

THE CASE OF VICTOR DAVIS HANSON: FARMER, SCHOLAR, WARMONGER

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Everyone is a reactionary about subjects he understands.

-Robert Conquest

Victor Davis Hanson's name has become known to millions of people since the attacks of September 11. Beginning the very day of those terrible events, he has poured forth a stream of commentary urging a tough response against...well, against somebody. At first it was bin Laden and al-Qaeda, of course. But as soon as the Bush administration announced that Iraq was a proper target for American retaliation, Hanson got on board. Since then he has briefed powerful men at the Pentagon, taught midshipmen in Annapolis, given lectures and interviews, all while maintaining a steady flow of "tough" journalism for National Review Online.

It is all quite a change for him.

Victor Davis Hanson is a fifth-generation California grape farmer. He has often expressed his admiration for the sort of men among whom he grew up: tough, hardworking smallholders, taciturn men with a sense of loyalty to their land and families. He clearly understands the privilege he enjoyed in being reared among this vanishing American breed.

He attended a nondescript state-supported college close to home and went on to graduate study in classics at Stanford. He developed an interest in ancient warfare, and found that his own farming knowledge could illuminate ambiguous and misinterpreted passages in the ancient historians.

All readers of Thucydides and Xenophon know how frequently they refer to armies "ravaging" enemy territory, "destroying" trees or "devastating" crops. The ancients could take for granted that their readers knew what such expressions signified; many had taken part in or suffered from such ravaging themselves. For today's typical urban or suburban reader, however, vines and fruit trees are nearly as unfamiliar as Pindaric odes or red-figure vases. Some classicists have imagined such ravaging to have produced famine and long-term economic depression, or even to have been the decisive cause of Athens' defeat in the Peloponnesian War.

Hanson, based on his own farming experience, was skeptical. Vines and olive trees have deep roots, and their permanent destruction was too difficult and time-consuming for a marauding army to attempt. Rather than being intended to starve the enemy into submission (as in modern warfare), crop destruction was a kind of slap in the face, a challenge to the enemy to come out and fight. When Pericles succeeded in convincing the Athenians not to fall into this trap and to rely instead on their naval power, it was a sign that the traditional pattern of hoplite (i.e., heavily armed infantryman's) battle was eroding (Thuc. II, 21-22).

In 1980, Hanson submitted a doctoral thesis on this subject to the classics department at Stanford and quietly went back to farming. Three years later the dissertation was published as a book: *Warfare and Agriculture in Classical Greece* (University of California, 1983). I recall seeing it on the "recent arrivals" table at a college bookstore: the back cover featured a photograph of the author in the unkempt dress of a grape farmer.

1983 saw a catastrophic fall in grape prices, and Hanson found himself, in effect, paying consumers to eat his produce. Things were so bad he found he could earn more teaching Greek. He became classics professor at California State University, Fresno — a position he still holds. His reputation as a classroom teacher is high and has won him awards.

By 1987 he had completed work on a second book, *The Western Way of War* (University of California, 1989). Its title may be misleadingly broad. The work is directly concerned only with infantry battle in classical Greece. The polis, Hanson explains, developed a mode of warfare peculiar to itself and with an influence still perceptible in the military practice of the occident.

Other ancient nations such as the Egyptians and Persians fought to a large extent with bow and arrow or sling, on horseback or from chariots. Attacks were often uncoordinated. Battle could be prolonged for days into a series of indecisive skirmishes. Troops were lightly armed, dressed with a view to looking fearsome and masculine, rather than heavily armored to protect themselves from blows. Warriors were as intent upon avoiding the stroke of death as they were on dealing it out to their enemies.

Greeks of the classical period had a strong preference for pitched battle between heavily armed infantry. The favored weapons were sword and hand-held spear, no arrow or throwing-spear. Ambushes and irregular skirmishing — indeed, almost all that we think of as strategy and tactics — were avoided in favor of brief, simple face-offs between identically equipped massed formations. Battle, that is, was a kind of ritualized collective dueling. Armor was designed with single-minded attention to preserving the life of its wearer. On the other hand, once battle commenced, the individual hoplite's supreme duty was to forget about his own preservation, stand his ground and take his chances. "Few types of fighting," writes Hanson, "have required quite the same degree of courage, of nerve in the face of mental and physical anguish, as this...in which armed and armored hoplites advanced in massed formation with no chance of escape" (p. 25).

The terrible ordeal of hoplite battle had, however, two advantages. First, it was economical. Deaths on the winning side averaged about five percent, on the losing side fourteen percent. Armor was affordable for the ordinary farmer. There were no long or distant campaigns; service lasted a few days, with the actual fighting occupying perhaps not more than an hour. Second, no non-Western army could stand up to it. This is what saved Greece during the Persian invasions of 490 and 480 B.C. Reluctant Persian draftees were simply not prepared to face heavily armed men who fought in formation and did not shrink from death. Herodotus relates that the Persians at Marathon believed the Athenians “possessed by some very desperate madness.” The death toll he reports for the battle—6,400 Persians versus 192 Greeks—gives some idea of the superiority of the “western way of war.”

Earlier military historians have tended to concentrate on questions of strategy, tactic, terrain, and logistics. But for these very reasons they also tended to slight hoplite battle of the classical period in favor of later Macedonian and Roman practice—which, incidentally, involved immeasurably greater loss of life.

