

Farmers and Thinkers

by Carin M. C. Green

The Other Greeks

by Victor Davis Hanson
New York: The Free Press;
541 pp., \$28.00



Between the eighth and sixth centuries B.C. there appeared the *polis*, the Greek city-state, an elusive entity which nurtured and defined ideals still central to Western European views of all that is “civilized.” How did the Greeks, up until then an unimportant and generally poor folk on the margins of Mediterranean society, manage this miracle? V.D. Hanson’s *The Other Greeks*, a book that is both excellent and deeply flawed, presents an explanation for the rise of the *polis* that is as old as Aristotle’s *Politics* (a work Hanson uses effectively) but which has faded from contemporary discussion. Hanson argues that it was the farmer—the small farmer—who made the *polis*.

The *polis* was not just the city—Athens, say, or Thebes. It was the city and the surrounding countryside. Since citizenship depended on a property qualification, the majority of the voting citizens in Greek *poleis* were farmers—not city-dwellers at all. Such farmers manned the hoplite phalanx, the extraordinarily successful infantry formation that, for most of these three centuries, marginalized both cavalry (the aristocrats) and light-armed fighters (the poor) in land-based war. They provided their own armor; in many *poleis* they elected their own generals (Xenophon’s *Anabasis* is a manual on how to lead an army that votes). Thus, political egalitarianism in the *polis* evolved along with, and in response to, the profound social, occupational, and military egalitarianism of an agrarian population.

The great strength of Hanson’s book, and the quality which should make it required reading for all students of Greek history, is that he *knows* this farmer in all his sweaty, leather-clad, crude reality. He knows his farm, too, his necessarily

diversified crops, his utilitarian views of women and slaves and children, his unending quarrels with fellow farmers over boundaries and water—all aspects of that lifelong self-interest that was, and remains, the key to agricultural survival. Hanson is the descendant of farmers, and a farmer himself. His identification with the Greek farmer of the *polis* period suffuses his book with a personal passion and a gritty, unblinking honesty. Vividly, and with impeccable scholarship, Hanson has restored the forgotten farmer to his proper place in the development of the *polis*.

The weakness of *The Other Greeks* is that Hanson wants his farmer to have *all* the credit, particularly for the moral basis of *polis* egalitarianism. He ignores the merchants, who transported surplus population to overseas colonies on their way out, and carried back, among other things, the metal for affordable armor. He discusses the farmer’s insistence on fair laws fairly applied, but neglects the importation of alphabetic writing, the tool of trades and intellectuals, even though written laws were what took the legal process out of the hands of the aristocrats. Why does he do this? For the same reason others before him since the *polis* period itself have done it: because what the Greeks accomplished was truly remarkable, and we want to be a part of it.

The Greeks of the fourth century were the first to muscle the evidence into a culturally acceptable form, and their example has been studiously followed over the millennia. Recent efforts to insert into Athens’ glory the missing images of women, Africans, and Semitic peoples generally have been, in part, a reaction to the 19th century’s determination to prove that classical Greeks were tall, blond, and “Northern European” (a/k/a “Aryan”). It has never been *enough* that the Greeks were the Greeks: they must somehow also be *us*.

Hanson, unlike most of these cultural propagandists, has a good deal of ancient political theory on his side, as well as a substantial amount of hard archaeological evidence, supported well, if not overtly, by the historical accounts. It is therefore all the more distressing (though not surprising: the Athenians were past masters at the game themselves) that he

should have succumbed to this ancient, ignoble, and distorting determination to use the accomplishments of Athens as proof of the moral superiority of a particular people. By doing so, he has compromised the unassailable central portion of the book—his account of the Greek farmer—and he will deservedly reap much controversy and criticism as a result.

What Hanson wants, for all his egalitarianism, is what elitists since the beginning of time have wanted: eternal verities. In the pursuit of these, his egalitarianism takes on an implicit layer of class bias. It makes no difference that Plato was defending the aristocratic life, while Hanson seeks to vindicate the *anti*-aristocratic agricultural life. They both want to believe that creating civilization is like raising grapes or horses—a socially neutral process.

This is the underlying meaning of Hanson’s “agrarian ideology,” and everything in *polis*-period Greece argues against it. Similar conditions and values produced the aristocratic, farmer-despising, warrior-class, land-based Spartans as well as the egalitarian, inventive, protean, sea-based Athenians. When the Persians marched against Greece the first time, *only* Athens and little Plataea stood against the invasion. The Greek states north of Athens capitulated without question; the states in the Peloponnesus, like Sparta, waited. “Agrarian ideology” be damned: Athens and Plataea stood against the Persians at Marathon because, for all kinds of self-serving and idealistic reasons, they believed they should stand against the Persians. The other Greeks played the odds, and lost.

