

# Reflections of Antiquity in the Greek Education of the 20th Century

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to examine the educational theories and practices of ancient Greece, to investigate a few of the explicit links that the modern Greek state has made to these and to discuss some of the more implicit parallels that can be discerned in the present Greek educational system. To some extent, it will be an investigation of the contemporary traces that remain from the ancient civilisation. Furthermore, it will be examined how the Modern Greek state achieves political ends through its attempts to embody in the citizen the reconstructed values of a glorious past, while characteristics of ancient Greek educational systems, still existing in the Modern Greek educational system, will be discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Ancient Greece was constituted of city-states ('polis'); that is of small autonomous cities which operated as autonomous independent states. Despite their common similarities, such as language, customs, religion, athletic festivals (e.g. Olympic Games), the Greek cities also had differences, for instance in the way of government or in their educational system (Karzis 1997: 59). The most vivid examples were the cities of Sparta and Athens. Those two Greek cities can offer, through examination and investigation, insights into how education is related, even nowadays, to the way that people organise themselves at the social and political level. The key issues

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emerging from the study of the educational systems of Sparta and Athens are the cultivation of a patriotic spirit, the teacher centred pedagogy, the negative notion about manual work, the influence of the ruling classes in the formation of education, and the role of teachers. All these issues appear to be common to both educational systems (of Sparta and Athens). On the other hand, Sparta was distinguished for the centralisation of education and the emphasis on homogeneity through education in order to achieve the political intentions of the ruling class.

As easily seen, ancient Greece systematised education and put it in a separate context as a result of a higher way of social and political organisation (Castle 1961: 11). However, the history of education in antiquity is not without relevance to our modern culture, for in it we can trace the direct ancestry of our educational tradition (Marrou 1959: xi). Educational theories shape educational strategies and methods that concern educational practices. An educational theory derives from an ideological orientation which is, in reality, a political ideology and choice since it is related to the question "what type of citizen I want to produce; for what kind of society and what form of government" (Tzani 1992: 11).

Therefore, in order to obtain a thorough understanding of education in the Modern Greek educational system and its reflection in educational policies and in issues such as administration, language and curriculum, an examination of the education in ancient Greek would be most helpful. Towards this direction, the present paper analyses the basic features found in the educational systems of Sparta and of Athens and discusses their appearance or alteration in the Modern Greek educational system.

## **2. Setting the framework**

### **2.1. The case of ancient Sparta**

Ancient Sparta put a great emphasis on education in order to maintain its supremacy, which was entirely based on military strength. Ancient Sparta was the first state in antiquity that was involved systematically with education as a whole; from the moment that a child was born until the end of his/her life (Barclay 1959). Sparta was extremely conservative in every aspect of its social and political life. Education remained static like

everything else. Any attempt to change things was considered to be a threat to the system. The socio-political and educational system was based entirely on Lycurgus's Laws (Marrou 1956: 19). Plutarch (1992 trans.) pointed out that Spartan citizens were forbidden from practising any type of work or trade. Helots, an unfree population group that formed the main population of Spartan areas, cultivated the land and paid taxes to the Spartan State (Karzis 1997), while the absence of gold or silver and their heavy iron currency prevented any desire for enrichment.

The whole purpose of the Spartan education was to build up character according to a clearly defined ideal, that of individual heroism, as it was in Homeric times (Robinson 1933: 43), serving the community as a whole (Barclay 1959: 50). Everything was sacrificed for the safety and interest of the community. This kind of public morality was based on absolute patriotism, devotion and obedience to the state and to the laws carried to the supreme limit of death (Marrou 1956: 22). The basic concern of Sparta's education system was to create brave soldiers, capable of fighting hard and without fear in order to defend their city's interests and also to have a blind obedience to the laws and to the masters of the city; being strong in the face of hardship, knowing perfectly the art of war and always being ready to sacrifice their lives for the sake of Sparta's greatness (Yannikopoulos 1999: 24). No one had the right to think independently or to serve individual aims. Communal life was in fact the keynote of the Spartan's whole existence (Robinson 1933: 40).

Obedience had to be maintained at any cost in order to preserve Sparta's political and educational system. Without obedience to the laws, the system would collapse because education, laws, the political system and military virtue were directly interwoven and mutually defining. Sparta was effectively a society of puritanical warriors who were forbidden from watching comedies or tragedies in the theatre on the grounds that men should not expose themselves to anything that came into conflict with the single-minded purpose of creating the perfect soldier (Plutarch 1992 trans.) Everything was co-ordinated to a general view about society and politics. Every single aspect was taken into consideration in order to shore up the system.