Hanson also distinguishes himself from most of his predecessors by his attention to the harrowing experience of the individual Greek fighter. His inspiration here appears to have been John Keegan’s study *The Face of Battle* (Dorset Press, 1986); and Keegan returned the favor by writing an admiring preface for *The Western Way of War*. Hanson, indeed, several times cautions readers that the necessarily gruesome descriptions of hoplite battle are not intended as pacifist propaganda—a claim readers of his post-9/11 journalism will have no difficulty believing. Any student of Herodotus will come away from the *Western Way of War* with a greatly increased admiration for the courage and fortitude of the ordinary, unlettered farmers whose sacrifices made the cultural efflorescence of fifth century Greece possible.

Between 1988 and 1993 Hanson wrote what is likely to remain his most important book, *The Other Greeks: the Family Farm and the Agrarian Roots of Western Civilization* (Free Press, 1995). It is an extraordinary contribution to our understanding of classical Greece: the achievement of a lifetime, really, though produced by a man still in his thirties. It is the principal grounds for his reputation as a scholar, but has also gained him a large audience for views on other subjects concerning which he is ill informed or mistaken. Before I offer criticism of his writings of the last five years, I want to give readers some understanding of the importance of his scholarly masterpiece.

Human beings have existed for hundreds of thousands of years, and the white race for about the last forty thousand. But what we refer to as Western Civilization cannot plausibly be traced back farther than the first millennium B.C. Furthermore, it was originally the achievement of a single nation, the Greeks, during a relatively brief span of time, the eighth through fourth centuries B.C. Ever since, men have understandably wondered what the

explanation of this could be. What was it about these particular people of this place and time which led them to bring forth self-government under law, free philosophical and scientific investigation, epic and dramatic poetry, and a body of art and architecture which remain the wonder of mankind two and a half millennia later?

It has been called the Greek miracle, but of course there was nothing miraculous about it. Such a grandiose manner of speaking merely reflects—besides admiration for the Greek achievement—our ignorance of its sources. For most of the centuries during which the ideal of classical education remained strong, this ignorance remained total. Consider, for example, the realm of literature. The Western literary tradition begins with a long poem called the *Iliad*, said to have been written by someone named Homer. This Homer is little more than a name to us. We still do not know exactly when or where he lived. But he was obviously a highly accomplished artist. Appearing suddenly as he does in our historical record, he is apt to seem an inexplicable, superhuman genius. And he has often been spoken of as such. But in fact the *Iliad* was the product of a long development. We know, thanks to the work of Milman Parry and other scholars, that Homer was an oral poet, very possibly illiterate, working within a tradition of public recitation for discriminating, aristocratic audiences. He brought that tradition to an unsurpassed level of perfection, so much so that the work of his predecessors ceased to be recited and their very names are now forgotten. Yet their work was by no means insignificant or mere labor lost; it was a necessary precondition for Homer's own achievement. No one—not even a writer of Homer's skill—could have created a work such as the *Iliad* from whole cloth.

Something analogous is true of the Greek polis, an historically unprecedented system of consensual government under law. When it suddenly emerges for us into the light of history in the pages of Herodotus (writing in about the 430s B.C.) we see it already fully formed and defending itself against the encroaching oriental despotism of Persia. Like the *Iliad*, the classical Greek polis is apt to appear to us something marvelous and inexplicable as long as its genesis remains hidden from view. And for most of later history, that genesis was well hidden indeed.

Beginning with the discoveries of Arthur Evans in the nineteenth century and continuing to the present with the recent development of "field survey archeology," this has changed. Enough is now known to allow a plausible reconstruction of the early development of the Greek economy and city-state. Professor Hanson's great contribution is to have synthesized the work of dozens of specialists to provide such a reconstruction; the bibliography of *The Other Greeks* (second edition) is thirty-six pages long. It is impossible to do the work justice in a short space, but perhaps what follows may encourage readers to attempt the five-hundred page original on their own.

In the course of the second millennium B.C. there rose and fell in Greece a notable civilization known as the Mycenaean (after the location of the first impressive archeological finds). Its economic life centered around large palaces, great lords, and a class of bureaucrats or administrators who oversaw agricultural laborers, assigning them their tasks and doling out rations. Most impressive to many are the rich burial finds: jewelry, weapons, pottery, sculpture. And they possessed two seemingly indecipherable scripts, which their discoverer Arthur Evans called simply Linear A and Linear B, both of which looked quite unlike classical Greek.

This Mycenaean palace culture of 1600–1200 B.C. did not, however, mark the dawn of Western civilization. It was a society comparable in achievement perhaps to the early Celtic Hallstatt and La Tène cultures, and considerably less interesting than the already ancient civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia. Like the latter, it was regimented and centralized. Hanson explicitly draws the parallel with Soviet-style collective agriculture.

Toward the end of the second millennium the Mycenaean world collapsed. Most of the palaces were burned. The next four centuries are termed the Greek “Dark Ages.” In fact, they are much less well known to us than Merovingian France or Saxon England. The archeological record is almost a complete blank, and there is no written literature at all. Then, in the eighth century, Homer, the polis, overseas colonization, even the Olympic Games, all appear almost simultaneously. How did it happen?

During the heyday of racial theorizing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there existed a kind of scholarly orthodoxy on this subject. Mycenaean civilization was destroyed by a superior race of invaders from the north: the Dorians. They brought the Greek language and Nordic blood with them, making classical civilization possible.