Who can read Herodotus’ account of Marathon without being moved, even today, as that small determined army of hoplites met the unknown, numerically superior invasion force of Persia? Just as moving is his account of Thermopylae, ten years later, where 300 Spartans died holding back the thousands of Persians led by Xerxes, who wanted revenge for Marathon. Predictably, Hanson—like Plato’s Athenian Stranger in *The Laws*—is much happier with Marathon than Thermopylae, because Thermopylae was followed by Salamis, the queen of all sea battles. After the Spartans fell, Athenians recognized they could not fight on

land and win, so they abandoned their city and their land. They relied on their triremes, warships rowed by any able-bodied male available—citizen, foreigner, pauper, even slave—and again, against all odds, they won. This battle, though, lacked the essential moral quality. Hanson does not explain, because he can't, just how a land battle fought by landowners produces a citizen morally superior to a sea battle fought by landowners, landless (not necessarily poor) men and paupers side-by-side. For Plato it was a simple matter of class; Hanson thinks it was a matter of occupation. In either case, there is no morality here worthy of the name.

We are asked to believe that a *polis* capable of survival only through a sea battle was a *polis* already unworthy of its "agrarian ideology." The decline of the *polis*, he thinks, came with the ascendancy of the landless, who "inject their own nonagrarian values into the social and political fabric" of the agrarian city-state. We all know the associations of that argument. The principle that if you fought for your country, you ought to be allowed to participate in its government, Hanson implicitly argues, was ethically flawed. But after Salamis, Athenian farmers were quite willing to continue to accept two benefits: the profits of the Laurium silver mines, and the sacrifices of the landless—Athens as a naval power sent far more landless rowers than farmers out to die. All this, I think, offers evidence of some traditional agrarian values having contributed to the *decline*, rather than the growth, of the *polis*. Hanson's championing of the Greek farmer has therefore done him more disservice than he merits.

There is a curious paradox here, one the Greeks themselves would have ap-

preciated. The excellence of Hanson's book has as its source his own deep respect for farmers and farming. Its flaws, on the other hand, are largely traceable to his ingrained contempt for intellectuals, a characteristic instantly recognizable from Aristophanes' farmers, such as Dicaeopolis or Strepsiades. This book, regardless of its subject, was work for the intellect. If the task is worthy, so are the tools required to do it. Neither Dicaeopolis nor Strepsiades, it is worth remembering, was capable of writing a Greek play or even of following a philosophical argument. Left in their hands, Athens would have been indistinguishable from any other Mediterranean agricultural community.

What Hanson has seen is the disrespect into which the farmer's work has fallen. He knows—as the ancients knew—that farming was an essential component of civilization, and that it was also symbolic of the civilizing process. Civilization is not an inalienable right, and it is never secure. It is the result of the work, hard work, completed every day for a lifetime, by *all* people—rural and urban, farmers or merchants, intellectuals or craftsmen or laborers—who value a civilized life, *regardless of their station*. That is the true legacy of Greece of the *polis* period, of Marathon, of Thermopylae, of Salamis, of the great art, of the exhilarating and dangerous ideas, of the venal politicians, the ambitious leaders, of those who died bravely or survived by luck and opportunism—and indeed, of the women, children, foreigners, and slaves who lived and died with them but had no true speaking part in this great tragicomedy. For those few years, in one or two places on this earth, they worked together to create something magnificent (it is symbolically right that Acropolis workers, whether free, alien, or slave, all got equal pay). Hanson has written a flawed and controversial testimony to the work of only one group among them. True, they have been forgotten, and unjustly so; true also, they formed the backbone of what is still a predominantly agrarian economy. But they are not alone, or uniquely superior to their fellows, and in treating them as though they were Hanson risks falling into that mire of class-based enmity that constituted Athens' greatest perennial weakness.

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Lone Star Rising

by Allan Carlson

The Thirty Years War: The Politics of the Sixties Generation

by Thomas W. Pauken

Ottawa, Illinois: Jameson Books; 220 pp., \$22.50

Reclaiming Morality in America: Why Traditional Morals Are Collapsing and What You Can Do About It

by William Murchison

Nashville: Thomas Nelson; 189 pp., \$16.99



The development of a uniquely Texan conservatism has occurred over the last quarter century. A central figure in this transition was the late M.E. Bradford, professor of English at the University of Dallas, literary essayist in the tradition of the Vanderbilt Agrarians, and prominent critic of the political Lincoln.

In 1972, Bradford rallied to the cause of George Wallace, only to see this last important example of Democratic populism halted by a bullet in the Alabama governor's spine. With the Party of Jefferson and Jackson dominated by the McGovern left and the new sexual and moral minorities, Bradford swallowed hard and turned to the Party of Lincoln. He became a prominent early backer of Ronald Reagan and convinced many of his fellow Southern intellectuals to follow. Even when vicious calumnies denied him the post of chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1981, Bradford remained loyal to the populist conservatism found within the GOP. He led his own last charge in 1992 on behalf of Pat Buchanan's first presidential campaign. Two years later, conservative Republicanism was in the ascendance in the old Texas Republic, heralded by Senator Phil Gramm's presidential bid, the election of a Republican governor, significant gains in the state legislature, and the victory of a strong movement conservative as chairman of the state party. A new magazine, *The Texan Republic*, even emerged to give voice and definition to these unlikely events.

The books under review here are best understood as expressions of this new

LIBERAL ARTS

THAT'S ALL, FOLKS

"Today is the birthday of Clark Clifford—he's 89—and Jimmy Buffet, 41."

—Bob Edwards on National Public Radio's "Morning Edition," December 25, 1995.