



ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE FATE OF THE SOUL

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This conference brings together classicists and anthropologists for a discussion on ancient mystery cults. To me it falls to open these proceedings. I am certainly no anthropologist and I suppose something of an outlier as a classicist; as one between the groups it is evidently my role is to play the margin and mediate between the parties. Before beginning, let me observe that I suffer under the rhetorical disability of speaking to two disparate audiences; when I find myself explaining something anthropological to the classicists I'm liable to display to the anthropologists my naïveté, while the classical material included for the information of the anthropologists is liable to grate on the classicists as overly familiar. A glance at the handout will reveal that it rounds up the usual suspects. I ask the indulgence of both groups.

I begin with an observation that these two groups are not symmetrically arranged around the topic; ancient mystery cults belong to Classics, and it seems evident that the anthropologists are here to teach the classicists something. The first thing I have to say, however, is this: the anthropological literature, so far as I have read it, has next to nothing to contribute on this topic. Once I have explained this point—which will take me a while—I am then going to go on to suggest that an anthropological way of thinking may after all be of some use here—although, for reasons I shall explain, the term “sociological” is perhaps to be preferred.

For the purposes of this argument I am defining a mystery cult as a cult which offers initiates a better fate in the afterlife. I understand that this is a highly contentious definition, that the mysteries of Samothrace, for instance, by this definition might not even qualify. However I am

interested in mysteries from this point of view, and I am taking as my starting point these familiar lines from the *Hymn to Demeter*:

ὄλβιος ὅς τὰδ' ὄρωρεν ἐριχθονί ων ἀνθρώρων
ὅς δ' ἀτελής ἱερῶν, ὅς τ' ἄμορος, οὐ ροθ' ὁμοίων
αἴσαν ἔχει φθίμενός περ ὑῆὸ ζόφωι εὐρώεντι.

Prosperous that earth-dwelling human who has seen these things;
But he who is imperfect in the sacred, who is without share, has never
A portion of similar things, once perished down in the wide darkness.

Hymn to Demeter 480-483

“These things” in the Hymn are the Eleusinian mysteries; Eleusis was the mother sanctuary of Greek mystery religion—honored above all others, says Pausanias, as much as a god excels a hero (10.31.11) and widely imitated. Pausanias mentions sanctuaries derivative from Eleusis in Phlius (2.14.12), Pheneia (8.15.2-4) and Megalopolis (8.31.7), and there were surely others; “Eleusina” is an epiklesis of Demeter in several places (Pausanias 3.20.5, 9.4.3).

Eleusis, further, certainly promised a better afterlife. Aristophanes in his play about the underworld actually brings the initiates on stage, dancing by torchlight into the sacred meadow, and lets them boast their special fate:

μόνοις γὰρ ἡμῖν ἥλιοςθή
καὶ φέγγος ἱερὸν ἔστιν,
ὅσοι μεμυήμεθηεὐσεβῆ τε διήγομενθή
τρόπον περὶ τοὺς ξένουςθή
καὶ τοὺς ἰδιώτας.

We alone have the sun and the sacred light, we who are initiate and have kept a godly disposition toward strangers and the little people.

Aristophanes Frogs 454-459

Certainly the Eleusinian mysteries promised advantages in this world also, but their main thrust was always eschatological. And that is why anthropology does not help us with them. The main work of

anthropology until recently at least has been inquiry into preliterate societies, and preliterate societies do not seem to entertain the notion of personal immortality, at least not in the sense which I am about to specify. Indeed from an anthropological point of view it is confusing to call Greek mystery cults “initiations,” since anthropologists generally use the term for coming-of-age ceremonies or for rituals of admission to some secret society (there is some overlap between the two) and for these, worldly advantages are the whole point. An initiation (anthropologically) is one type of rite of passage, and as such brings with it a new worldly status.

