Christian Meier
A Culture of Freedom: Ancient Greece and the Origins of Europe, trans. Jefferson Chase.
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Christian Meier's *A Culture of Freedom*, originally published in 2009 as *Kultur, um der Freiheit willen. Griechische Anfäng Europas?* is a wide-sweeping argument that locates an essential aspect of European culture in the distinctiveness of ancient Greece from the other large empires found both before and after it. This distinctiveness, or what Meier calls its "motor", was the freedom experienced by broad circles of men across many small communities. To secure and promote this freedom, these small groups rose up to the challenge of shaping a culture of freedom and fighting against all encroachments. One stated purpose of his argument is to challenge the idea that Europe only emerged from Christianity or even later in the renaissance; instead, Meier argues that the Greek conceptions of freedom and everything that freedom allowed to flourish (including rationality) remained present even when Europe had to remake itself in the Middle Ages. In order to fully make this case, this book is part of a series exploring the development and challenges of European culture. As Raaflaub notes in his forward to the book, the argument reveals Meier's interest in the ancient past "never as something gone and alien but . . . (as something that) stimulates thinking about the present (xi)."

The book is divided into two sections. The first part, entitled "The Question of Beginnings," is a short (46 pages) outline of the significance of this argument to the debate concerning the origin of Europe. It introduces the main argument of the book: the freedom and desire for autonomy experienced by the ancient Greeks bound them together but also created anxiety and problems arising from the need to find a balance among the members of this free community. This community, unlike those living under a strong centralized authority which could exert pressure from above, had to think through the differences concerning the idea of justice, seek modes of expression which facilitate self-assertion and agreement, and it had to find innovative ways of coexisting and resolving conflicts. All of this would require a radical questioning of tradition and the development of a new intellectual and political culture. As part of this development, this section also explores the interesting question of how Europe came to be conceptualized as a continent. Europe, like many territories in history, took on the name of a smaller region, in this case one north of the Aegean: but the significance of this, Meier argues, was a conceptual rather than geographical division from Asia. It is this capacity for such high-level abstract conceptualization which would ultimately create the classical world of Greece, known mainly to us through the golden age of Athens.

The second and more substantial part of the book (230 pages), entitled "The Rise of the World of the *Poleis*", is Meier's explanation as to how this "exceptional culture" came to be and how it was constituted. The section covers approximately 700 years from the post-Mycenaean migrations and "dark ages" of Greece to the beginning of classical Athens. It also covers an ensemble of topics from colonization and the diversity of *polis* structures to the Greek culture of agonistic impulse, gods and priests, aristocracy and tyranny, epic and lyric poetry, and the

beginnings of political thought, philosophy, and science. Several of the chapters, such as the poetry of Homer and Hesiod or development of political thought, focus on specific topics with reference to crucial authors or texts; other chapters provide a more narrative form tracing historical development. As Meier's argument concerns the uniqueness of Greek culture, his analysis also includes references to the other great world cultures of the time, in particular the Persians, Lydians, and Phoenicians. He also traces how Greek contact with these cultures allowed them to integrate their more advanced knowledge to Greek circumstances. In his chapter on the diversity of the *poleis*, for example, he explores how contact with Oriental knowledge possibly inspired the early philosophers of Miletus, such as Thales and Anaximander, to adapt such knowledge to the Greek problem of finding a proper balance for a culture of free men.

It is Meier's broad analysis and discussion of an obscure period of Greek culture which is both the strength and weakness of this work. On the one hand, Meier covers a great deal of ground to set up his argument that Greece had a unique culture of freedom. Most of this argument is based on very broad brushstrokes of a period for which we have very little archeological or textual evidence of cultural phenomena or how these early *poleis* actually functioned. The extensiveness of the argument also raises questions throughout the text. How solid is the evidence, for example, across the diverse Greek *poleis* over several centuries, that the spirit of agonistic competition meant that members of broader classes sought political power for status rather than advancing their own material interests? Is it really true that these lower classes had no culture or ideals of their own as an alternative to the elites or that they had no personal ambitions, so were able to care for all? Or is it that our sparse evidence simply has not preserved the variety of culture and ambitions experienced by the lower classes?

As the argument covers such a wide range of subjects, Meier's treatment of any individual topic lacks nuance and provides an overtly generalized view. It is not entirely clear, for instance, that *isēgoria* (equality of speech) is simply a synonym for *isonomia* (equality before the law). In addition, since making a case for Greek uniqueness requires a comparative analysis, Meier's brush strokes on the great empires of the time are even broader. As he admits in several places, we know even less about how many of these cultures functioned, but most appeared to collect tribute and rule with a governor or even indirectly. This means that although there may have been pressure from above, the day-to-day life of individuals with some means within these empires may not have varied so much from that of those in the small Greek *poleis*. Meier's argument for Greek exceptionalism proves to be quite thin.

On the other hand, Meier's broad and wide-ranging analysis of this obscure period of Greek culture provides much food for thought. Meier is clear that he is writing for a broad audience interested in the legacy of Greek freedom in European culture and not for the more specialized scholarship on Greek politics and history. He also makes it clear that much of his argument is inferred from parsimonious evidence and that, at times, his assertions are speculative and may seem overtly bold. His argument succeeds when read as an overview of the diverse conditions, cultural importations and innovations, and new ways of thinking which promoted the development of a free culture in Greece. For his main broad audience, he does provide an explanation of Greek history which is both comprehensible and plausible. For scholars working on specific aspects of Greek culture, he draws attention to the important question of how the well-known period classical Athens and its preoccupation with freedom and democracy came to

be. His argument highlights the importance of understanding classical Greece not as discrete aspects of culture or politics, but from the perspective of an interconnection and dynamism of various aspects of culture from literature to geography, migration, and war. Although his argument that the Greeks were unique in their development of a free culture may be speculative and not conclusive, his attention to the spectrum of dimensions of Greek culture provokes his reader to investigate further the influence of more obscure authors, such as Alcaeus or Theognis, or the inspiration the Greeks drew from its contact with the other great empires. A principal strength of this argument may be this provocation to understand more deeply the origins and constituents of a free culture, something which is not only relevant for understanding ancient Greece but for protecting what is important in contemporary Western culture.

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