

On a Little Known Chapter of Mediterranean History

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It is a great honour and a great experience to have been chosen to be the first person to receive the Premi Internacional Catalunya: a newly founded prize whose foundation is clearly of historical and symbolic significance for Catalonia. I am now standing before you with two tasks to fulfil. The first is to thank the Institut Català de la Mediterrània and its President and Officers, and all others concerned, for having conferred on me so great an honour by judging me, and my work, worthy of being chosen. This task of giving thanks is easy to perform; for since I feel abundantly grateful, it is easy for me to say: Thank you very much indeed, thank you for your appreciation of my work, thank you for your good will, and thank you all for your generosity. And thank you also for all the work and all the effort and all the time you have spent in preparing this solemn ceremony. And I also want to thank all of you who have come here with the intention of participating in this great occasion. And finally, let me express my thanks to the people of Catalonia and to the members of their Generalitat and to their President.

Turning now to my second task, this is far more difficult. It is my task to address you. But it is obviously impossible for me to make, by way of a short address, anything like an adequate return to you, much as I should wish to do so. When preparing for this address, my inadequacy was a heavy weight, and I found it very difficult to decide on a topic. Should I talk to you on an abstract subject matter like the theory of scientific knowledge? Or on democracy? But is not democracy a subject of which you may perhaps know more than I do? If possible, I should say something interesting about the Mediterranean, I thought, in deference to your Institut Català de la Mediterrània; but I know nothing, or very little, about the Mediterranean. So in my mind's eye I saw myself standing here before you, an old man of 87 before his stern judges, and not a good speaker – somewhat like Socrates before the 501 stern Athenian judges who condemned him to death.

When I had come so far in my considerations, I suddenly knew what was

to be the topic of my address: "The Miracle of Athens and the Origin of Athenian Democracy". This was an appropriate theme, for it was to become the miracle of Greece, and later, the miracle of the Mediterranean, of Mediterranean civilization. It is a topic which combines the themes of democracy with that of Mediterranean civilization, and which gives me the possibility of addressing you on a topic to which I myself have made a contribution – a contribution which I have not fully developed before. Our civilization, which is essentially Mediterranean civilization, derives from the Greeks. And it is the period from the 6th century to the 4th century before Christ in which this civilization was born; and it was born in Athens.

The Athenian miracle is staggering. Here we have, in a short period, beginning with Solon at about 600, a peaceful revolution. Solon saved the city by shaking off the burden of debt from the exploited Athenian citizens, and by forbidding that any Athenian be made a slave because of his debts. It was the first constitution ever designed to preserve the freedom of the citizenship, and it will never be forgotten, although the history of Athens showed abundantly clearly that freedom is never secure but always threatened.

Solon was not only a great statesman but also the first Athenian poet of whom we have knowledge; and he explained his aims in his poetry. He spoke of *eunomia* or "good government", and he explained this as balancing the conflicting interests of the citizenship. It was, no doubt, the first time, at least the first time in the Mediterranean region, that a constitution had been shaped with an ethical and humanitarian aim. And what was at work here was the universally valid ethical imperative that Schopenhauer brought into the simple form: *Neminem lede imo omnes, quantum potes, juva!* That is: "Do not hurt anybody, rather help everybody, as well as you can!".

Like the American revolution, which came 2500 years later, Solon's revolution had only the freedom of the citizens in mind; the slavery of the bought barbarian slaves was overlooked.

After Solon, Athenian policies were far from stable. Several families were contesting for power, and after some unsuccessful attempts,

Peisistratos, a relation of Solon's, established himself as a monarch or tyrant in Athens. The source of his great wealth were silver mines that were situated outside Attica, and he used his wealth in Athens largely for cultural purposes and for stabilizing the Solonian reforms. He instituted festivals, especially theatrical ones; to him is due the founding of the performances of tragedies in Athens. And as we know from Cicero, he organized the writing down of the works of Homer, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which previously seem to have existed only as oral traditions. It is the main thesis of my speech that this was a deed that had the most far-reaching consequences, making it an event of focal significance in the history of our civilization.

For many years, ever since I wrote my *Open Society and its Enemies*, the Athenian miracle has been a problem that fascinated me. It was a problem that followed me around and did not let me go. What was it that made Athens create our civilization? What made Athens invent art and literature, tragedy, philosophy, science, and democracy, all in such a short period of time?