Another type of rite of passage, which does have next-world implications, is the funeral. Let us briefly sample the anthropological literature, taking up an essay now about a century old: Robert Hertz’s “A Contribution to the Study of the Collective Representation of Death.”¹ Hertz draws on a variety of field reports and focuses on reburial, a custom found in many parts of the world whereby the funeral is double, with an opening phase at the time of death and a concluding phase considerably—years, even—later. During the intervening period the soul of the departed lingers close to the earth, and is dangerous; the survivors are in mourning, entangled with the deceased, and may be socially segregated. Only after the final ceremony of permanent burial does the soul depart for the land of the dead; the survivors are then set free and can resume normal life. Hertz saw the pattern of this sequence (*avant le lettre*) as Van Gennep’s familiar three parts: separation, liminality, and reaggregation;² he further saw that not only are the mourners reaggregated but so is the departed—into a new social status, that of an ancestor. With permanent burial, Hertz asserts, the dead become respectable and we are reconciled with them. This is a transfiguration, and it implies a resurrection—sometimes literal, in the sense that the soul will be reborn in a new person; sometimes sociological, in the sense that the living person who is lost to us returns as a powerful ancestor, possibly the object of cult. In any case society cannot lose any of the persons who compose it. The dead are obviously gone but at the same time they remain; this must be a transformation, the acquisition of a new social status. The funeral therefore is an initiation.

That concludes my summary of Hertz. I would add that the survival of the dead is a culture universal, and must be so because it is

¹ Hertz 1960: 27-86.

² Van Gennep 1960 [1908]: 10-11 and *passim*.

empirical and undeniable: the departed linger in our thoughts, they shape our feelings and actions. They can disappear as individuals but must survive socially; they persist *to others*. Rituals cope with this fact. Through the process of the funeral the dead go away—nearly everyone seems to have some idea of a land of the dead—and at the same time they are restored to us as members of a group with whom we can have stable relations. Probably the prospect of this double transformation was sometimes consoling to individuals—to leave descendents, a monument, and unforgettable story—but that did not make it a concept of personal immortality. Personal immortality is a personal project, something to look forward to or fear as a personal experience, shaped by choices made in life. This is rather social immortality, or rather social continuation, a life after death which is actually not eternal because it is meaningful only as long as the living continue the social relation. Most often the great-grandfathers—whom the Greeks called *tritopateres*—are still with us, but the generations before them are faded into a generalized space of origins.

I now proceed to a transition from anthropology to Classics by setting next to Hertz a monograph roughly contemporary with his: Erwin Rohde's *Psyche*.³ In the first part of this two-part book Rohde discusses two contrasting ideas: the Homeric afterlife, where the dead persist insubstantially in Hades, powerless twittering shades – except for a privileged few who avoid death altogether and are translated to the Isles of the Blessed or some similar location beyond our reach – and in contrast with this, the notion of the powerful hero who survives in a cave, or as the presiding spirit of a tomb, or in some other way. Being German, Rohde wants to see these two as related by some kind of historical development; he has, however, considerable difficulty in working out the chronology, since he wants to put hero cult before Homer, although Homer is his earliest source. We need not trouble ourselves with this problem: we can rather see the two as the two halves of Hertz's double transformation: Homer speaks of the departure of the dead, hero cult of their transfigured persistence. Gregory Nagy further suggests that the epic emphasizes departure in order to insist on that special kind of persistence which the epic itself provides: “a song for men to come,” and excludes hero cult because, being associated with the hero's tomb, it is inherently local, contrary to the pan-Hellenic

³ Rohde 1925 (1893).

aspirations of epic.⁴ Nagy's suggestion certainly has the advantage of taking these contrasting ideas as two complementary aspects of a synchronic system.

Be that as it may, we can say that everything that is in Rohde's Part One (with a single exception, to which I come later) is also in Hertz: the departure of the dead, their persistence, the need to care for them, their power to affect the living. Rohde also can see that none of this implies an idea of personal immortality, of what we personally can expect beyond the grave, and in this connection he makes a link between Classics and anthropology:

From such a cult no dogmatic or distinctly outlined picture of the life of the departed could have been deduced... Everything in this connection dealt with the relation of the dead to the living... This is the point at which the cult of the souls and belief in the existence of the souls stopped short among many of the "savage" people who have no history... Such traditional beliefs...left the nature of the disembodied soul vague and undefined; they viewed it purely from the standpoint of the living and almost entirely in its relations with this world.

