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Civilization and Barbarism

Civilization, barbarism, and: does ‘and’ connect or disconnect? Does civilization stand in opposition to barbarism or must we consider the relationship as altogether more complicated? And if so, why?

1. We are used to thinking that the opposition between civilization and barbarism came to us from the Greeks. But a reflection on its ambiguities is also part of the Greek legacy, and its troubling implications still resonate with us.

Here is a story told by Herodotus, ‘the father of history’ (a long-debated but well-earned title), in the third volume of his *Histories*.¹ It is a digression that is preceded by a detailed list of crimes committed by Cambyses, the Persian king: murder of his brother, incest with his sisters, violating cadavers, defiling the images of the gods. Cambyses, Herodotus concludes, was mad. An example follows:

¹ *Herodotus*, VOL. 2 [c. 425 BCE] (Alfred Denis Godley trans.) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 38.

I hold it then in every way proved that Cambyses was very mad; else he would never have set himself to deride religion and custom. For if it were proposed to all nations to choose which seemed best of all customs, each, after examinations made, would place its own first; so well is each persuaded that its own are by far the best. It is not therefore to be supposed that any, save a madman, would turn such things to ridicule. I will give this one proof among many from which it may be inferred that all men hold this belief among their customs. When Darius was king, he summoned the Greeks who were with him and asked them what price would persuade them to eat their fathers' dead bodies. They answered that there was no price for which they would do it. Then he summoned those Indians who are called Callatiae, who eat their parents, and asked them (the Greeks being present and understanding by interpretation what was said) what would make them willing to burn their fathers at death. The Indians cried aloud, that he should not speak of so horrid an act. So firmly rooted are these beliefs; and it is, I think, rightly said in Pindar's poem that custom is the queen of all things.²

That Darius, king of the Persians, actually attempted such an act appears to be highly unlikely; be that as it may, we will never succeed in reaching certainty on the matter. It is more important to understand the significance of his speech within Herodotus' historical

² *Herodotus*, p. 51.

narration. Pindar's formula, according to which 'custom is the queen of all things'—*nomos ho panton basileus*—would lead us to conclude that all customs are equal, and therefore it is impossible to draw a clear boundary between customs which would be acceptable and those which would not.³ In other words, our habits seem obvious and natural to us, insofar as they are, like all habits, the result of convention.

And yet, attributing to Herodotus a point of view which we would call radically relativistic would be risky. It is worth remembering a remark by Arnaldo Momigliano: 'Herodotus, one of the founding masters of ethnography, was ready to declare "barbarian" customs superior to the Hellenic ones. But it was a cool, ultimately self-assured, look at foreign civilizations. There was no temptation to yield to them.'⁴

It is the cold look of someone who stages a mental experiment that addresses, on a small scale (but through an extreme example, namely, funeral rites), a more general issue: the variety of human customs. On this point, Darius, the king of Persia, appears as a double, an *alter ego*, of Herodotus. They are both simultaneously the judge and the judged, inside and outside the experiment. When

3 Wilfried Nippel, 'La costruzione dell' "altro"' in Salvatore Settis (ed.), *I Greci: Storia, cultura, arte, società, Volume 1: Noi e i Greci* (Turin: Einaudi, 1996), pp. 165–96; Sally Humphreys, 'Law, Custom and Culture in Herodotus', *Arethusa* 20 (1987): 211–20.

4 Arnaldo Momigliano, 'The Fault of the Greeks' in *Sesto contributo alla storia degli studi classici e del mondo antico*, VOL. 2 (Rome: Ed. di Storia e Letteratura, 1980), pp. 509–24; here, pp. 518–19.