I had one answer to this problem, an answer that was undoubtedly true but, I felt, quite insufficient. The answer was: *culture clash*. When two or more different cultures come into contact, then this makes people realize that their ways and manners are not natural, not the only possible ones, neither decreed by the gods nor part of human nature. It thus opens up a world of new possibilities: it opens the windows and lets in fresh air. This is a kind of sociological law, and it explains a lot. And it certainly played an important role in Greek history.

Indeed, one of Homer's main themes in the *Iliad* and even more in the *Odyssey* is, precisely, culture clash. And culture clash is of course also a main topic of Herodotus's *History*. Its significance for Greek civilization is very great.

Yet this explanation did not satisfy me. And for a long time I felt that I had to give up. A miracle like the Athenian miracle I felt could not be explained. And least of all could it be explained by the writing down of the works of Homer, although this certainly had great influence. Books, and indeed great books, had been written down before, and at other

places, and nothing comparable to the Athenian miracle had happened.

But one day I went back to Plato's *Apology of Socrates before his Judges* – the most beautiful philosophical work I know. And re-reading a much discussed passage, I had a new idea. The passage (26 D-E) implies that there was a flourishing book market in Athens in the year 399 BC, a market, at any rate, where even old books (like the one by Anaxagoras) were sold on a regular basis, and where they could be bought quite cheaply. Eupolis, the great master of ancient comedy, speaks (in a fragment cited by Pollux, *Onomasticon* IX, 47; cp. VII, 211) quite explicitly of a book market 50 years earlier. Now when could such a market have arisen? It was clear: only after Peisistratos had the works of Homer written down.

Slowly, the whole significance of this event dawned on me: the picture began to unfold. Before Homer had been written down, there were books, but no popular books, freely distributed on the market: books were, if they existed, a great rarity, not commercially copied and distributed, but kept (like the book written by Heraclitus) in a holy place, under the surveillance of priests. But in Athens, we know that Homer had become popular: everybody had read Homer, most knew him by heart. Homer had become the first public entertainment ever! And this was the case mainly in Athens, as we can learn from Plato who in his *Politeia* complains about this dangerous entertainment and in his *Nomoi* ironizes Sparta where Homer's name is not quite unknown, and Crete where he has never been heard of. No doubt the great success of Homer in Athens led to commercial book publishing: books, we know, were dictated to a set of literate slaves who wrote them down on papyrus; the sheets were collected in scrolls or "books".

How did all this start? The most likely hypothesis is that Peisistratos himself not only edited Homer but had him copied and distributed. By a strange coincidence I stumbled across a report saying that in a year in which Peisistratos was still ruling Athens, the first and very considerable export of papyrus from Egypt to Athens began. Since

Peisistratos had been interested in having public recitals of Homer, it is very plausible that he started distributing the newly edited books; and their popularity led to the appearance of other publishers.

Collections of poems written by other poets, as well as tragedies and comedies followed. None of these had been written with the intention of being published; but books written with that intention followed as soon as publishing had become an established practice, and the book market (*biblionia*) in the Agora had become an institution. I conjecture that the first book written with the intention of publication was Anaxagoras's great work *On Nature*. Anaximandros's work was, it seems, never published, although it seems that the Lyceum had a copy, or perhaps a summary, and that Appollodoros later discovered a copy –perhaps the same one– in an Athenian library. So I suggest that the publication of the works of Homer was the first publication ever, at least in the Mediterranean region. It not only made Homer the bible (*biblion*) of Athens, it made him the first instrument of education, the first primer, the first spelling book, the first novel. And it made the Athenians literate.

That this was highly significant for the establishment of the Athenian democratic revolution –the expulsion of Peisistratos's son Hippias from Athens, and the establishment of a constitution– may be seen from one of the characteristic institutions of the democracy which was established about 50 years after the first publication. I mean the institution of ostracism. This institution assumed, on the one hand, that an Athenian citizen was able to write, for it assumed that he could write the name of the citizen he thought dangerously popular or otherwise prominent on a potsherd. On the other hand, the institution of ostracism shows that the Athenians, at any rate during the first century after expelling the tyrant Hippias, regarded the prevention of a tyranny as the central problem of their democracy.

