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Anarchism and the Greek Temperament

Alan Morgan

November 1964

THE FIRST SYSTEMATIC ANARCHIST PHILOSOPHER was, so we are told, Zeno of Citium (320–250 BC) who, says the encyclopaedia, “was the author of some eighteen books, including the notorious *Republic*, an early work of cynic and anarchist tendencies.” But none of them survive, and all we know of them is from other Greek author’s quotations. Nevertheless we may readily assent to the proposition that, of the three ancient peoples who shaped our civilisation, it was the Greeks whose characteristic temperament and attitudes appeal most to anarchists.

You can see this for yourself by playing the parlour game of Jews, Greeks and Romans, the invention of which Colin MacInnes ascribes to David Sylvester. We can all, he claims (regardless of our actual ethnic origins of course) be classified as one of these three. The stereotypes, for purposes of the game, are that the Jews were moralising, prophetic, radical-traditional, the Greeks were life-loving, crafty, hedonistic-spiritual, and the Romans authoritarian, organisational, grandiose, rhetorical.

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Retrieved on 22nd September 2020 from

<https://libcom.org/library/anarchism-greek-temperament>

Originally published in *Anarchy* #045: Ancient Greece

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

The game consists simply in classifying your friends, public figures or historical characters, as one or other of the three types. Politicians are almost always Romans, you will find. Occasionally they are Jews, but very seldom Greeks. Anarchists are sometimes Greeks and sometimes Jews. The clash between these two temperaments among anarchists is frequently responsible for the divisions between them. Some of us of course, are Greeks masquerading as Jews and some of us are Jews who would dearly love to be Greeks. Some of us conceal a Roman tinge. It certainly helps clear the air if we are able to attribute our differences to temperament rather than to wickedness or bad faith.

The Greek temperament, or our interpretation of it, is capable of arousing a passionate loyalty among its adherents. Henry Miller for example, writes ecstatically, "I love those men, each and every one, for having revealed to me the true proportions of the human being. I love the soil in which they grew, the tree from which they sprang, the light in which they flourished, the goodness, the integrity, the charity which they emanated. They brought me face to face with myself, they cleansed me of hatred and jealousy and envy. And not least of all, they demonstrated by their own example that life could be lived magnificently, on any scale, in any climate, under any conditions."

These are not, of course, the lessons that the classical education of the English aristocracy inculcated, but then, as Simon Raven pointed out in ANARCHY 24, the texts selected by the schoolmasters were hardly representative. He was untypical of their pupils in that he actually succeeded in learning the classical languages and in reading for pleasure. "And some curiosity lead me to look in a lot of places and not just where they told me to look. I found that what it said was richly and ripely subversive of the whole moral doctrines in which I was being so carefully and expensively educated. It either refuted them, mocked at them, or quite simply ignored them."

Elsewhere, paraphrasing Maurice Bowra's *The Greek Experience*, he epitomises the Good News from Greece, in these propositions:

1. This world, peopled by man, is the proper concern of man.
2. Death is a fascinating subject for speculation, but anyone who who claims to know the truth about it is either a fool or a confidence-trickster.
3. The Gods have taken human shape, not out of condescension, but because there is no other shape worth taking.
4. The truth is not determined by Revelation but by logical deduction from self-evident principles or from such natural examples as are available.
5. Laughter, wine and the love of friends are all the sweeter for being merely transient.
6. Physical love is an enjoyable and harmless occupation.

For other cultures, Goethe remarked, one must make allowances; to the Greek alone one is always a debtor.