Even at the time this theory was first put forward there was one fairly obvious problem with it: the Dorians had to come from somewhere. If their superior natural endowments produced a great civilization in Greece, shouldn't it have done so in their earlier homeland to the north? Why is there no record of any such civilization?

The really decisive blow to the theory, however, came with the decipherment of Linear B in 1951, and the revelation that it was an early form of Greek. The Greek speakers, in other words, were already in their present homeland by the middle of the second millennium B.C. The Dorians did not displace the native population or even impose a foreign tongue; they added only a slight variation to the existing genetic pool.

By the late twentieth century, the racial theory of classical civilization lay mostly in ruins for sound reasons unrelated to “antiracist” demagoguery. But there was no replacement for it. We still had no plausible explanation for the Greek miracle. Thanks in some significant measure to Victor Davis Hanson, we now do. The explanation, in a word, is *agrarianism*.

All preindustrial societies are agricultural, but only a few have been agrarian; of these latter, classical Greece was the first and most important. Agrarian societies are informed by a certain ideal, according to which landed estates should be generally small and inalienable. A plot of land should be large enough to provide a family with a decent sufficiency, but not luxury. It should belong to a family rather than any individual; the head of the family holds it in trust for the benefit of his children and his children's children. It is *his*, in other words, but not his alone. He has no moral right to do with it simply as he pleases.

Agrarianism is an egalitarian ideal, in a sense. A common Greek proverb was *ouk agathoi hoi plousiotatoi*: "the very rich are not good." And, as Hanson easily demonstrates, there was an anti-aristocratic tendency to much Greek literature: especially apparent in Hesiod, Euripides and Aristophanes. But this must not be confused with the envy-driven modern ideology of socialism. In the agrarian polis there was no objection to the accumulation of wealth as such; only to wealth being used to buy out family farms and consolidate large estates. Such *latifundia*, as the Romans called them, inevitably come to be controlled by absentee landlords in their own interests, leading to dependency for those who actually worked the land: free citizen-farmers are replaced by a peasantry. This is inimical not only to efficient land use but to political freedom. The elder Pliny echoed this old agrarian sentiment when he wrote, in an age of Trimalchios and *vomitaria*, "anyone for whom seven acres are not enough is a dangerous citizen."

Solon boasted that the legitimate interests of the wealthy aristocrats were respected in his legal code: a concord of the orders, not class struggle, was the classical ideal. Wealthy men were encouraged to use their wealth for the public benefit, for example, by sponsoring religious festivals and dramatic performances. Aristotle believed a polis had the duty to "teach those that are the respectable by nature that they are not to desire excessive riches," not because he resented aristocrats having more wealth than he did, but from a belief in *noblesse oblige* and a realization that the piling up of riches is not the proper end of human existence. And many aristocrats sincerely accepted the agrarian ideal. Plato—no democrat—suggested in his *Laws* that no farm should be more than five times as large as the smallest holdings.

Hanson sketches for us an account of the rise of Greek agrarianism for which the evidence must necessarily remain meager but which, as far as it goes, is utterly convincing. From comparative studies (for example, of the Western European Dark Ages) certain things can be known about the consequences of the collapse of a complex society. We may infer, for example, that there was a drastic decline in the population, a partial or complete reversion from cultivation of the soil to pastoralism, and an organization of society on the basis of kinship and personal service—feudalism, in a generic sense. Any agriculture that remained would have been extensive rather than intensive; in other words,

land use was extremely inefficient. Probably it consisted of cereal cultivation in the rich but (in Greece) scarce bottomland of river valleys. Gradually, as conditions became more settled, population began to increase and this type of land ran out. Men then began to stake out individual plots of slightly less desirable land on the lower slopes of the surrounding hills. As this too was engrossed, other enterprising farmers worked their way onto rockier ground, ever less suited to cereal cultivation. To compensate for the inferiority of the soil, they began to experiment with other crops, notably olives, figs, and vines – inventing the practice of grafting in the process. These new crops had a longer life-cycle than cereals, and the men who raised them had, correspondingly, a greater tendency to take long views. The new diversified agriculture was labor-intensive, producing not merely more or better food but a new type of person: the family farmer, a hard-working, practical man with a stubborn, individualistic streak, a strong sense of property rights backed by the courage and ability to defend property tenaciously. These agrarians may have been the first considerable body of men in history to develop a “work ethic,” a view of labor as intrinsically important and ennobling rather than mere pain to be endured for the sake of the wealth it produced. Hence arose the idea – so common among ancient moralists, so rarely recalled today – that luxury could be a snare, that the best situation in life was a mean between destitution and riches rather than the maximization of riches.

Besides respect for property, agrarianism favored the rule of law. Aristotle saw this: “when the farmer class and the class having moderate means are in control of the government, they govern according to laws; the reason is because they have a livelihood, and they are not able to be at leisure, so that they put laws in control of the state and hold only the minimum number of assemblies necessary” (*Other Greeks*, p. 114). Aristotle defined a free polis as one in which men rule and are ruled in turn according to generally accepted procedures. Greek civilization thus came to place great emphasis on law-abidingness. Furthermore, educated Greeks were aware that this distinguished them from other nations. Herodotus depicts an envoy warning the king of Persia that Greeks “have law for a master, whom they fear more than your men fear you.”