Herodotus says that custom is ‘the queen of all things’, he simultaneously detaches himself from all things and observes them from afar. We see, looming in the distance, an ongoing dialogue between Herodotus and the sophists who put forward paradoxes like: ‘A Cretan says: All Cretans are liars.’⁵ Is the Cretan lying or is he telling the truth? What does Herodotus think?⁶

2. The paradox of the Cretan has never ceased to torment logicians: the paradox of Herodotus torments, or should torment, historians and anthropologists. But the unsettling feeling, which we feel in reading the aforementioned passage, that we are facing something contemporary, must be limited by pointing out an element of distance which is linked to the term *nomos*. The translations of ‘law’ or ‘custom’ are inevitably inadequate, because the term *nomos* refers to an undifferentiated sphere in which ‘right’, ‘custom’ and ‘religion’ (in the sense in which we use these terms) mingle. *Nomos* is a noun derived from the verb *nemein*: divide (or allocate) according to the law or tradition.⁷ We are seemingly back to our starting point, but

5 Nippel, ‘La costruzione dell’ “altro”’, p. 174: ‘[. . .] there are discussions proposed by the sophists on the relativity of law (*dissoi logoi*) that refer to examples mentioned by Herodotus’. On *dissoi logoi*, see Mario Untersteiner, *I sofisti: testimonianze e frammenti*, VOL. 2 (Milan: Mondadori, 1967), pp. 161–72.

6 Here I pick up some remarks developed in Carlo Ginzburg, ‘Lost in Translation: Us and Them’, *Hermitage* 2 (2006): 20–2.

7 Émile Benveniste, *Noms d’agent et noms d’action en indo-européen* (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1948), p. 79; Émile Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, VOL. 1 (Paris: Minuit, 1969), p. 85; Emmanuel Laroche, *Histoire de la racine nem en grec ancien: nemo, nemesis, nomos, nomizo* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1949).

after having acquired a piece of information: the association between law, custom and division. Even when they look innocent, classifications (and especially dichotomous classifications) have often, although not always, political implications. In a famous passage from his dialogue *The Statesman* [*Politikos*], Plato introduces dichotomous categories into the discussion, aptly beginning with the one which contrasts Greeks and barbarians, through an objection which is formulated by one of the dialogue's interlocutors, named, significantly, the Stranger:

[. . .] it is very much as if, in undertaking to divide the human race into two parts, one should make the division as most people in this country do; they separate the Hellenic race from all the rest as one, and to all other races, which are countless in number and have no relation in blood or language, they give the single name 'barbarian'; then, because of this single name, they think it is a single species. Or it was as if a man should think he was dividing number into two classes by cutting off a myriad from all the other numbers, with the notion that he was making one separate class, and then should give one name to all the rest, and because of that name should think that this also formed one class distinct from the other. A better division, more truly classified and more equal, would be made by dividing number into odd and even, and the human race into male and female; as for the Lydians and Phrygians and various others, they could be opposed to the rest and split off from them when it was

impossible to find and separate two parts, each of which formed a class.⁸

3. On this page, Plato rejects the holistic opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them’, between Greeks and barbarians, as poorly argued, and therefore untenable. The opposition, and its hierarchical implications, had been reinforced by the wars between the Greeks and Persians. Like Herodotus, although in a different manner, Plato responds to the challenge of the sophists. Today, this term immediately evokes the noun ‘sophistry’, with its negative connotations—an oblique and distant echo of the negative aura that surrounded the sophists, philosophers who roamed Greece, teaching eloquence. In return for their teaching, the sophists asked for payment: a novelty which created a scandal and cast an enduring shadow on their image. But the theories that the sophists proposed were scandalous as well, because they questioned allegedly self-evident ideas, such as the opposition of Greeks and barbarians—and more generally, the relationship between *nomos* and *physis*, law and habit on the one hand, nature on the other. ‘Could what we consider natural be on the contrary the product of convention?’ argued the sophists. This is the question that Herodotus asked himself in staging the (presumably fictional) experiment by Darius, the Persian king.

8 Plato, *The Statesman* (Harold N. Fowler trans.) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975[c. 350 BCE]), 262d–263a. See Geoffrey Ernest Richard Lloyd, *Polarity and Analogy: Two Types of Argumentation in Early Greek Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966). A reference to this passage can be found also in Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 123–4.

Since a long time, historians of philosophy have dispelled the negative stereotypes that tradition had projected onto the sophists. Today, their questions seem more urgent than ever, even if our answers greatly differ from theirs. Certainly, we must be wary of false continuities, like those tied to language, as in the case of *nomos*/law/habit.

