard of before! Here the danger becomes manifest of using certain constant categories in a routine way. The details of T.s narrative of these events are of no special interest, and the subsequent picture of Periclean Athens is too full of preconceived and biased ideas to give the reader any satisfactory impression. It is understandable that T. should accept Gilbert Murray's views on Greek tragedy; but there are few scholars today who still think that the alleged fertility rite is of real importance for our understanding of the tragedians. Astonishingly little is said about the height and uniqueness of Athenian civilization, and if T.s picture rightly leads up to the figure of Socrates, he hardly does him justice by concentrating on his allegedly futile attempt ("Virtue is Knowledge") "to reduce moral issues to questions of taste or knowledge"! Pericles of all men is used to prove that this Socratic theory is mistaken; for he knew what he did when he used the tributes of the allies for the rebuilding of the Athenian temples and thus for the employment of the discharged soldiers and sailors. It is entirely out of proportion to condemn this as an "act of dishonesty". For one thing, Athens still upheld the freedom of the seas, and not all the tributes went into the buildings. These, on the other hand, were not, as so many great buildings of early times, the product of forced labour and the lash of the whip. Citizens, metics and slaves were working side by side for equal pay, and a slave could even be a foreman. Athenian 'tyranny' over her allies was no better nor worse than that of any imperial power, and her interference in the domestic situation of the allied states sometimes involved the overthrow of a small ruling oligarchy. To compare Athens with Sparta as "a parasitic military 'ascendancy' with its own helots and perioeci" (meaning the two groups of allies!) is an absurd abandonment of historical objectivity.

The political and military history of the fifth and fourth centuries are narrated in a dry enumeration which is not worthy of the author nor suitable to the general tenor of the book. This is the more regrettable as there is no satisfactory realisation of what these centuries meant in the history of the human mind, nor of the positive side of the city-state way of life. T. speaks of its amenities and its penalties, but neglects its achievements. However strongly we may feel about the crime of 399, it is nonsense to claim that "nothing did so much as the judicial murder of Socrates to detach Hellenic hearts from all (*sic*) city-states". It was, in fact, Socrates who by his ultimate sacrifice revealed the greatness and the power of the state laws. Wherever law and order, public spirit and human perfection are regarded as valuable assets (to say the least) of human society, thanks are due to the Greek city-state. Surely, the 'realistic' treatment of history which debunks sentimentality and idealism and emphasizes the economic and social aspects, has ended upon the rocks.

It seems hardly necessary to follow the further chapters as closely. We have already briefly mentioned the wrong position into which Rome ('barbarian' to most Greeks) is juggled by including it among the Hellenic city-states. To protest against this trick does not mean that we underestimate the primary importance of the Hellenization of Rome – so far as it went. But even T.s somewhat tentative derivation of Roman dual citizenship from that of the Greek federal leagues is quite misleading. T. realises the immense importance of Rome's citizen soldiery, and yet he fails to see the fundamental difference between the ways the Greeks and the Romans handled citizenship, as it is, for instance, demonstrated in the Athenian and the Roman empires. It is just here that Rome's political genius is most spectacularly displayed and is most certainly not 'Hellenic'.

The two last centuries B.C. (or, with T.s preference for exact dates, the period from 218 to 31 B.C.) are called in this book "the age of agony". That is not a bad title for an age dominated by a Rome corrupt and torn from within, the age also of the full decline of the Hellenistic powers and the renewed inroads by barbarians in East and West. T. does not forget that at the same time the real Hellenism (not its Roman version) had its first encounter with Judaism which foreshadowed what he calls their "eventual mating" in Chris-

tianity and Islam. He neither forgets that the age of agony also saw the reception of Hellenism by the Parthians and its expansion into India where it influenced, and was influenced by, Buddhism, the one religion which in other ways was as un-Greek as Judaism. In both cases, the progress of Hellenism ended outwardly in defeat and decline. And yet, it was in that age of agony that some of the strongest foundations were laid for later centuries.

With Augustus a new age began, and we refuse to take it as a part of Hellenism. We may agree that the three empires between the Atlantic and the Ganges can all be called philhellene. The impact of Greek thought and art and of the Hellenistic forms of government (such as the deified ruler, a professional army, and a professional civil service) is beyond doubt. Yet T. himself sees differences: "The Romans were thorough-going converts to the Hellenic way of life". (Needless to say that this is fantastically wrong.) "The Parthians were benevolent patrons of it". (They created a true successor state to the Seleucid empire, and they were responsible for the prosperity and culture of Dura-Europus: were they only patrons?) "The Kushans were Hellenes by adoption". (Of their empire in Northern India this reviewer has no knowledge of his own, but he wishes to point out that 'adoption' is usually of a more lasting nature than the Hellenism of the Yavanas, if that was their name³.)

