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COMMENTARY

on

PETER BERNHOLZ 'COMPETITION AMONG STATES'

by

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Peter Bernholz remarks in his 'Abstract' that "The 'New Economic History' approach has proposed the hypothesis that military and . . . political competition among states has forced rulers to grant safe property rights as well as the rule of law to their subjects." His present project is to consider whether "this theory developed by the new economic historians can also be applied to antiquity", and he goes on to explain that his main emphasis is to be "on early Greek and on Sumerian developments" although he will also give some attention to Phoenicia. This, it seems to me, is a most necessary and promising project. What and all that I can <sup>contribute</sup> is a list of hopefully helpful comments and suggestions.

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1. In the first place Sumer differed from both Phoenicia and ancient Greece in two surely relevant and important respects. Geographically it was land-locked whereas the Greek and the Phoenician settlements both extended along stretches of the Mediterranean coastline. Politically, too, Sumer has been accounted part of the world of oriental despotism - or, in Marxist terms, that of "the Asiatic mode of production" - whereas certainly ancient Greece and presumably Phoenicia have not. In his classic treatise Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power (New York: Vintage, 1981) Karl Wittfogel maintained most categorically that:

The history of hydraulic society records innumerable rebellions and palace revolutions. But nowhere, to our knowledge, did internal forces succeed in transforming any single-centred agromanerial into a mult centered society of the Western type. More specifically: neither in the Old nor in the New World did any great hydraulic civilisation proper evolve into an industrial society, as did, under nonhydraulic conditions, the countries of the post-Medieval West (p.227).

Oriental Despotism was first published in 1957. So subsequent research may well have revealed that Sumer did indeed provide at least the beginnings of an exception to this rule. But, if it did, then we certainly need to ask how this was achieved. How without divisive geographical obstacles did the Sumerians manage to maintain several competing city states, and how without access to the sea did these manage to develop long distance trade?

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2. It is, surely, impossible to exaggerate the importance of the maritime character of the Greek and Phoenician cities? For the movement of people and of goods was far easier and far more free by sea than by land. Hence, as Hayek pointed out in The Fatal Concert (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1988):

So far as we know, the Mediterranean region was the first to see the acceptance of a person's right to dispose over a recognised private domain, thus allowing individuals to develop a dense network of commercial relations among different communities (p. 29).

Bernholz maintains that "the Phoenician city states competed strongly commercially and often militarily with the Greek states . . . The Phoenicians were able to block the Greeks from colonising Spain, Sardinia and Northern Africa, whereas the Greeks could keep the Phoenicians from settling in Southern Italy and France, the greater part of Sicily, the Greek Isles, Anatolia and the Black Sea."<sup>11</sup> One would like to know, what is perhaps not knowable: both how far the failure of Greeks to colonise the coasts of France and Spain was due to their remoteness from metropolitan Greece and how far to Phoenician or other military opposition; and whether either Greeks or Phoenicians ever resorted to military force solely in order to restrict the purely commercial activities of the others. For perhaps we did have ~~this~~ a complete Mediterranean common market emerging as a single spontaneous order rather than as an imposition by centralising power.

3. Bernholz points out both that Phoenicians invented among other things the trireme and that, significantly, it was Greeks rather than Egyptians who imitated these inventions. His main conclusion is that "the successful economic development instigated by . . . institutional reforms led to higher taxable wealth, a greater population and to a more rapid pace of innovations . . . It thus brought about sizeable advantages . . . in international, political, commercial and military competitions."

By far the most striking illustration of such advantages is the defeat of the Persian invaders in the great decisive battle of Salamis. For the victorious trireme fleet was and could only have been provided by the economically dynamic Athenians. (Herodotus tells us (VII 144) that the building of the first 200 ships in the Athenian navy was financed by profits from the state silver mines at Laureion. This uncharacteristically profitable nationalised industry was, of course, worked by slaves and not overmanned by militantly unionised freemen.)

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4. Bernholz quotes Latacz on "the founding of nearly all genres of occidental literature" within a period of "about 250 years . . . (from about 730-480)." By emphasising literary form rather than semantic content and by cutting the creative period short so early in the fifth century B.C. this statement does less than justice to the immensity of the Greek achievement. But a little later, and again quoting Latacz, Bernholz begins to put things right. Various listed developments led "to a new way of thinking in Ionia and especially in the metropolis Miletus" and created "a belief in progress and faith in the capabilities of human reason." Indeed "The new conditions, needs and experiences create a new human type in Miletus, the researcher, in the decades around 600 B.C."

All this is as true as it is important. But still something crucial has been omitted. Greeks may well have been anticipated by some whom they would have called barbarians in writing accounts of what was alleged to have happened. But what Herodotus and Thucydides certainly did was to produce the <sup>first</sup> truly critical history. Similarly Confucius,

who died in 479 B.C., a year before the conclusion of the Latacz 250 years, produced his “philosophical reflexions” decades before Plato was born. But the Confucian Analects contain none of that sustained philosophical argument about concepts such as is found in abundance in Plato’s dialogues. The omission to which we are pointing from the present account of the Greek achievement is something which was to be essential to modern science. It was the development of abstract thought in Philosophy, in Logic and above all in Mathematics. For, as Galileo was to say, “The book of nature is written in the language of Mathematics.”

To my knowledge the best account of this unprecedented and unparalleled Greek contribution to Mathematics is provided by Alan Cromer in his Uncommon Sense: The Heretical Nature of Science (New York, and Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1993). The character of this contribution is displayed most clearly in its supreme achievement, the Elements of Euclid. What Greeks did, and what no other culture either before or since has ever save under their influence contrived to do, was to make Mathematics purely, abstractly and compulsively deductive. As Cromer has it, “The religions of the world have their various holy books, the Vedas, the Torah, the Gospels, the Koran, but for mathematics there is only the Elements” (p.90). (Cromer is also excellent on how education based on the Homeric epics, rather than the Old Testament eased the way to optimistic “belief . . . in the capabilities of human reason.”)

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5. One small, final point. Bernholz writes: “With Alexander the Great and his Hellenistic successors the Phoenician cities in the East became totally unimportant, whereas Carthage went on to flourish.” This is no doubt true, although there seems to be reason to believe that flourishing compassed any outstanding cultural achievement. But the conquest of Alexander did spread Greek influences throughout a Hellenistic world which became for centuries unequivocally part of the West. And his foundation of Alexandria became during the same period what the Brussels bureaucracy would have had to admit as a ~~European~~ City of Culture second if at all only to Athens.