Rohde 1925: 217

In his second part Rohde takes up Greek ideas of personal immortality, beginning with ecstatic Dionysiac cult, which achieved purification of the soul through wild and enthusiastic rituals. This focus on the condition of the soul, says Rohde, led "naturally" to a concern for its ultimate fate; thus Rohde moves from purification to eschatology, to the idea of rebirth, and of reward and punishment after death. He does not, however, treat mystery cults in his discussion of personal immortality; his chapter on Eleusis is in Part One, where it seems to me quite out of place – indeed Eleusis is the "one exception" to which I referred earlier. Rohde's reasons are somewhat unclear – in fact he nowhere clearly states the principle which divides Part One from Part Two. From scattered remarks in his text, however, I venture to draw the following formulae and attribute them to him: Greek political society was founded on an anthropogony which recognized an absolute distinction between the divine and the human. Hero cult, which might

⁴ Nagy 1979: 114-119.

seem to place the heroes as intermediate divine figures – once mortal, now immortal – does not violate this rule because the heroes are essentially local figures and thus members of the communities which possess them; they are mortals whose potency persists and indeed increases after death, but they have not become gods, they remain on our side of the line. Dionysiac ecstatic cult, by contrast, breached the line between human and divine, offered direct contact with the divine, and gave rise to purification rituals with an eschatological aspect promising admission after death into the company of the gods. Such a religion is *mystical* according to Rohde's definition: for him, mysticism is a human aspiration to directly experience the divine, perhaps even to achieve divinity. Mysticism, he goes on, was inherently anti-political – as was philosophy, its religious heir – and as such culturally marginal until the post-classical period, when the breakdown of political society opened the way for the social diffusion of mystical beliefs. Eleusis, however, already established in the archaic period, was a mainstream political institution; therefore (and this is Rohde's paradoxical formulation) “the mysteries did not point the way to mysticism.”⁵ It is notable that Rohde says nothing of that Dionysiac element in Eleusinian cult.

Be that as it may, Rohde did establish two points which must be taken as fundamental in the study of Greek mystery cults and Greek mysticism: 1) mysticism was not immemorial in Greek lands, but came into existence at a definite period, and 2) the Greek mystical spirit was at some level hostile to the city state.

These two points were taken up – along with Rohde's definition of mysticism – by Dario Sabbatucci, a leading member of the Rome school (founded by Raffaele Pettazoni and particularly associated with Angelo Brelich) in his important and neglected monograph: *Saggio sul misticismo Greco*.⁶ Sabbatucci's understanding of Greek mysticism is fundamentally sociological (I prefer this term to “anthropological” because we are dealing here with a literate society); for Sabbatucci, the key to understanding of mysticism is to grasp its anti-social character. He speaks of the *rottura mistica*, the mystic breaking away, and the *rovesciamento di valori*, the inversion of values. That the Greeks tell us that their mystic rites were all imported from elsewhere, from Thrace or Anatolia, is for him the way in which they express their understanding

⁵ Rohde 1925: 225.

⁶ Sabbatucci 1965: 51-52; 65; 126; 131; 165-166; 187; 194; 207; 216; 225.

that the mystical tendency, even if produced within the culture, is in some sense alien to it. Our term for this paradox is “counter-cultural.”

Greek mysticism seems from its origins to have been a culturally marginal activity. From the sixth century B.C. onward there circulated through Greek territory persons offering participation in various privately organized exotic cults. These offered healing and purification – there being considerable overlap between the two, since disease was often seen as the result of some impurity, one’s own or an ancestor’s – and also a better fate after death. The best general description is in Adeimantus’ speech in Plato’s *Republic* Book Two:

ἀγύρταιώ ἐςκαίωμάντειρςἐπίπλοισίωνώθύραςώϊόντεςώ
 πείθουσινώ ώςώ ἔστιώ παρὰώ σφίσιώ ύναιμιώ ἐκώ θεῶνώ
 ποριζομένηώθυσίαιςώτεωκαίώπρωάϊς εἴτεώπιάδίκημάτου
 ἔγονεναύτουῖ ἢ προγόνων, ἀκεῖσθαι μεθ’ ἡδονῶν τε καίώ
 ἔορτῶν, ἐάν τε τινα ἐχθρόν πημῆναι ἐθέλη, μετὰ σμικρῶνώ
 απανῶ ὁμοίωσώ καιον ἀδίκω βλάψει, επαγωγάϊς τισιώ
 καίώκαταδέσμοις ... βίβλωνώ ἐώμαδονώπαρέχονταιώ
 Μουσαίουώ καίώ Ὀρφέωσ, Σελήνηςώ τεώ καίώ Μουσῶνώ
 ἐκόνων, ώςώφρασι, καθ’ ἄςώθηπολοῦσιν, πείθοντεςώύώ
 μόνονώδωτάςώἀλλάώκαίώπόλεις, ώςώπρωάϊςωσειςώτεωκαίώ
 καθαρμοίώἀδικημάτωνώ ἀθυσιῶνώκαίώτελευτήσασιν, ἄςώ
 ἡώελετᾶςώκαλοῦσιν, αἰώτωνώκεῖώκακῶνώἀπολύουσινώ
 ἡμᾶς, μή θύσαντεςώ ἐώενᾶ περιμένει.