Education developed in an austere, ascetic atmosphere that was typical of Sparta (Marrou 1956: 22); it was entirely subordinated to the needs of the State and completely in the State's hands. It set goals, programmes and methods that were compulsory and uniform for all its citizens. Another feature of Sparta's education system was that the people who were chosen for education were selected by the state on the basis of merit. The best pupils became 'vuagi', that is leaders of groups that mainly aimed at the physical and spiritual exercise of the young men, or 'eren', that is leaders of groups that mainly aimed at teaching the art of war, while the best men became 'paedonomi', who were responsible for the education of the young men. According to Lycurgus (Plutarch, Lycurgus, 16), teachers could not be appointed, whether slaves or paid freemen, and he ruled that no one could rear or educate his son as he wished. One of the duties of 'eren' was to teach 'vues' literacy and to transmit basic knowledge (Yannikopoulos 1999: 20); this type of teaching we now call the 'mutually instructive method'. The 'Paidonomos' or "Overseer of Children" (a man who surpassed other citizens in his education and morals) was assigned to keep watch over them and was assisted by adolescents who whipped the 'bad' children (Xenophon, The Constitution of Lacedaemonians, ii. 2, 3). Spartan boys aged 7 to 20 were gradually introduced to hardship, while they developed their skills in the art of war (Barclay 1959: 65). Spartan military education service ended at the age of 60 years old. After their 'retirement', elders were still active in society. If they were elected from among the Assembly of Citizens, they offered their services in the Senate. The rest participated in the public meetings and provided their experience to 'Apella', the popular assembly in Ancient Sparta. At the informal level, every citizen had educational responsibilities, since everyone had to behave in the proper Spartan way. As Plutarch (Lycurgus, 17) said 'everyone thought that they were, one way or another, fathers, educators and rulers of the children'.

In Sparta, education was compatible with every other social and political etiquette; it was compatible with every single aspect of social life. Plato was inspired by Sparta and wanted to apply the same system in his Republic because, through unceasingly checking the children's behaviour, the system had the benefit of correcting all the mistakes of the youth as well as of the adults.

Sparta's curriculum overemphasised physical and military education. Cultivation of the reflective mind was not a priority of the Spartan educational system. Isocrates suggested that Spartans were illiterate. Plato (Ippis. Meiz. 285c) argued that they did know numeracy. Aelian (1997 trans.) noted that Lacedaemonians had a complete ignorance of music because they were interested only in physical and military exercise. Plutarch, on the other hand (Lycurgus, 16), argued that Spartans learn only the necessary literacy, while their education focused upon three basic elements; to govern well, to suffer difficulties and to win all battles.

In reality, Spartans did not need to be highly literate according to the way that they organised their society. Their laws were few and were set to music in order to facilitate recital and memory (Yannikopoulos 1999: 31). All the hymns and paeans (victory songs) that they knew were learnt by heart from a very young age and were sung on every occasion. Wideness and diversity of learning did not have a place in Sparta. Spartans only needed to know their society's view and not that of other societies. Education was a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for the exercise of civic rights. Only the ignorance of Lycurgus laws was regarded as inadmissible and had consequences.

Spartan women were enjoying a freedom of movement and an appreciation by the state. Women's education, as well as with other features of social life, served the cultivation of Sparta's imperious model. In Sparta, the young girls were exercised together with the boys in gymnasiums. The only discrimination was that women's exercises had to be milder. The reason why women in Sparta had equal opportunities with men in social life and in education was based upon the notion that it was necessary for the survival of the city. Furthermore, since Spartan men were often away for military purposes, they needed to be reassured about the security of their city. Only women who knew how to fight and were able to control slaves could thereby ensure the safety of the city in the absence of the men.

Sparta put great importance on education and was the first known state in antiquity to use education explicitly in order to sustain and reproduce the political system. The Spartan educational system succeeded in its aim to an absolute degree. It managed to ensure the survival of a small warrior nation for centuries. In Sparta, politics and education were related to

such an extent that, even today, they can serve as a useful paradigm case of the uses of education in supporting totalitarian political agendas and practices. The Spartan ideal has reappeared in all its savage and inhuman grandeur in the totalitarian states of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe (Marrou 1956: 22).

Unfortunately, Sparta was a mainly oral civilisation, which did not regard writing as essential. Writing was considered a threat to the militaristic ideology, as was cultivation of the intellect. Whatever we know about Sparta derived from the admirers of its system or from its opponents, most of whom were Athenians.