This idea comes out very clearly when we realize that the institution of ostracism did not regard banishment as a punishment. By being ostracized, a citizen's honour remained untouched, and he retained his property and indeed all rights except his right to remain in his city. This

right he lost, first for ten years and later for five, though he could be recalled. In a sense, ostracism was an honour, since it recognized that a citizen was outstanding; and some of the most outstanding leaders were ostracized. Thus the idea was: Nobody is irreplaceable, and although we admire leadership, we must be able to do without any particular leader; otherwise he may make himself our master, and it is the main task of our democracy to avoid this. It should be noted that ostracism was not long in use. The first known case was in 488 BC, and the last in 417 BC. All the cases were tragic for the great men who were banished. The period almost coincides with that of the greatest works of Athenian tragedy, with the period of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, who banished himself.

So it is my hypothesis that the first publication in Europe was the publication of Homer, and this fortunate fact led to the Greek love of Homer and of Homeric heroes, to popular literacy, and to Athenian democracy. But I think it did more. Homer was of course popular before; and almost all vase paintings had been for some time illustrations of his work, as had many sculptures. Homer himself had been a detailed and realistic painter in words of many vivid and interesting scenes, and as Ernst Gombrich has pointed out, this challenged sculptors and painters to do as he did in their own different media. And the challenge became even greater as the detailed knowledge of the Homeric text became more widespread. So the influence of the power to read upon the arts cannot be denied. The influence of Homeric themes upon the Athenian tragedians is evident; and even when they used non-Homeric themes, they were still continuing to choose themes with which their audience could be assumed to be familiar. So I can indeed claim that the cultural influence of the book market was incalculable. All the components of the Athenian miracle were greatly influenced by it.

But to crown all these arguments, we have a kind of historical experiment. The great invention that, as it were, repeated the invention of the publication of books accessible to the people on a large scale was the invention of book printing by Gutenberg, two

thousand years after Peisistratos's invention of book publishing. It is interesting that, even though the invention was made in the North of Europe, the majority of those printers who had acquired their skill took it south to the Mediterranean – to Italy. And there they played a decisive role in that great new movement called the Renaissance, and which included the new humanist scholarship and the new science that ultimately transformed our own civilization.

This was a movement on a much larger scale than the movement which I dubbed "The Athenian Miracle". It was, first of all, a movement based on very much larger editions of books. Aldus printed editions of one thousand copies in 1500. It was, obviously, the size of the printed editions which was the salient point of this new revolution. But otherwise there is an astonishing analogy, or similarity, between what had started in Athens in, say, 500 BC and had spread from there throughout the Mediterranean, and what was happening in Florence or Venice in, say, 1500 AD. And the new humanist scholars were aware of this: they wanted to renew the spirit of Athens, and they were proud of their ability to do so.

As in Athens and later in Grecia Magna –and especially in Alexandria, but indeed all over the Mediterranean–, scientific and, in particular, cosmological speculation played an important role in these movements. Renaissance mathematicians, such as Commandino, successfully tried to recapture the lost results of Euclid, Archimedes, Apollonius, Pappus and Ptolemy, but also of Aristarchus, which led to the Copernican Revolution and so to Galileo, to Kepler, to Newton and to Einstein. If our own civilization is correctly described as the first scientific civilization, then it all comes from the Mediterranean and, I suggest, from Athenian book publishing, and the Athenian book market.

In all this I have badly neglected the contribution of the Arabs, who brought an Indian number system to the Mediterranean. They gave much, but they received as much if not more than they gave when they reached the Mediterranean.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I have briefly told a well-known story – well

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known but for one small yet, I think, significant contribution: the decisive role played by books from the very beginning. Our civilization is, indeed, a bookish one; its traditionality and its originality, its seriousness and sense of intellectual responsibility, its unprecedented power of imagination and its creativity, its understanding of freedom and its watchfulness over it – all this rests on our love of books. May short-term fashions, the media, and computers never spoil or even loosen this close personal attachment!

But I do not wish to end with books, however important they are for our civilization. It is more important not to forget that a civilization consists of civilized individual men and women, of individuals who wish to live good lives and civilized lives. It is to this end that books and our civilization must make their contributions. I believe that they are doing so.