The early Roman empire is characterized by T. as a dull affair. Can any period of universal history really be dull? Was the tremendous adventure of this so far greatest empire not something exciting and impressive and wonderful, even with all its faults and weaknesses? I also cannot believe that life under the Principate was 'dull', unless one thinks that peace and prosperity are merely dull. Here as elsewhere T. proves to be one of the simplifiers of history. It is true that he also makes it complex by assembling individual trends into an overlying master plan; but the complexity of the single trends (such as Greek or Roman history) evades him. In a sense, T. contradicts himself by writing two more chapters on the unique exchange between Hellenic thought and Eastern religions under the empire. He naturally sees Christianity as one of these religions and stresses its Hellenic side as well; but what an incredibly silly and outrageous idea it is to compare Jesus – because of a death without self-defence – with "the gentle Spartan martyr king Agis and the gentle Roman martyr aristocrat Tiberius Gracchus"! He goes on in a similar vein, and his lack of reverence, obvious before in his verdicts on Greece, here reaches a summit which will shock non-believers as much as believers. The story of the fight between Christianity and the Roman government is in a high degree distorted because T. insists on calling emperors and empire Hellenic instead of Roman or barbarian, whichever seems at times the better description. This is particularly strange because he believes that his 'Hellenism' was dead before Christianity became the official religion and before the barbarians founded new states of their own within the frontiers of the empire. Hellenism collapsed in the 'age of anarchy' in the third century A.D. I wonder what the Neoplatonists would have thought of that. If "Christianity superseded Hellenism", it could not do so without the support (or the antagonism) of Rome. If T. had been able to see the Roman traditions in their own right, he would have drawn a very different picture of the 'Decline and Fall'.

Toynbee's last words are a warning to the present world. We have revived, so he tells us, the Hellenic worship of idolized local states. In normal language this means that mankind is at present indulging in nationalism. That certainly is a very serious and dangerous state of affairs; but it is not "a ghost of Hellenism".

We have reached the end of this very long discussion of a small book. The present generation of historians, and especially of ancient historians, is exposed, to a degree unknown to the last few generations, to the impact and even the attacks of the 'synthesists', with their philosophical or sociological surveys of universal history. Such invasions into the world of

³ cf. A. K. Narain, *The Indo-Greeks* (1957).

more conventional historical writing may enliven it and provide it with new and fertile ideas. They may, or they may not. The danger is that the accumulation of knowledge over a very wide field and the use of certain preconceived ideas will frequently lack that sobriety and clarity without which no history worthy of its name can be written. Toynbee is not the only offender⁴, though the one with the greatest influence. In this review I was not concerned with his *magnum opus*, though some of its ideas proved relevant. The present book asks for special treatment; it asks for a warning. It is intended for a wide audience, above all for teachers and students and pupils in Adult Education classes. They should know that it teaches unsound history⁵.

It may be repeated that there is one more reason why we feel justified in criticising T.'s book in such detail. T., in person even more than in print, has a disarming modesty, a charm and a persuasiveness quite his own. At the same time, he overwhelms the reader of his *Study of History* with his immense learnedness and the wealth of his ideas. His fundamental conceptions are hammered in merely by being used again and again, and by taken for granted. We ordinary mortals who feel unable to stand up to this torrent of words and ideas and facts, all expressed with such skill and conviction, can have our say when T. meets us in our own field, on a smaller scale and with narrower aims. That is the ultimate reason for writing this response to Toynbee's challenge to the ancient historians.

London

VICTOR EHRENBERG

⁴ cf. e.g. my review of E. Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. II in *H.Z.* 187, 369 ff.

⁵ A few minor points: It is not before the third or second century B.C. that "public events were dated by Hellenic historians as having occurred in such and such an Olympiad" (p. 5). – Why should the king of Persia, the Great King, consistently be called 'Emperor'? – Doris was not the name of the islands off the South-West coast of Asia Minor (p. 28). – The attempt to translate Greek and Latin words is certainly carried too far, if we e.g. hear of 'shield-wielders', 'undershields', 'thridings', and have to guess that *hoplites*, *hypaspistae*, and *tribus* are meant. Nor do I think 'nation' or 'race' (in place of 'tribe') a happy translation for *phyle*.

C. PACCIUS AFRICANUS

In his magnificent *Tacitus*,¹ Ronald Syme presents the reader with a vast panorama of the early principate. Among the minor characters who fill his pages is C. Paccius Africanus, who is mentioned twice; his career, however, is not drawn in detail. Nor does recourse to the *RE* give satisfaction; we find a Tacitean Paccius Africanus, but none with the praenomen Caius. Among the relatively few Paccii discussed in the *RE*,² the possible identification of one other with this man is hinted at, but no more.³ It seems possible now to claim that the two are in actuality one, and that this one is C. Paccius Africanus.

¹ Oxford, 1958, 2 vols.

² The name Paccius is rather uncommon in Roman history, as are the etymologically related names Pacius, Paquius, and Pacuvius (F. Münzer, *RE*, 18,1 (1942) 2062, s. v. Paccius). *RE*, *loc. cit.*, 2063–5, gives fifteen Paccii, P. de Rohden & H. Dessau, *PIR* III (Berlin, 1898) pp. 3–4, list seven, Dessau, in his index to *ILS*, III, 1, pp. 109–10, twenty. The indices to various volumes of the *CIL* have, of course, more, but we know nothing about most of them.

³ M. Hofmann, *RE*, *loc. cit.*, under No. 7, "Der Zeit nach wäre eine Identifizierung mit dem . . . Paccius Africanus (s. Nr. 11) nicht unmöglich, . . .," and No. 11, "Identität mit C. Paccius C. f. (. . . s. Nr. 7) möglich, aber nicht beweisbar."