And the Greek term *physis*, which we translate as ‘nature’, has a different meaning for us than it did for the ancient Greeks. Today, somebody could translate the opposition between *physis* and *nomos*, nature and convention, into a question rife with political implications: ‘Do cultural differences have a biological origin?’ A translation that would amount to a blatant anachronism. Let us have a quick look at the historical sequence.

4. In his *Statesman*, Plato had opposed the natural dichotomy between men and women to the fictitious divide between Greeks and barbarians. At the beginning of *Politics*, Aristotle cites the distinction between men and women, and the superiority of one over the other, to introduce by way of analogy the distinction between masters and slaves, i.e. between ‘natural ruler and natural subject [. . .]. One that can foresee with his mind is naturally ruler and naturally master, and one that can do those things with his body is subject and naturally a slave.’ For Aristotle, slavery is a natural phenomenon, like being a woman. Between these two forms of subordination, there exists yet another profound similarity: ‘among barbarians, the female and the slave have the same rank’, because barbarians ‘have no class of natural rulers’. The community that

characterizes barbarian societies is a community of slaves. Aristotle cites approvingly a line from Euripides (*Iphigenia in Aulis*, line 1400): “Tis meet that Greeks should rule barbarians.”⁹

Today, hardly anyone would claim that slavery is a natural phenomenon. Moreover, questions about the role played by cultural elements in the opposition between men and women have been around for a long time. But other statements within Aristotle’s vast *oeuvre* end up contradicting those which have just been mentioned.

Once again, we are confronted with an answer to the challenge posed by sophists.

Deliberately provocative, their affirmations about the relation between *nomos* (law/constitution) and *physis* (nature) claimed human access to reality as self-evident, similar to Pindar’s words, ‘Custom is the queen of all things.’ But Aristotle, in his *Peri hermeneias* [*On Interpretation*], focused on language and the problematic relationship between language and meaning. Referring to a statement from Plato’s *The Sophist*, Aristotle observed that a noun taken alone and out of context can neither be true or false, ‘unless one adds that it is or is not, absolutely speaking (*haplos*) or referring to time (*kata chronon*)’.¹⁰ With this distinction, the issue addressed by the sophists—the distinction between *physis* (nature) and *nomos*

9 Aristotle, *Politics* [c. 325 BCE] (H. Rackham trans.) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 1252 a26–1252 b11.

10 Carlo Ginzburg, *Wooden Eyes: Nine Reflections on Distance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) pp. 25–61.

(law/custom)—was tacitly shifted from the ontological to the epistemological level, from reality to discourse.¹¹

On the surface, this argument looks purely technical; in fact, it amounted to a turning point in the history of thought, even if it was neither presented nor perceived as such for a long time. Looking back, it looks like a bomb that would end up exploding nearly two thousand years later. In his Latin translation of Aristotle's *Peri hermeneias*, Boethius (who lived between the fifth and sixth centuries CE) translated the distinction between *haplos* and *katà chronon* as *simpliciter* (absolutely) and *secundum quid* (according to the circumstances).¹² The latter term expanded to a larger scale the general characterization indicated by Aristotle.

Generation after generation of students read Aristotle's *On Interpretation* in Boethius' Latin translation (*De interpretatione*). Two of them would end up being the protagonists in the famous debate which took place in Valladolid, at the behest of Charles V, in 1550–51: Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, translator of and commentator on Aristotle; and the Dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas, Bishop of Chiapas.

5. Sepúlveda and Las Casas were at odds on two issues: could one consider the Indios of the New World slaves by nature, and was a

¹¹ Aristotle's distinction may have been inspired by a passage of *Dissoi logoi* 5.15, a sophist treatise; see Thomas M. Robinson, *Contrasting Arguments: An Edition of the Dissoi Logoi* (New York: Arno Press, 1979), p. 131, pp. 208–9.

¹² Aristotle, *De interpretatione* (Boethius trans.) (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014).