Mendicants and seers come to the doors of the rich and convince them that they have a power acquired from gods with their sacrifices and charms; in case you or one of your ancestors is liable for some injustice, they can heal it through delightful feasting, or if someone wants to harm an enemy, for a modest price—no matter if it is an unjust man against a just one—they will do injury with certain charms and binding spells... They produce a crowd of books by Orpheus and Musaeus, children of the Muses and the Moon, as they say, which guide their sacrifices, and thus convince not only private persons but even cities that through sacrifice and playful delights liberation and purification from injustice are possible during one’s lifetime, and also for the dead—these they call “perfections”, which release us from evil over there, while dreadful things there await those who have failed to sacrifice.

Plato *Republic*
364b-366b

Adeimantus' rhetoric has caused him to lump together quite a range of mystical operators, ranging from an international star like Epimenides of Crete, who purified the whole city of Athens after the murder of suppliants, down to the small-time charismatics who hawked from door to door their curses, love-charms, and promises of eternal bliss. These were literate; all of them carried and some of them wrote books, most often ascribed to Orpheus. For this reason and for want of a better label we call them generically "Orphics." Epimenides wrote "*mysteria* and purifications" in prose (Suda *s.v.*); Pherecydes, who is supposed to have been the teacher of Pythagoras, wrote about war in heaven and these writings, we are told (Origen *Contra Celsum* 6.42) became the basis for *mysteria* concerning the battle of the Titans and the Giants against the gods. Euthyphro in Plato's dialogue knows of such stories "and stories even more wonderful than these, which the many do not know...which if you heard them you would surely be astounded" (Plato *Euthyphro* 6b-c). These stories, in other words, although they were written down, were in a way secrets; they were transmitted in limited networks, like the cabala and such kinds of lore.

Although the masters of this kind of wisdom varied considerably in their social standing, sociologically they were all somewhat similar: cultural specialists, free-lance, itinerant, offering their expertise in an open market. A comic poet (Nikophon fr. 19) can class "dealers in mysteries" with dealers in anchovies, charcoal, books, baskets, or whatever. This is what Walter Burkert calls "craft" mysticism.⁷ The most notable of these was Empedocles of Akragas, who traveled from town to town preaching reincarnation and vegetarianism, offering prophecy and healing and control over the weather. Empedocles did not, however, ascribe his writings to Orpheus but proudly signed them himself; he created a complete cosmology based on the four elements and the interplay of love and hate. He was his own authority and in his own person a typical charismatic prophet; he had been, he explains, a god in heaven, but had been expelled for blood guilt and had had to begin all over again at the bottom of the great chain of being, as a vegetable; through a succession of lives he had worked his way up as a fish, as a bird, as a beast, and was now a man about to become again a

⁷ Burkert 1982: 5-19.

god. For Empedocles, it seems, all the charismatics shared some such history:

εἰς δ' ἐτέλος ἰμάντειν ἔπεικα καὶ μνοπόλοισι καὶ ἤητροῖς
καὶ ὑπρόμοισι ἀνθρώποισιν ἐπιχθονίοισι ὑπέλονται
ἔνθεν ἰάνα βλαστοῦσι θεοὶ ἰμῆσι φέριστοι
ἀθανάτοισι ἄλλου ἀνὸ μέστιοι μᾶντο τράπεζοι
ἔοντες, ἀνδρείων ἰαχέων ἰαπόκληροι ἰάτειρεῖς.

