

Unthinking the Greek Polis: Ancient Greek History Beyond Eurocentrism. By KOSTAS VLASSOPOULOS. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp. xiv + 288. Cloth, \$112.00. ISBN 978-0-521-87744-2.

Vlassopoulos (V.) has written an ambitious and challenging book that seeks to “examine and make explicit forms of silence” (p. 5) caused by a Greek historiography that has focused on the polis to support Western, European, and Occidental [sic] ideologies since at least the 19th century. The author makes clear in the Introduction that his work is meant to be polemical, both challenging the assumptions behind the current study of Greek history and beginning the work of outlining alternative approaches by drawing on other fields of history. V. thus seeks to make it possible for Greek historiography “to move beyond teleological and Eurocentric Grand Narratives into an understanding of the multiple, yet co-existing, and co-dependent courses of history” (p. 10).

V. provides a well-structured review (by way of extensive critique) of the origins and structure of Greek historiography’s relationship with the concept of the polis. The book should accordingly be required reading for anyone interested in the subject, particularly since it encourages readers to confront the question of whether our desire to create alternative historiographic approaches should necessarily supplant those centered on, or at least admitting of a specifically Greek polis. V. makes a sustained attempt to answer this question in the affirmative; whether he is persuasive will depend on the perspective of the individual reader.

The chapters and contents follow a logical pattern, in which Part 1 seeks to show that, once the study of the Greek polis is placed within—and is seen to have been at the mercy of—the wider currents of Greek historiography (Ch. 1), it becomes clear that ancient discourses, especially Aristotle’s (Ch. 3), on the polis should be taken more seriously (Ch. 2). In particular, V. notes (p. 80) that the examples, definitions, and levels of analysis found in Aristotle highlight the problem that, since Greek texts provide no evidence for the idea of *the Greek polis* [italics V.’s], the concept should be dismissed from the field of Greek history as misleading at best, oppressive at worst. Part 2 continues to push for the deconstruction of the concept of the polis, particularly with regard to two teleologically-charged dichotomies in which it often figures. Here, V. undertakes to decouple the study of the Greek polis’ notion of citizenship from the political teleology of Western democracy (Ch. 4), and its economy from that of modern capitalism (Ch. 5). He is concerned to show the insufficiency and, indeed, historical inaccuracy of analyzing nucleated ur-

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ban communities with their hinterlands, participatory citizenries with excluded demographic groups, and the economic relations established by these entities as characteristics uniquely and specifically definitive of the Greek polis. Part 3 attempts to outline some avenues along which a historiography of the un-thought Greek polis, once revealed as an historiographic illusion (Ch. 6), might proceed. V. posits that, since the polis disguises a multiform of historical polities ranging from the politically decentered ethnos to the quasi-imperialist hegemonic city-state (Ch. 8), we would do better to investigate a variety of spatial (Ch. 7) and temporal (Ch. 9) alternatives both below and above the polis-level of analysis. A call to revive alternative narrative approaches, such as the ancient travelogue and embedded speech *kata ta deonta*, rounds out the volume (Ch. 10).

V.'s avoidance of cultural and religious history makes him focus on the political narrative, and this leaves unclear whether some of the goals he seeks have been already achieved by modern research into Mediterraneanization or Punicization, the Delian League, various Amphictyonies, the Panhellenic sanctuaries, the Greek ethnos, class, status, gender, age, sex, slavery and other forms of dependant labor, burial, religion, performance, the colonial poleis, etc. One might therefore ask whether V.'s un-thought polis is the necessary or only tool to fill the silences he rightly identifies as needing to be recovered. What goals that could not be met by emphasizing the extent and the limits of both the historical relevance of the polis and the contemporary relevance of our study of it can *only* be met by unthinking the polis and reasserting the diversity and plurality of its historical forms, networks, and discourses? As the world enters a new era of globalized, postnationalist political forms, from silent hegemonies to non-state actors, will an entirely new historiographical perspective be more useful than an ongoing critical revision of the current one? And which approach can best justify the study of the Greek political past in the first place, especially in a time of economic crisis?

V. would seem to advocate the type of historiographical awareness raised by, e.g., Hayden White (pp. 229–33, or even Croce's dictum that "all of history is contemporary history" quoted in the book's first sentence), that the practice of Greek historiography depends a great deal on what you start out trying to do with it. For V., as a Greek historian, Greek history should be no different from any other history, and history should be divorced from teleology. Classicists, perhaps, or anyone who would argue implicitly or explicitly that Greek and Roman history can be different, special, perhaps even

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unique in illuminating contemporary concerns, will therefore find much that is stimulating in V.'s perspective. Will narratives recapturing the complexity of historical diversity in order to liberate the silenced voices of the past coexist with those that, e.g., utilize the rise and fall of the Greek polis as a tool to conceptualize and critique how a free autonomous enfranchised citizenry might articulate issues such as domestic social problems or overseas involvement with both dependent allies and ideologically opposed foreign powers? V. demonstrates that an alternative way of proceeding is possible; the extent to which the scholarly community will take up his suggestions is less certain. But a recognition of the plurality of approaches V. advocates and practices is certainly a minimal desideratum for future discourse.

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