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History 100: Foundation of Western civ  
11/20/17

Vernant, Jean Pierre. Myth and Society in Ancient Greece. Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980.

The western European culture has been highly Influenced by the Greek heritage. From societal values and structure to politics and civism, the ancient Greece has shaped Many aspects of modern society. Indeed, the very first idea of Democracy was implemented in ancient Greece. It is with the intent of comprehending such influences of the ancient Greek society that this paper will analyzed, through Jean Pierre Vernant’s work, the Direct collision between myth and society. Through a juxtaposition of previous studies, he presented his argument by claiming the interconnectedness of religion and society in ancient Greece and how such link transcended time. In this paper, a summary of the book will be provided while an analysis will be Simultaneously laid to discuss the author's points.

Understanding human relationships necessitates primarily a study of the structure of classes and values that run the society. This does not escape Vernant’s mind when he begins his argument by citing the triumvirate between the structure and the struggle of social classes, wars, and marriage. Social classes in ancient Greece were very hierarchical and even cities like Athens that deem themselves as democratic failed to recognize the legality of some of their inhabitants. So, there was in the city-states, relations of domination and submission between slaves and masters or between men and women thereby emphasizing the macho nature of this society. In addition, he highlighted the close link of this ideology with their love of warfare because, for him, competition among Greek cities added to their social patriarchy necessarily resulted in multiple conflicts. While some (Hoplite) would get recruited into the army to detain a certain privilege or social status, it turns out that competition and confrontations were part of the basic principles of Greek society hence the popularity of stories celebrating the vigor and bravery of mythical heroes: "the heroic ethos"[[1]](#footnote-1) Transmitted either by storytellers like Homer or highlighted by dramatists such as Sophocles and Aristophanes. These stories, in addition to their heroism, transmitted core values or criticized vices in Greek society through satire. It is from this approach of "war of all against all"[[2]](#footnote-2) that comes the settle idea of divinity and submission in Greek society. The Greek, as the work suggests, consulted the gods of Olympus (and others) in all their activities; from war (Ares and Athena) to festivities (Dionysus and Apollo) without forgetting the marriage (Hestia and Hera), ancient Greek life was closely linked to the worshiping of the gods. Greek Marriage was the legitimization of sex and reproduction. Indeed, as Demosthenes[[3]](#footnote-3) defined it, the legitimate child is the result of the union of a man and a woman who has received such permission (parental). In this case, Vernant proposed a reproductive view of marriage but he also evoked the materialization of the recognition of the matrimonial area established by the Athenian democracy which sort of formalized the role of women in society. These three intrinsic areas thus offer already many similarities with contemporary societies which, according to this work, reflects in many aspects of it. Nowadays, the idea of marriage is so widespread to the point where secular states now promote, like Athens has done for women, the recognition of homosexual couples by granting them marriage for all. Similarly, the celebration of our war heroes and the division of our classes, at least according to Karl Max, shows the continuity of these values ​​over time, thus illustrating the point of view of the author about the influence of Greco-Roman values on western civilization.

Moreover, from an economic perspective, the author highlights the link between these values and the functioning of the economy. Considering the agricultural economy exercised by these people, the author admits the need for a working class able to cultivate but unable to dominate the economy. This was their practical justification of slavery and the antagonism between slaves and masters. This relationship, to a much lesser degree, is perceptible in capitalist societies today in which profits are maximized at the expense of blue-collar workers. Additionally, the close relationship between the gods and humans led to the construction of many temples and organization of religious events. And given the high cost of these initiatives, wars were fought for the acquisition of funds. We can thus conclude that the Greek civilization laid the foundations that will be later adopted by the Romans to consolidate the structure of our contemporary societies. Therefore, the problems and struggles of these societies can find their resolutions in the deep analysis of ancient Greek culture.

Nevertheless, as in the words of Conan Doyle “It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts”[[4]](#footnote-4). This is the very inconvenience of this work. By offering his opinion and admitting his comparative goal early on, Vernant lures his readers by giving them the facts progressively; which he will twist to make them consistent with the opinion already presented thus increasing the subjectivity of the reader and limits the chances of an eventual rebuttal. A possible contradiction, however, is the calling of the Greeks to their gods and myths that contrasts with those we have with our religions. Beyond a simple comparison between monotheistic and polytheistic faith, the question is to show how religion shaped the civic life of ancient Greece whereas now governments (state) separate themselves from religion and promote secularism.

In conclusion, it should be noted the indubitable connection between religion and society in ancient Greece. The way myths have influenced the social and political life of the city-states is the basis for understanding contemporary societies. we must also emphasize that the blending of this culture with that of Rome gave the Greco-Roman heritage that built the western culture. It is, however, opportune for the public to remain open-minded before raising any similarity between the elements in this work and those present in our daily lives.

References:

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1. Vernant, Jean Pierre. Myth and Society in Ancient Greece. Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980. P.19 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hobbes, Thomas. *De Cive,* 1642 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Athenian politician (384 BC-322 BC). Vernant, *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*. P.47 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Doyle, Arthur Conan. The adventures of Sherlock Holmes. New York: Heritage Press, 1950. P.3 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)