## **2.2. The case of ancient Athens**

Unlike the Spartan educational system and political regime, the Athenians nourished and developed individuals who were able to govern and to be governed. Education in classical Athens was designed to create the Athenian, the citizen of the democratic state. The Athenian ideal united the two Homeric ideals in one and sought to create, at the same time, the philosopher and the man of action (Barclay 1959: 84).

The Athenian constitution was based on the principle of political equality. All free citizens, rich or poor had equal rights to vote and speak in the Assembly. There was a comprehensive and direct type of democracy in Athens due to the way that Athenian citizens participated in public affairs. Xenophon, in "The Constitution of Athenians", associated Athens's democratic regime with its economy which became strong due to navigation. As a result of navigation and trading, Athenians developed a great sense of adaptability.

Clearly, in Athens opportunities for education were not equal between rich and poor, or between men and women Athenian education was only for boys and men who were free citizens, and mainly those from aristocratic families. Despite its democratic regime, Athenian education was limited to only a small proportion of the population. Slaves, women and a small number of poor citizens were mainly illiterate (Yannikopoulos 1999: 58). Consequently, education was aristocratic and based exclusively on the financial status of the children's family. Taking into consideration

Xenophon's argument (Xenophon, I, 5,6) we realise that uneducated or poorly educated Athenians (ignorance derives from the lack of money) were manipulated by the speeches of the wealthy, educated Athenians who had access to tertiary education (especially that provided by the Sophists, who taught the techniques of oratory). With the advantage of persuasion, educated Athenians, by acting as demagogues were able to achieve shifts in policy through the Assembly of the Citizens.

The story of Athenian education appears in many aspects the opposite of that of Sparta. While Sparta sealed itself in a spirit of fierce conservatism, Athens was open to strangers and new ideas; therefore it developed a different conception of its regime and education. Athens gradually transformed its education to a more intellectual form in the classical period (450-320 B.C.). One common characteristic that Sparta had with Athens was the weakening of the family's role. In both cities the child remained under his family's supervision until the age of seven and then started official education.

The rearing of children (boys) in Athens, until the age of seven, was not the exclusive province of the mother as it was in Sparta. Slaves or women servants had responsibility for rearing the child. The 'pedagogue'- or the tutor, was responsible for the child from the age of seven and he had various duties; he was usually a slave and usually illiterate. Only rich families could afford literate slaves. Both Sparta and Athens did not have strong family interference in their children's rearing and education, especially after the age of seven. In Sparta it was the state's responsibility while in Athens the father employed slaves to take care of his son's education (Yannikopoulos 1999: 55).

Education was private and not compulsory. The state only arranged the hours at which schools and 'palaestres' (sport centres) had to open and close (Aeschilus, Temarch, 9), to learn 'letters' and swim (Freeman 1922: 57) and obliged the boys between 18-20 years old to be trained in the art of war. Thus education was based on parental choice, and families could regulate the quality and the duration of their children's education. Parents had the right not to send their children to school. However, even poor families tried at least to send their children to learn basic literacy and numeracy, since it was essential for them as future citizens and for their work.

In classical Athens there were three types' schools which constituted the primary education: the schools of 'grammatistes' (teachers of literacy and numeracy), 'paedotribes' (teachers of physical education) and 'citharistes' (teachers of music). Gymnasiums (something like contemporary secondary education) were Sport centres for Athenians, after the age of sixteen years old, where they were not only to exercise but also to listen and participate in various conversations. The state supervised and paid for Gymnasiums. The state appointed the 'gymnasiarch', who was responsible for every matter that concerned gymnasium. Lynch (1972: 29-30) mentioned that there were three gymnasiums, placed outside the city, due to the lack of a large enough space within the city. One of the gymnasiums, the Cynosarges was for Athenian boys who had a non-Athenian parent.

The names of the Gymnasiums were: the Academy, the Lyceum and Cynosarges (Grydakakis et al. 1998: 80); from the first, Plato named his school Academy and from the second, Aristotle named his school Lyceum. Both schools were built close to the Gymnasiums and were named after them.