In the end they become seers and makers of hymns and healers

And leaders among humans bound to the earth;
Thence they grow to gods greatest in honors,
Sharing the hearth, the table, with the other immortals
Without share of manly sorrows, unwearied.

Empedocles fr. 146, 147 *DK*

Empedocles, in other words, saw in the mystics, in the religious seers, poets, and healers of his day, a living link between mortal and immortal, an embodiment of the abolition of that abyss which in mainstream Greek religion divided these two.

Empedocles was of course a Sicilian; it was in the Greek West, and to some extent in the North, around the Black Sea, that this kind of religiosity had its greatest success. Also in the West, in Italy, mysticism successfully made the transition from “craft” to “sect” when Pythagoras of Samos, who seems to have begun as a free-lance Orphic like the others (Ion of Chios—fr. 2 *DK*—tells us that he wrote under the name of Orpheus) came west to Croton and succeeded in establishing there a community and a mode of life which survived him, and which he called “philosophy”—with enormous long-term consequences for the history of culture.

Nevertheless in the classical period Orphism never became respectable. To purify a whole city is no mean achievement, and it is true that we hear no scorn of Epimenides, but on the other hand we do not hear admiration either, only a collection of miracle stories: that he slept fifty-seven years in a cave, for instance, and lived on magic food provided by the nymphs. Lesser figures are uniformly mocked—except by their own followers, of course; Heraclitus already in the sixth century fulminated against “night workers, magicians, bacchics, maenads, mystics...those things people accept as mysteries are mystic unholiness” (Heraclitus fr. 14 *DK*). Euthyphro complains that when he

reveals to the public divine matters and prophecys the future they all laugh at him (Plato *Euthyphro* 2c). Theseus in Euripides' *Hippolytus* captures some mainstream stereotypes when, thinking (erroneously) that his son is an Orphic, he says:

σὺ δὴ θεοῖσιν ὡς περισσὸς ὢν ἀνήρθ᾽ Ἡ
 ξύνει; σὺ σώφρων καὶ κακῶν ἀκήρατος;
 ...
 Ἦδ᾽ Ἡσὺν αὔχει καὶ δι᾽ ἀψύχου βορᾶς Ἡ
 σίτοις καπήλευ', Ὀρφέα δ' ἄνακτ' ἔχων Ἡ
 βάκχευε πολλῶν γραμμάτων τιμῶν καπνούς.

So you are such a superior person as to consort
 With gods? You are temperate and undefiled of evil?

...
 Go boast your diet and trade for reputation
 Abstaining from animal food. Take Orpheus as your lord,
 Be ecstatic, valuing the smoke of many writings.

Euripides *Hippolytus* 948-954

Similarly Demosthenes thinks to discredit his opponent Aeschines by telling how in his youth he had helped his mother with mystic initiations (Demosthenes, *de Falsa Legatione* 199). They are a topic for mockery; so also Euthyphro complains that when he tries to prophecy the Athenians all laugh at him (Plato, *Euthyphro* 3b5-3c4).

How then are we to explain the status of the Eleusinian mysteries? They were Orphic, at least in the sense that (according to one tradition) they were founded by Orpheus ([Euripides] *Rhesus* 943f, cf. Aristophanes *Frogs* 1032). And they were certainly reputable. By the late fifth century the mysteries were being used as part of Athenian imperial cultural politics; all cities in the Athenian empire were required to join Athens in paying them first-fruits, and the other cities were invited to join in as well.⁸ There is nothing apolitical about this, or counter-cultural either.

Sabbatucci suggests a solution. He begins with the observation that the mysteries are oddly unconnected with life. There were no special requirements for initiation, except that one had to be Greek and not guilty of murder—and since blood guilt for the Greeks entailed exclusion from any public place or public occasion these exclusions are equivalent

⁸ Meiggs & Lewis 1969: 217-223 (# 73); IG i² 76

to saying that one had to be a member of the social (not the political) community. Furthermore the initiates seem to have returned to ordinary life very much as they were before. There is no suggestion in our sources that initiation at Eleusis involved forgiveness of sins or the purification of the soul; Aristophanes seems to be the only writer to suggest that the initiates were held to a standard of conduct. Nor did initiation result in any special privileges, powers, or responsibilities; the initiates lived like the others. An initiation, says Sabbatucci should be *initial* to something; Eleusis, by contrast, was a completion. People were somehow unsatisfied until they had been there. “This initiation was the end and not a mere means, a destination and not a point of departure, a conclusion and not an introduction.”⁹

As for the next life, the difference Eleusis made is left pretty well unspecified. Sophocles, 150 years after the Hymn to Demeter, is still saying nothing more than that there was a difference.