Eventually the sheer numbers of new agrarians shook the old Dark Age, clan-based structures of authority. The small farmers began to make their influence felt politically. This, in Hanson’s view, was the true significance of Solon’s legislation in sixth-century Athens. He and the other “lawgivers” – shadowy figures such as Philolaus of Corinth and Phaleas the Chalcedonian – were actually agrarian reformers, men who brought law and politics into line with already established agrarian economic and social realities. Failure to understand this has often resulted in these ancient lawgivers being misunderstood as a sort of philosopher-kings, founding states *ex nihilo* on the basis of their own abstract ideals of justice: consult Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, Book II, chapter 7, for an especially extravagant example of this tendency.

The agrarian character of the ancient city-state is concealed to a great extent by the nomenclature of ancient political thought, which centered on moral virtues and the number of enfranchised citizens rather than on economic arrangements. Consider, for example, Aristotle's well-known sixfold classification scheme for regimes. A city may be ruled by one man, a few men, or the mass of the population. And the rulers may govern in their own interests or that of the city as a whole. Hence there are three good regimes: kingship, aristocracy, and polity, or "good" democracy (*politeia*). And, correspondingly, there are three defective regimes: tyranny, oligarchy, and 'bad' democracy (*demokrateia*). Hanson ably demonstrates that this scheme is a Procrustean bed when applied to the economic evolution of the classical city-state. The early agrarian polis might be described as a broad oligarchy, since the landless poor were excluded from government. But in those times there simply was no large urban class of artisans and tradesmen, so the regime might with almost equal propriety be named a democracy. Because, however, agrarianism led to efficient land use and an ever-increasing surplus, such a landless, urban, but not necessarily poor or uneducated class did arise and seek participation in government. In Athens, it won that participation in the fifth century and a new, radical type of democracy came into being, lasting down to Aristotle's own time. Under the new conditions, oligarchy came to be conceived in a new way. For example, occasionally power was seized by an aristocratic cabal, as in the famous episode of the "four hundred" in Athens in 411 B.C.; or a narrow collaborationist government might be installed in formerly democratic cities by Sparta in its own interests. By Aristotle's day it was these despotic regimes which were known as "oligarchies." It would be perverse, however, to class them with the broad agrarian oligarchies of earlier times. But Aristotle's terminology blurs this essential distinction. It can be sharpened using modern economic and sociological concepts, but these disciplines were simply not part of the Greek achievement.

Among the high points of *The Other Greeks* we may mention chapter 9, "The Erosion of the Agrarian Polis." It concerns itself with Athens from the Peloponnesian War until the Battle of Chaeronea (431-338 B.C.), a period for which the historical record is far richer than for agrarianism's rise. Hanson shows that the Athenian farmers benefited economically from radical democratic imperialism even as they lost their political preponderance. Furthermore, they continued to enjoy a high level of social prestige: the urban population emulated rather than resented them. The phenomenon might be compared to that of the British gentleman, an originally sociopolitical category which gradually evolved into a moral ideal, and "set the tone" for the lower orders of society in an increasingly democratic age. It was not any agrarian "reaction" which destroyed Athenian democracy, but the rise of the nonagrarian monarchy of Macedon.

The Other Greeks contains three chapters devoted to military matters, but limited largely to their economic and cultural aspects. In view of Hanson's recent advocacy of widespread American military intervention, his criticisms of ancient militarism are especially noteworthy. By militarism, I mean lack of civilian oversight, state pay for soldiers and armaments, conscription, extended foreign campaigning, and exemption of generals and decision-makers from actual battle service. All had been characteristic of the ancient Near East, and reappeared in the Hellenistic world which arose out of the Macedonian conquests. Within the Western Tradition, they are a sure touchstone of cultural decadence. During the classical period, and especially until the Persian invasions, Greek "armies" were more properly agrarian militias: amateur, private, and formed by farmers themselves in their own interests. Hanson doubts major wars (as opposed to individual battles) were even common before the fifth century.

The Other Greeks first reveals an interest in American agrarianism, an interest more fully developed in *Fields without Dreams*, (Free Press, 1996). That work is based on the author's own experiences as a grape farmer during the agricultural depression of the 1980s. Hanson reminds his fellow countrymen that characteristically agrarian virtues underscored the democratic practices of earlier America as well as of the classical city-state and identifies government subsidies as responsible for the consolidation of family farms into agribusiness monstrosities. Much of the narrative has the ring of black comedy, though for the small farmers involved—Hanson's family and their neighbors—it was closer to tragedy. Independent farmers are taken advantage of by government and government-favored agribusiness concerns, simply because they *are* hardworking, uncomplaining, and have a sense of responsibility. They have gradually been reduced to a kind of helotry or driven out of business by managers and bureaucrats who are often their moral inferiors. Although I have no personal experience with agriculture, Hanson's narrative has for me a compelling quality. He concludes the book by calling for abolition of the Department of Agriculture. He does not seem to be aware, however, of the broader connection between governmental monetary policies and economic downturns such as the one he experienced. Perhaps a classicist-farmer should not be expected to have mastered the theories of Mises and Hayek.

In *Fields without Dreams*, war disappears from view.

At this point in his career Hanson was only forty-two years old and little known outside specialist circles. He had already achieved more than most scholars do in a lifetime. He could have rested on his laurels; perhaps he should have.