Tertiary education (the schools of Plato, Aristotle, Isocrates and the Sophists) had as its aim the preparation of the future leaders of Athenian society, because studies in tertiary education required money and time and this was only available to the upper classes; specifically men of the upper classes. The role of the Ancient Greek School was significant in the social and political education of pupils. Therefore the ancient school as it appeared in Sparta, like wolf-packs or scout-troops (Marrou 1956: 20) or as it appeared in Athens, as group education, helped to develop the hierarchical model. In primary education relations between pupils and teachers were not ideal. Teachers were strict and authoritarian towards students. Physical punishment was extensively used (Hourdakakis 1995: 49). In contrast the relations between teacher and pupils in tertiary education were much better. Socrates defined the strong relation between teacher and student as 'pedagogical love'. In Plato's Academy, Aristotle's Lyceum and Isocrates' school, students addressed their teacher as friend and there was no distance between the teacher and the students (Hourdakakis 1995: 50; Yannikopoulos 1999: 138). In this sense, the pedagogy of tertiary education was less authoritarian.

In addition to rhetorical studies, philosophical studies also flourished in classical Athens. Philosophical studies flourished due to the stability of the economy and democracy. Although they did not have any obvious practical application, philosophical studies were integral to the democratic ideal and were considered to be essential for the intellectual development of the free citizen.

Despite the fact that 'grammatistes', teachers of literacy, numeracy and reciting, played a significant role in primary Athenian education, their status was very low in the Athenian society. Their profession was badly paid, and contemptible. The general belief in classical Athens, as well as in Sparta, was that working for money was considered inappropriate for a gentleman; therefore none of the Athenian citizens wanted to work as a teacher in primary education. The educated Athenians preferred to open a school for further education and receive more money or presents from the rich students (the Sophists, Plato, Aristotle and Isocrates were such examples). Only slaves or poor citizens used to work as 'grammatistes' (Hurdakis 1995: 132; Yannikopoulos 1983: 210).

In principle, primary and further education was open to all free citizens but 'grammatistes', 'paedotribes' and 'citharistes', asked money for their teaching. Moreover, teachers of rhetoric and philosophers (tertiary education) required a lot of money, so it was only members of the aristocracy who could afford the time and money for a full education (Yannikopoulos 1999: 59).

### **2.3. Basic similarities and differences**

Among the aforementioned features of the Spartan and the Athenian educational system, there are both similarities and differences.

A distinguishing similarity is that both the Athenian and the Spartan education specifically intended not to be a technical education, in the sense of teaching a young person to make a living. The latter was not regarded as essential by Athenians and Spartans, or by the Greek philosophers (Plato, Aristotle). Barclay (1959: 82) summarised this educational orientation as follows: "...anything that is learned to be used for practical purposes is not education; anything which enables a man to make money is necessarily an

ungentlemanly thing; and anyone involved in making money is ipso facto unfit to be a citizen". In Socrates' words (Plato, Protagoras, 312b) is reflected the notion of education in Athens: "you didn't learn any of those things in a technical way, with a view to becoming a professional yourself, but simply for their educational value, as an amateur and a gentleman should".

On the other hand, a distinguishing difference was the emphasis on oral speech. In Athens, it was considered essential due to its political significance in the Senate. For Athenians the couple words-deeds was not antithesis but synthesis. Theoretical dialogue helped to strengthen their thinking and the development of political thought related to political issues. On the contrary the brevity of speech in Sparta (Plutarch, Lycurgus, 19) was interpreted as a dislike of dialogue and served as a shield against destabilising debate within the rigid political regime of Sparta. In Athens rhetoric was popular because of the Athenian emphasis on democracy and participation. Oral speech was used in the parliament and in the assembly of the citizens where they legislated. With the development of democracy, trials were a common phenomenon among citizens. Kirkos (1986: 272) pointed out that the use of oral speech as a medium and weapon of imposition for personal affairs, was the originating reason for the art of rhetoric. In courts, orators did the job of lawyers or they wrote speeches for their clients for money.

### **Links with modern Greece**

From the aforementioned information, it is evident that ancient Greek pedagogy considered numeracy, literacy, music and physical education to be a fundamental part of a child's education. The difficulties of literacy lessons were many. After pupils learnt reading and writing they learnt poems by Homer (as Spartans did) and other poets by heart. The role of religion, in both cities, was diffused in their educational activities. Songs, Homer's epic poetry, heroic deeds, all have references to the Gods.

The teaching methods, both in Athens and Sparta, were not pedagogical; it was based entirely on memorisation in a mechanical way, while at the same time physical punishment prevailed. The hard physical punishment in the schools of ancient Greece played an inevitable part in the

education process; thus the cane was for centuries the symbol of the teacher (Yannikopoulos 1983: 28). Finally, education did not stop after school: Athenians had an informal education through their political involvement in city matters, as well as participating in public events (Hurdakis 1995: 37).