ὡς ἔτρισόλβιοιέ

κεῖνοι βροτῶν, οἵ ἐταῦτα εἰσέρχθεντες ἐτέληέ
 μόλωσ' ἐς Ἐιδου· ἐτοῖσδε ἐγ' ἀράμιονοις ἄκεϊέ
 ζῆν ἄστι, τοῖσδ' ἄλλοισι ἐπάντ' ἔχειν ἄκακέ

Surely these are thrice-blessed among mortals, who having
 seen these rites go into Hades. These alone have life there;
 the others have every evil.

Sophocles *TGF* fr. 837

Those who are initiates in this life are initiates in the next; the emphasis is on what they have seen, not on how this has made them different. As notions of the terrors of the underworld evolved, there does seem to have developed some sense that those who had been to Eleusis were sheltered from the worst of fates, from wallowing eternally in the mud or carrying water in a sieve (Pausanias 10.31.11). Otherwise the next-world advantages, like the this-world advantages, remain abstract and undiscussed. All this, says Sabbatucci, makes the Eleusinian mysteries resemble not an initiation but a pilgrimage. There was a collective journey to a special sacred place where the pilgrims were received by resident sacred personnel; all this was experienced as a temporary departure from the mundane world. Eleusis was not so much a gateway to the other-worldly as an actual experience of it. As such it was

⁹ Sabbatucci 1965: 137.

an experience which exactly had *nothing to do* with this life. The difference Eleusis made was that one had been there, exactly that. And as in the case of a pilgrimage, there was no reason to go more than once – although one might go back to conduct another neophyte.

Pilgrimages, as Victor Turner has taught us, are anti-structural events, intermissions in the ordered pattern of social life. As such they are characterized by *communitas*, the suspension or dissolution of social hierarchy. Similarly, everyone was welcome at Eleusis: male and female, slave and free. All present formed a transient community – transient because the bond linked not all those who had been through the ritual – Eleusis was not a portal to a secret society, like the Free Masons – but bonded those who had been initiated together. In this respect also Eleusis was like a pilgrimage.

Planned intermissions in the social order are part of the social order; institutionalized anti-structure sustains the structure even while offering an alternative to it. Examples are the Carnival, Halloween, Purim, Yom Kippur, New Year's Eve. Pilgrimages also can (although they need not) recur at regular intervals. In these terms we can understand how the Athenians acculturated the counter-cultural. Whereas the Orphics summoned their adepts to break with established society and embark upon a new life marked by special clothing and diet, Eleusis opened a window on another life with the understanding that the meaning of the experience need not be sought in this world since it was yet to come. Eleusis was the way the Athenian community and the Greeks in general could participate in the promise of the Orphics, and yet at the same time Eleusis protected established society from the Orphics by segregating in time and space the radicalism of their eschatology.

In this way, following Sabbatucci, I would deal with Rohde's exception. And with this result in hand we can return to Rohde's two parts, and ask: what is the difference which makes the difference? On the one hand, we have the eschatology of Part One, the persistence of the dead; this is world-wide and immemorial. On the other, we have the eschatology of Part Two, personal immortality, which exists only this side of a definite temporal frontier. What happened to make the difference? What (and this is my sociological question) are the social preconditions of the emergence of a counter culture?

On the issue of chronology, it is worth saying at this point that the Eleusinian Mysteries, which of course claimed to be of enormous antiquity, are now-a-days generally thought to have originated early in the sixth century. The *Hymn to Demeter* is dated to about that time, and

the first buildings in the sanctuary somewhat later. This places the Mysteries in the generation of Epimenides and Pherecydes, who were, so far as we know, the earliest of the Orphics. The whole development, in other words, was more or less synchronous. This brings us to a discussion of the chronological horizon.