In 1999, however, three years after *Fields without Dreams* and two years before the World Trade Center attacks, Professor Hanson published *The Soul of Battle* (Free Press, 1999). It marks a turning point in his career, and deserves our close attention. The cover touts the work as a story of "how three great liberators vanquished tyranny." Only one of the men in question comes from

Prof. Hanson's special field of study: Epaminondas of Thebes. Greatly admired in antiquity, he is nearly forgotten today; I shall, therefore, summarize his career as briefly as possible.

The Peloponnesian War was waged by a Spartan-led coalition supposedly to free Greece from the domination of Athens. What actually happened was that, after destroying the Athenian Empire, Sparta created an even more despotic empire of her own, demanding tribute and obedience wherever her power extended. In 382 B.C. she occupied her former ally Thebes, installing a garrison and a collaborationist oligarchy. Three years later, a democratic cabal successfully conspired to overthrow the oligarchy and expel the Spartan garrison. They also established a new regional federation of democratic townships, led but not dominated by Thebes. In July of 371 a large Spartan-led force was met and defeated near the village of Leuctra by a smaller Theban-led force under the command of Epaminondas. It was considered a shocking upset. Epaminondas wished to follow up his victory with an immediate descent upon Sparta, but it took over a year to obtain the necessary authority and collect an army. What an army, though! Sparta had many enemies, and in December 370 some seventy thousand of them prepared to march south into the Peloponnesus. Their stated purpose was to aid the Arcadians, who had seen in Leuctra a chance to revolt from Spartan overlordship. Upon arriving, they learned that the Spartans had withdrawn to avoid facing them. The Arcadians, however, convinced Epaminondas it would be wrong to waste the opportunity presented by having such a splendid force assembled so close to Sparta. Overstepping his legal authority, Epaminondas led his men into the Eurotas valley, ravaging the land as far as the suburbs of Sparta itself; no army emerged to meet him. Returning to Arcadia in midwinter, he decided quickly on another, greater, and equally unplanned exploit: the liberation of Messenia. This territory, to the west of Sparta, had been reduced to serfdom three centuries previously. It had provided most of the agricultural surplus necessary to free Spartan citizens from labor, allowing them to devote themselves full-time to politics and military training. Within a few weeks, Epaminondas's men freed it and fortified the capital. Sparta had gone from ruler of Greece to minor regional power in less than two years, and it was largely due to the leadership of one man.

When Epaminondas returned to Thebes in the summer of 369 he received the common democratic reward of Greek generals: he was put on trial for treason by envious fellow-citizens. He was too proud even to mount a defense. The assembly, fortunately, had enough sense to drop the matter. For the next seven years, Thebes was the leading power in Greece. Epaminondas mounted three further invasions of the Peloponnesus, though without a force as great or results as spectacular as the first time. In 362 he was killed fighting another victorious battle against the Spartans in Arcadia. Theban hegemony vanished the instant he died and was never recovered. But neither did Sparta recover; Epaminondas's blow against her was essentially fatal.

There are certain figures from antiquity – Alexander the Great is the most notorious example—who are intriguing precisely because only enough evidence concerning them survives to whet our curiosity, but not enough to satisfy it. There is always a danger in modern attempts to reconstruct the thoughts and actions of such men; we are apt to project modern concerns upon them. This has happened, I believe, in Hanson's mostly competent and valuable summary of Epaminondas's career. A cover blurb for *The Soul of Battle* describes the work as "suffused by the author's deep faith in democracy." That, indeed, is just the problem. We find him speaking, for example, of a "naïve idealism" (p. 45) for democracy in Thebes, which is nothing more than his own modern ideological and messianic "faith in democracy." Few ancients actually had much good to say about radical democracy; those who did—such as Pericles and Demosthenes—did so because they were democratic political leaders themselves. They were, in other words, flattering the sovereign demos. Plato had their number; in his *Menexenus* he has Socrates point out that "it is an easy matter to praise Athens to the Athenians." The soberest ancients (such as Aristotle) propounded instead the idea of a constitution "mixed" of democratic and aristocratic elements.

Worse still, in speaking of the bizarre Spartan constitution so admired by Xenophon, Plutarch and—it is said—Socrates, we find Hanson slipping into Marxese. Sparta's "substructure" (as opposed, presumably, to its "superstructure") was "a maze of cultural, political, and economic contradictions" (p. 67; cf. also p. 178). This may reflect the influence of G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, a Marxist classicist elsewhere praised by Hanson.

Or again, consider Epaminondas's study of Pythagorean doctrine, which, as Hanson describes it, would seem to have made him into a regular Jacobin *avant la lettre*: Pythagoras's followers wished to

Overturn conventional prejudice... censor the luxury and decadence of the more wealthy and powerful, and apply a radical equality to fellows both male and female.... The enemies of all Pythagoreans were superstition, blinkered tradition, conventional religion and custom—anything handed down though ignorance that might impede unfettered examination.... Their utopia... was... a commune of the ascetic and educated, a sect of natural and trained elites, whose own exemplary behavior would allow them to bring justice and enlightenment to the ignorant other. (p. 58)

There does exist a kind of leftist *philosophia perennis*, and a number of cancerous modern ideas were well anticipated in antiquity. Some no doubt were to be found among the Pythagoreans. But there is no call for interpreting Epaminondas's struggle against Sparta as the fulfillment of an ideological program, Pythagorean or otherwise. Sparta was hated because she had oppressed and waged war against Thebes—and many other Greek states. Epaminondas did pride himself on liberating the Messenians, and not merely because this was an economic blow to Sparta. But, as with all ancient leaders (even Spartacus) there is no evidence he objected to slavery in principle.