We can trace some common elements between the ancient Greek and modern Greek State. Some of them are self-evident and common; some are interrelated and interwoven for the most modern states while some others constitute a unique case related to the Modern Greek state:

1. The importance of education for the state and the ruling class. Education under the auspices of state can legitimise the dominant ideology. The recognition of education as an important factor for the individual and the very existence of modern states, economies and societies. The appreciation of the social function of education in reproducing existing patterns of cultural, economic and political life. Education as medium served various political and ideological intentions, in a positive as well as in a negative way.

2. The highly centralised administration in education and its full control by the state (on school texts, curricula, teachers, methods, etc.).

3. The systematisation of education and its division on three levels (primary, secondary, tertiary). The acknowledgment of the importance of children's age for entering the educational system as well as their placement in different levels of education.

4. The compulsory (up to the secondary education), uniformity and state character of education.

5. The low status for teachers in primary and secondary education. The prevailed teaching and learning methods (ex-cathedra teaching, physical punishment, lecturing, memorisation, mechanical production of knowledge, mutually deductive method, etc.) in primary and secondary education during the last two centuries and the concept of lifelong education.

6. The role of religion in education.

7. The academic theoretical orientation of the curricula and the limited practical character of education, according to the needs of the market.

8. Greeks' way of thinking regarding technical vocational education, Greeks orientation for employment as white collar civil servants and the depreciation of manual work, their "obsession" for academic education as

an indication of upward social mobility and their persistence to traditional professions (lawyers, doctors) despite the high rate of unemployment.

In a general framework Greeks throughout the centuries acknowledge and value education as a tool of upward social mobility and as a basic element of exercising power. Spartans received the “appropriate” state compulsory education and ruled in their territory for centuries, despite their small number and their hostile relation with the rest of the population. In ancient Athens education was private and not compulsory but Athenians, like Spartans, value education as the cornerstone of their society. Consequently the majority of Athenian leaders and intellectuals belonged to the middle and upper-middle class. A small number of Greeks enjoyed privileges during the Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman Empire due to their education.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The aim of this paper was to investigate the educational systems of Sparta and Athens in antiquity and to reflect on contemporary educational issues in Greece. The first issue that emerges is the explicit connection between politics and education; something that in modern Greece appears to exist as a hidden ideology rather than an explicit intention of the political parties. The role of the Ancient school in the process of socialisation and citizenship was significant. The role of ‘paedonomos’ in Sparta or ‘grammatisti’ in Athens, the organisation of the curriculum, the aspects of school life (in Sparta cadet life) and informal modes of education (common meals, symposiums, theatre, religious ceremonies) all contributed to the shaping of a specific political and social behaviour. In both cases the patriotic spirit was cultivated constantly in the service of the ruling class. In a parallel manner, the Modern Greek state uses the patriotic spirit in order to promote the socio-economic interests of the ruling class by camouflaging the needs of the Greek society as a whole. Greek state provides education on its own terms and conditions and legitimates its actions in the name of national survival according to an ethnocentric and nationalistic agenda.

In the process of defining the links between education in modern and ancient Greece, we can identify a traditional approach to education in the

nowadays Greek system. Its academic theoretical orientation and neglect of citizenship reflects the intention of the state to produce apolitical citizens assimilated as good Christians and Greeks and ignoring the serious socio-economic problems.

Issues such as the correlation between teaching methods and politics raised from the gap between Socrates and other scholars' (Frankfurt School) notions about a teaching method which requires the participation of the learner and promotion of critical thinking and self-awareness; in contrast with the teaching methods (lecturing) which prevail in most contemporary societies and which promote memorisation and mechanical learning. In addition, the construction of the curriculum in modern societies reflects a neglect of the important role of participatory citizenship as it was conceived in the ancient Athenian democracy. Modern democracies do not attempt to produce politically active citizens; thus education's role is reduced to providing operatives and not thinkers. Only a limited proportion of the school population has access to the means and resources that enable them to acquire a political education. Therefore, the apolitical product of education (the student) will be an obedient and static rather than a creative and progressive component of the system. Moreover, this scenario, as it is played out in Greece, not only produces apolitical citizens, but also unskilled ones.

Paraphrasing Marcuse and the Frankfurt School theorists (Callinicos 2000: 523) Greek democracy is an administrative society permeated by the values of ethnocentrism, in which the satisfaction of 'false national needs' served to prevent the non-ruling classes from gaining any genuine insight into their situation.

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