The early sixth century is one of the periods – depending on what we mean by “city state” and what we mean by “invent” – when we can say the city state was invented. This was the period of the lawgivers: Solon at Athens, Chilon at Sparta, Zaleucus at Locri and probably also Charondas in Catania. This was also the high-water mark in old-world Greece of the tyrants, and while the Greeks always spoke of the rule of a tyrant as the negation of politics, tyranny seems in many Greek states to have been a necessary phase of political development. In the West this was the period when, after a pause, new areas such as southern France were colonized, and many cities – Metapontum, for instance, and Cyrene – were reformed and repopulated. This was the age of the Seven Sages – Thales and Solon, certainly, and the list often includes Periander the tyrant and Pittacus, who was a kind of dictator. In this time the Greeks first struck coins and built stone temples. It was the period when the great games: Olympic, Pythia, Isthmian and Nemean – were organized into a pan-Hellenic cycle.

Altogether this can be considered an important phase of rationalization. This term I derive from sociology; it does not mean that people became more reasonable. Reason we have always with us, probably since the Neanderthals; rationalization is a specific use of reason, having to do with the self-conscious adaptation of means and ends, often involving prior planning. A predictable cycle of games makes it possible for athletes to compete in them all. A stone temple is not only much more expensive than a wooden one, it also involves a careful plan – because the stones must be cut to size ahead of time. A lawgiver thinks of a city as something like a building that can be reconstructed in terms of an idea. Rationalization is in contrast to improvisation, and also in contrast to tradition: it moves into the future in an ordered thoughtful way. It is associated with quantification, cost-benefit analysis, and a lucidity aspiring to the condition of mathematics; the plans it provides may not be successful but, in order to be rational, they must be intelligible.

Rationality – and I use the term as I find it in Max Weber¹⁰ - is instrumental; there is for Weber no rationality of the ends. The expert has rational authority to the degree that he can tell us how to achieve our projects; he cannot evaluate them. Socrates remarks that we pay the ship captain a couple of drachmae to take us to Egypt and entrust him with our lives, but we would not want our daughter to marry him because, while he can get us to Egypt, he does not know whether or not we ought to go there. He is skilled but not wise. But where is wisdom to be found? Philosophy has typically attempted to ground our activity in nature, to identify certain goods as natural: health, self-determination, love. But philosophy has often found itself in conflict with religion, which may prescribe unhealthy asceticism, loss of self, righteous wrath and/or acceptance of persecution. There can be reasonable dispute about these matters, but it does not seem possible to settle the issues rationally. Sociology therefore tends to take values as given. Usually they are cultural norms, which is to say, they are given by tradition. When tradition fails the values may be asserted charismatically, through some claim to revealed or prophetic wisdom. Charismatic authority stands with rational and traditional as Weber's third type. Reason says: I'm not saying this is the thing to do; I'm saying if you want to do that this is the way to do it. Tradition says: I say this is the thing to do because it is, and that's the end of it – which might even be right, even if unhelpful. Charisma says: this is the thing to do because I say so – a much chancier proposition.

Because they are jointly in contrast to tradition, charisma and rationalism are siblings and often co-inhabit. Charisma and rationality can work together when charisma prescribes the ends, rationality the means. Utopian societies partake of both, and both are at home on the frontier; where the bonds of tradition are relatively weak there is room for ingenious novelties and weird sects. Early Greek philosophy surely partook of both: Pythagorean mathematics and Empedoclean physics aspired to rationality, yet both Empedocles and Pythagoras, were miracle workers. Ancient tradition made the link in another way by making Gorgias the pupil of Empedocles, as if relativistic rhetoric could derive from a revelation of the absolute. Orphism was charismatic; sophistry, founded on the utility of the word, was rational. Socrates, a generation later, combined the two another way, joining dialectic to myth.

¹⁰ [Weber 1947](#)[1920]: 123.

Through a parallel dialectic we can understand the development of Athenian mystery cult as an aspect of, as well as a response to, the development of the city state. Archaic and classic Greek development was a kind of first modernism, nowhere more so than in Athens. From Solon through Peisistratus to Pericles the city of Athens developed in size, wealth and power. In the process institutions became increasingly impersonal, quantity replaced quality as the economy became increasingly monetized and wealth tended to replace inherited status. Life became more secular and values more relative; such developments generate a hunger for the sacred and the absolute. Whatever else the Mysteries may have been, they were certainly an experience of the absolutely sacred. And they were focused on the experience – indeed, that is their link to personal immortality – which is a form of individualism, and thus arises in the social conditions which produce that social construct, the individual.