Messenian helotry, “an altogether cruel and bitter condition,” as one ancient called it, is competently described by Hanson, but oddly termed “apartheid.” This anachronistic expression is first encountered well buried in an endnote to *The Other Greeks* (p. 478, note 4)—a cloud no bigger than a man’s hand. The special character of helotry was that its victims were enslaved by the Spartan state: they were not personal chattels, as were the slaves in most Greek city-states or the American South. In this respect there is a certain analogy with the position of blacks under the old South African race laws. Both were political rather than merely natural or economic statuses; both amounted to a kind of socialism. The essential difference, of course, is that the racial divide between Spartan citizens and Messenians was slight. More generally, all racial differences within the ancient Greek world were slight in comparison with those that afflict the modern era.

As explained above, the old racial theory of the rise of classical Greek civilization was indeed mistaken. It would be improper, however, to generalize from this particular case. If the valleys of Dark Age Greece had been inhabited by the present citizens of Equatorial Guinea, whose average IQ is said to be 59, the result would not have been the classical city-state, self-rule under law, tragedy, philosophy, and the Parthenon. Hanson, unfortunately, has milked the “antiracial” aspect of his own thesis for a great deal more than it is worth. He never misses an opportunity to reiterate that Western Civilization is a matter of “culture, not race”—as if informed racialists were unaware of anything besides biology. The truth, of course, is that writers for publications such as this one are interested in race because of their concern for Western culture. And whatever Hanson may think, race is no exception to the rule that one ought to know something about a subject before endeavoring to instruct others. Sadly, Hanson knows less about racial differences than I do about raisin production.

Which brings us to the subject matter of the rest of *The Soul of Battle*. As mentioned above, the work is billed as a story of “how three great liberators vanquished tyranny.” One of the other liberators in question is Patton. The Nazis, of course, give Hanson ample opportunity for pontificating about “racism.” Still, it is surely fair enough to describe Patton as a “liberator from tyranny.” It is the third liberator I wish to focus on here: William Tecumseh Sherman.

I was shocked to see, at the time *The Soul of Battle* was published, that Prof. Hanson had chosen Sherman as one of his military heroes. He had, after all, been at pains in his very first book to distinguish the ancient practice of crop-destruction from the modern version, in which the intent is precisely to wage war on the civilian population, and even reduce it to starvation. Could he really be unaware what historical figure this modern practice is most closely associated with?

Or what of the “western way of war” consisting of short, decisive infantry engagements? Would Gen. Sherman’s March to the Sea represent this tradition?

Or what of Hanson's agrarian concerns? Would he expect Sherman to share his tender concern for the preservation of family farms?

What we find in the Sherman chapters of *The Soul of Battle* is, in fact, a remarkable testament to the ability of even a highly intelligent man to compartmentalize his thoughts. Much of Hanson's treatment of Sherman can be rebutted from the author's own earlier work. The most striking instance regards the relation between property rights and political power. "You must first make a government before you can have property," he quotes Sherman as saying (p. 149); "there is no such thing as property without a government." The disproof is in the pages of *The Other Greeks*. Property rights and their concomitant—freedom under law—evolved from the special, highly unusual circumstances of Dark Age Greece, where government was nearly absent. The polis, as Hanson demonstrated, arose out of this preexisting economic and social arrangement. Sherman's statist view of property, so common in our day, represents a reversion to the non-Western mentality of Persian autocracy in which subjects only have as many rights as the king chooses to allow them.

Agrarianism is another subject on which our author switches sides when moving from classical Greece to America. The South was quite obviously the agrarian section in antebellum America. Hanson, however, chooses to label it "pseudo-agrarian" merely because some larger plantations existed. Like many Americans, he seems to have an exaggerated idea of the number of such Southern *latifundia*. This received notion—which is not new—feeds naturally into a Marxist-style exploitation theory of the Southern economy. Hanson approvingly quotes an Ohio officer who served under Sherman: "a civilization in which a score of lives are impoverished and embittered, are blasted and debased and damned, in order that one life may be made sweeter, is a system of wrong that no language can properly condemn" (p. 149). The sentiment is difficult to dispute, but it does not correctly describe Southern society—nor any other. Wealth is not extracted from unfree men by the free; it is produced by the labor of all men. If the exploitation theory were correct, the slaveholding South ought to have been wealthier than the industrial North; of course, this was not the case.

Hanson's ignorance of the realities of Southern agrarianism is matched by his ignorance of the rich body of thought it has occasioned. John Taylor, John Randolph, the Vanderbilt "Twelve," Richard Weaver, M. E. Bradford—none seem to have come to his attention. Weaver, in particular, might have taught him a lot. Consider only his great essay "Southern Chivalry and Total War":

The majority of the Southern people looked upon [the war] as an elaborate ceremonial, to be conducted strictly according to rules, and with maximum display of color and individual daring—in short, as a gigantic tournament, with the Lord of Hosts as umpire and judge. After First Manassas some Southerners were actually heard to express the opinion that the war must promptly cease because the question of manhood between the two sections had been decided and

there was nothing else at issue. The South went into the first modern war thinking it was a duel, and “affair of honor.” (*The Southern Essays of Richard M. Weaver*, pp. 164-165)

This Southern view, indeed, bears some resemblance to Hanson’s own description of classical agrarian hoplite battle in *The Western Way of War*. In that book, as above related, Hanson had been at pains to distinguish the limited hoplite duel from the lengthy and distant campaigns of “Hellenistic thugs” and Roman legionaries, financed through plunder and pillage. Is the analogy between this latter kind of warfare and Sherman’s brand of “total war” so difficult to see? How did it go from being despicable in antiquity to being admirable in the nineteenth century?

Hanson’s answer, I think, is easy enough to infer. Reducing a civilian population to starvation is admirable when it is necessary to end what he variously terms the “odious” or “abhorrent” practice of slavery (adjectives he never applies to the slavery of any other place or time). But slavery was in fact abolished in numerous countries during the nineteenth century without any March to the Sea.

The shortcomings of Hanson’s Sherman chapters are indeed so numerous that it is impossible to treat them adequately here. I shall merely list a few more:

He believes the plantation class’s worth was “self-assessed in material rather than human terms” (p. 157). Weaver, again, was on the mark in calling the South “the last non-materialist civilization in the Western World.” There exist innumerable testimonies to how little status value was conferred by wealth in the antebellum South.

He believes Northern prosperity was due in part to taxation—which of course merely reallocates wealth while eroding it (p.199). His knowledge of economics, in other words, has not improved.

He draws inferences from might to right, believing the South’s defeat amounts to a proof of its moral culpability. He explicitly equates the constitutional issue of states’ rights with that of slavery (both these confusions on p. 187).

Secessionists were “revolutionaries” who “hated” the union (p. 155) and “forced” it into the war (p. 185, quoting Sherman’s own words).

Furthermore, the language of these chapters possesses an extravagance unprecedented in Hanson’s writings up to this time (though not unmatched by his political diatribes since September 11). My favorite sentence: “To Sherman, the self-avowed agent of the apocalypse, warfare of the new modern age had only one redeeming feature: the bringing of a brutal, immutable truth to the world of hypocrisy and darkness” (p. 203).

Hanson’s knowledge of Sherman’s March *is* extensive (the bibliography for these chapters alone includes sixty-eight items). But it is strictly limited to the military aspect of the March; where consideration of the larger socioeconomic and moral aspect of events should come, we find only vehement rehashing of Yankee propaganda.

Victor Davis Hanson is a fine military historian of *classical Greece*. He knows so little of political theory that he cannot distinguish imperial aggression from its opposite. Sherman marched for the imperial aggrandizement of the Union; Epaminondas marched to destroy the Spartan empire. In that regard, these two figures were polar opposites. Sherman's historical predecessors were rather the Persian commanders who attempted to crush agrarian, democratic, "Western" Athens and incorporate it into their empire.

How did Prof. Hanson come to associate two such figures in his own mind and in his writings? As best as I can reconstruct it, his train of thought went something like this: "The Greeks were agrarians who figured out democracy and Western Civilization. We Americans are the heirs of that civilization; lots of us used to be farmers and a few still are; we call our own form of government democracy. So we are the Greeks of today. The Confederates, however, owned slaves—which we know is wrong, though the Greeks for some reason didn't. The Confederates, then, were the Persian tyrants of the nineteenth century. Since Sherman fought them, he was the heir of the Athenians facing down Persian might at Marathon. Or perhaps of Epaminondas freeing Messenia from Spartan rule: it doesn't so much matter. In any case, since we are Americans and heirs of the Greeks, we are also Unionists, Western, enemies of tyranny, and various good things. When we fight, the other guys are Persians, Spartans, rebels, Asiatics, tyrants, and various bad things."

This "Hanson doctrine," as it might be called, is not only supremely confused—it possesses a self-righteous Manichean quality worthy of Robespierre.

Now, I must remind my readers that *The Soul of Battle* was published in 1999, two years before the events of September 11. A person reading the book upon publication might have come to the same conclusions I have just sketched. But he could never have foreseen that Prof. Hanson's shortcomings would have an effect outside the domain of military history.

Victor Davis Hanson began on the very day of the World Trade Center attacks to publish articles advocating an American war in the Middle East. The earliest have been gathered in a book—*An Autumn of War*—which has sold briskly and been touted by Rush Limbaugh, William Kristol, and other influential figures. Significantly, the longest piece in that collection concerns Sherman, whom the author puts forward as a model to be followed for America's war in Afghanistan.

Indeed, Hanson's cardinal mistake has been to interpret the events of September 11 as a conventional military attack. They were not. War is older than civilization itself, but the first terrorist organization in the modern sense was only formed in the 1870s, in Imperial Russia. It is the direct or indirect inspiration of all such organizations down to the present day. It styled itself "The People's Will," and its executive committee had only about thirty members. These men resorted to planting bombs precisely *because* they knew they were too weak to confront the Imperial Government directly. Their aim

instead was to provoke the authorities into taking harsh countermeasures, and thus (it was hoped) generate public support for the revolutionary cause. For three years they carried out a dramatic campaign of murder against high government officials, culminating in the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881. This succeeded splendidly in provoking the desired countermeasures; within a few years Russia had a secret police that foreshadowed Lenin's Cheka. But it gained no public support; ordinary Russians were horrified by the assassinations and the revolutionaries' cause suffered. Rather than reconsider their aims and methods, however, later Russian terrorists developed a cult of martyrdom, of self-sacrificial violence as an end in itself. Terror was hallowed by its association with revolutionary aims even in the absence of any political gains.