That, within the compass of a walnut shell, is my account of the historical setting of the Eleusinian mysteries. I began with the assertion that anthropology cannot help us here, and went on to attempt a small piece of what Lévi-Strauss calls “anthropology of the past.”¹¹ This paradox provokes a few reflections on anthropology and the Classics.

Anthropology begins with Montaigne on cannibals and Rousseau on the origins of inequality; it was however in the field of classical studies that it first became in any important sense empirical, because the ancients were the first “others” of whom European scholars had any sufficient empirical knowledge. It is enough to mention three books published within a few years of each other—and of *The Origin of Species*, for that matter—namely: Sir Henry Maine *Ancient Law* and Ludwig Bachofen *Mutterrecht*, both 1861, and N. D. Fustel de Coulanges *The Ancient City*, 1864. All these were products of a classical education. Nevertheless social science and the Classics soon parted company – and indeed all three of the books I have mentioned were not so much interested in the past as in what was before the past, some primordial age of which the ancient material might display some survivals. Fustel is most explicit about this, when he says “we must transport ourselves beyond the time of which history has preserved the recollection, to those distant ages during which domestic institutions were established, and social institutions were prepared.”¹² His first two

¹¹ Lévi-Strauss 1966[1962]: 233; 242-43; 256.

¹² Fustel de Coulange 1864: 75.

parts (the only parts of the book most people remember) are a *histoire imaginaire* very like Rousseau—illustrated, indeed, by “survivals”, but survivals which he can identify as such only because they illustrate his imagined past. Very much the same can be said of Bachofen; Maine, as an Englishman, is more empirical, but even he grounds his understanding of development in an original condition like that of the Cyclopes, each giving the law to his own household.¹³

Anthropology, in fact, began with a search for origins, for a primeval condition before history. Therefore anthropologists quickly turned to ahistorical societies, to those who divide time into a near present and a mythical past. Although each of these societies has a history they do not present it as part of their self-description; therefore on the principle that you go by what the natives say, the anthropologist could safely neglect it. Culture, since Tylor the key term, was conceived as a stable system. Anthropology thus became the adversary of history.

The ancient societies we study in the field of Classics were, however, nothing if not historical and self-consciously so. They do not have “a culture”; they existed in a dialectic of tradition and innovation, tense with conflicting and competing self-descriptive accounts of what it means to be civilized in their way. Anthropology tends to find all this puzzling and somewhat irritating; that is why those who have attempted to think anthropologically about the ancients have whenever possible continued, from Frazier and the Cambridge School right up through Benveniste and Dumézil, to use ancient material as a way into some imaginatively reconstructed prior past. Structuralism, as represented by the Paris School and others, dehistoricizes in a different way, positing underlying patterns which persist, which are in history but not of it, so that chronology can be (more or less) neglected.

Therefore I have made the shift from anthropology to sociology. In sociology we are studying not the others but ourselves. Of course we are always studying ourselves, in the sense that we are motivated by puzzles that we have, and that are therefore somehow about us, but sociology builds from the top down rather than from the bottom up; it starts with the modern condition and then asks (sometimes) how did we get here? All the “great transformations” – from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, from mechanical solidarity to organic solidarity, the arrival of the Protestant ethic, the disembedding of the economy – are accounts of how modernism happened. Through these accounts sociology finds

¹³ [Maine 1920](#) [1861]: 133.

itself deeply engaged in history – but (from the point of view of Classics) the wrong history. This problem I have attempted to address by characterizing the classical period as a “first modernism.” The similarities with the modern period are striking, but so are the differences. The classical city did transform the conditions of life, but without important technological change, did monetize its economy, but it did not create capitalism, did develop the idea of citizenship but without an ideology of natural right, did create forms of personal religion but without creating competing confessions – except for the philosophical schools. Communities became larger and more impersonal, but were still mainly face-to-face. I could go on, but I have gone on long enough. I mean only to suggest that the concepts of social theory are indeed relevant to Classics, but that they have to be rethought as they are put to use; they cannot be simply “applied”, as if they were bumper-stickers or paint in a can.

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