Contemporary Islamic terrorism still bears a strong family resemblance to its Russian predecessor. The traditional Muslim idea of holy war and religious martyrdom fuses easily with Western political fanaticism. The al-Qaedaists find their inspiration in the writings of Sayyed al-Qutb,

a self-conscious intellectual in the Western sense, who attempted to give Islam a decidedly modernist, even "existentialist" character. The faith of the true Muslim was, for Qutb, an expression of his innermost being against the inauthentic otherness of the surrounding world. Islam was therefore the answer to the rootlessness and comfortlessness of modernity, and Qutb did not stop short of endorsing both suicide and terrorism as instruments in the self-affirmation of the believer. (Roger Scruton, *The West and the Rest*, pp. 115-116.)

This mentality is difficult for normal people to comprehend, but we must make the effort if we are to understand what our civilization is now up against.

Hanson, in contrast, conceives the September 11 attacks as a tactical blunder in a conventional war. Bin Laden, he assures us, "thought it more likely that he could gain fame and power than court death and destruction" (*An Autumn of War*, p. xvi). He writes as if al-Qaeda had not intended to provoke a military response from the U.S., and must now be shaking in their boots from bewilderment and surprise.

This very lack of imagination makes Hanson useful to vested interests. The American military, while powerful, is a force designed for conventional fighting. Hanson's misleading historical analogies between Sherman and the Afghan war, therefore, come opportunely to its leaders. He has ignorant bureaucrats at the Pentagon imagining they enjoy the authority of history for picturing themselves as "vanquishers of tyranny." Our country may be no safer, but Hanson's own reputation has soared among men unable to appreciate his standing as a scholar. Should his own understanding of terrorism improve, his usefulness to his new friends will vanish precipitously.

An Autumn of War continues and extends other unfortunate tendencies we saw in *The Soul of Battle*, notably the unconditional praise of modernism. "Medieval" is his great term of condemnation, as when he describes

Islamicists as “wedded to a medieval world of perpetual stasis” (p. 15). We, on the other hand, “inherited our democratic ideals from the European enlightenment” (p. 208). So much for Greek agrarianism. He speaks of America being “created as [an] antithesis” to the Old World (p. 211). And in just the last twenty years we have “evolved beyond the traditional Western paradigm in reaching the theoretical limits of freedom and unbridled capitalism” (p. 204). So much for the destruction of free farming by the Department of Agriculture.

Hanson’s “deep faith in democracy” seems to grow ever deeper. “It is the duty of Americans,” he writes, “to support popular governments and democratic revolutionaries wherever possible” (p. xix), and more specifically to support “the right of all Islamic peoples to self-determination through consensual government” (p. 72). Never mind that divine sanction is the only legitimizing principle familiar to ordinary Muslims. He expects that “what once happened among the enslaved peoples of the Warsaw Pact could occur again in the Middle East—and in a decade or less rather than fifty years” (p. 203). What if Muslims turn out not to care for “freedom and democracy?” No cause for second thoughts: “[i]f they wish...to elect themselves into the slavery of Islamic republics, so be it—but at least we can say that we fought for legitimacy—and they, not us, ruined their countries” (p. 143). He speaks casually of outlawing polygamy, “liberating” women, secularizing education, and putting an end to “tribalism.”

Among the more intriguing pieces in *An Autumn of War* is Hanson’s “interview” with Thucydides. Passages from *The Peloponnesian War* are turned into answers to Hanson’s queries about the War on Terror. He asks about the need for tough measures, even against those not directly connected to the September 11 attacks. “General Thucydides’s” answer advocates punishment of the innocent along with the guilty. The passage, it turns out, is taken from a speech by the demagogue Cleon, whom the real Thucydides called “the most violent man at Athens.” In the speech quoted, Cleon was defending a motion to put the entire adult male population of Mytilene to death and enslave the women and children, because *some* of the citizens had plotted a revolt against Athens.

Hanson further sees fit to apply to Donald Rumsfeld a panegyric Thucydides made upon Pericles the Great. More recently, he has compared George Bush to Demosthenes (though not, fortunately, with any special regard for the president’s speaking ability). Thucydides’ magnificent remarks on the perversion of language brought on by war fever are turned upside down into a defense of Hanson’s own wild rhetoric about “Islamofascism” (pp. 75–78). Such is the “classical wisdom” he offers our age.

In the two years since writing the pieces collected as *An Autumn of War* Prof. Hanson has remained busy producing at least one article per week for National Review Online. He seems oddly out of place among the professional libelers

and callow minds now posing as heirs to that once respectable journal, but it is only knowledge of his past achievements which allows one to say this; the actual material he now grinds out is indistinguishable from theirs. We may skip discussing it; besides being numbingly repetitious, it contains little argument or analysis of any sort. Indeed, most of it is mere cheerleading—intended to stir the reader’s enthusiasm for whatever line the Bush administration is pushing at the moment.

Victor Davis Hanson is among the most talented writers in America today. How sad, then, that precisely his *worst* qualities are now exerting the greatest influence. *The Other Greeks* will never reach the vast audience that has devoured *An Autumn of War*. No revival of free agriculture or classical education is likely to be sparked by his earlier work. Instead, he is now a leading proponent of policies which, it is to be feared, threaten us, our country, and our civilization with catastrophe.

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