

# CLASSICS & MODERNS

## What Ancient Greece can teach us

By

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Many people ask why do we study classics and what do they have to teach us in our era. Beyond historical curiosity of how people lived in the distant dead past, knowledge of the classical period must have some utility in improving our life and help solve our problems to make its study worthwhile. This short exposition attempts to answer this question by a grand synthesis of the comparative study of classical theory and modern reality. Our fundamental thesis is that the Greek conceptualization of the ancient polis and its regional environment corresponds quite well with the contemporary notions of the post-modern city in the global system.

In order to show this correspondence in a systematic way, we adopt an abstract approach utilizing a space-existence-time (SET) taxonomy and input-transform-output (ITO) methodology. As introduced and expanded in the author's book **Exopolitics**, this approach combines the substance of our polis-ethnos-cosmos (PEC) theory with the process of its dialectical method. It is to this combination that we now turn.

### The PEC Triptych

On the basis of the conceptual framework constructed here, the elements of the PEC triptych in our thesis may be ranged along the following spatial continuum:



This schematic representation puts polis and cosmos as the two polar opposites in our ecumenical discourse. The juxtaposition of these realities (state vs. empire) also engendered the debate between their opposing ideologies (patriotism vs. humanism). The ethnic position in the middle (nation), was supposed to effect a policy solution, as well as a theoretical synthesis of the two extremes.

In discussing the various aspects of this dialectical debate, we use the SET axiom to construct a two-dimensional space-time field. The spatial dimension contains the PEC continuum, while the temporal dimension follows the past-present-future progression. As to the existential third dimension, consisting of the personal-social-

natural domains, it is held constant around the social domain because that is where macro politics is focused.

This application coincides with the two-dimensional (vertical in time and horizontal in space) use of the dialectic method to form the following 3x3 Matrix:

### DIALECTIC SET MATRIX

	<u>SPACE</u>	ACTUAL THESIS LOCAL	IDEAL ANTITHESIS REGIONAL	REAL SYNTHESIS GLOBAL
<u>TIME</u>				

#### Person

CLASSIC THESIS	<b>Polis</b>	Ethnos	Cosmos
MODERN ANTITHESIS	City	<b>Nation</b>	World
FUTURE SYNTHESIS	Urbanity	Country	<b>Earth</b>

#### Universe

It is evident that the matrix contains the main ingredients for our theory: i.e. static, dynamic and dialectic systems, in a spatial and temporal classification. In this scheme, the columns represent the increasing levels of ideological geopolitical aggregation, whereas the rows represent the arrow of time through macro history.

The first row explores the classic contradictions among the politic, ethnic and cosmic domains, as seen by the Greeks. The second row does the same among the national, regional and global aspects of our contemporary world. Finally, the third row attempts to forecast the probable tendencies of these dialectic confrontations into the 21st Century.

It should be noted that above and below the three sociosphere sectors are the egosphere of the individual human being and the ecosphere of the natural environment respectively, both of which are given as externalities in this concentric spherical model. On this overall view, we are now ready to elaborate each of the Matrix rows and columns, as representative of the theory and praxis of the three chronological periods as well as their topological ideals.

### Classic Foundations

Since synoecism is the basis of community life, the requirements for a viable city-state came to be: economic sufficiency, political security and cultural amenity. Out of them evolved the two dimensions of state sovereignty: i.e. vertical, *de jure* authority and *de facto* power; as well as horizontal, internal jurisdiction and external independence; which have always been concentrated either on city-states or capital-cities.

The classical polis did not distinguish between polity and society. The *demos* was also the *polis*, with little difference between public (politics) and private

(economics). It was only later that Justinian's *corpus juris* reemphasized *Lex Regia* as absolute state sovereignty, whereas classical *jus naturale* was based on universal and eternal principles. Eventually, sovereign *auctoritas* descended from *dei gratia* to *vox populi*, thus confirming the reversion towards modern democracy.

However defined, sovereignty has come to mean the supreme authority to rule, tax and draft people. As such, politics determines who gets what, when and how. In this context, Hellenic sociopolitical theory may be summarized by focusing on three intersecting dichotomies which reflect the traditional "we/they" distinction between insiders and outsiders in any society.

The first and foremost delimits the political domain by separating the citizen from the foreigner. This power distinction is based on the difference between natives and aliens in the polity. The former participate in sovereign policy-making, whereas the latter merely submit to it.

The second dichotomy concerns the economic sector and distinguishes the rich from the poor, the subject from the object. This wealth distinction is based on the right to own property. On that basis, the free are those who may accumulate wealth, whereas the slaves are the commodities of somebody else's property.

Finally, the third division is that between Greeks and barbarians. This biocultural distinction is based on the racial assumption of a superior civilization confronting either primitive or decadent cultures. Whether by birth or education, this dichotomy results in an international caste, segregating each ethnic group from all the others.

The combination of these three inclusion-exclusion criteria explains the different behavioral, moral, and legal codes of social groups in a comparative perspective. Thus a Greek, who identifies himself as the free citizen of a polis, relates first with his political state, then his surrounding cultural nation and last with the economic world at large, in a gradually diminishing degree of attachment.

It is evident that classical theory and praxis was caught in a terrible trilemma which ultimately proved insoluble: i.e. how to combine patriotism, nationalism and humanism. Although they saw the danger of political divisiveness, the Greeks could not find a formula which optimized the advantages of national unity and local autonomy, at the same time as they struggled to survive within the larger cosmic environment. Their failure typified the protean Greek tragedy of marching to one's doom in full knowledge of the outcome.

In dialectic terms, the political thesis was both the actual reality of Greece as well as the ideal theory of Plato and Aristotle. Politicians and philosophers alike defended the polis as the *sine qua non* of a civilized life worthy of an advanced civilization. The former tried repeatedly to find a balance of power which permitted all of them to coexist in the same tight space with the minimum of elbow room maneuverability. The latter also tried unsuccessfully to propose reforms by which the polis could minimize its external contacts and thereby raise the threshold of interstate frictions and conflicts.

The antithesis to political independence was promoted by the pan-Hellenists who were prepared to sacrifice state sovereignty on the altar of national survival. Seeing the barbarians knocking at the gates, the nationalists pushed for political integration into at

least a loose confederation of the Greek world. Alas, they too failed more miserably than their political opponents.

Ironically, the synthesis of the opposing conservative and integrative positions came from an unexpected direction: first from the north by Macedonian hegemony and then from the west by Roman conquest. But both kingdom and empire were precisely the forms of government that the Greeks were trying to avoid because they considered them apolitical and barbaric regimes, hence not a fair exchange for their beloved city-state. So when they eventually succumbed to them, they did so out of sheer exhaustion rather than true selection.

It seems that in their conflict between reason and emotion *-logos kai thumos-* the Greeks were unable to make the necessary compromises which could create a viable nation-state. Instead, they were relegated to live as serfs in an imperial province of secondary rank. Was their failure inevitable in the global scheme of things or could they have prevented their fateful demise and thereby change the history of the world?

This academic question has often been asked but rarely answered definitively. According to our thesis, although history could certainly have turned out differently, the eventual decline of Hellenism could not have been prevented. Every civilization, as all dynamic systems, has a certain life span which sooner or later must come to an end.

Moreover, even if Greece could unite in a single state, it would no longer be classical Greece, but some other entity, regardless of its name. It is not possible to simply change one parameter of a social system without affecting the others. A Greece without city-states would also be a Greece without the Hellenic culture which was based on the polis. So what purpose would such unity serve, if not cultural protection?

Some would answer: economic prosperity. Sacrificing one's quality of life to raise one's standard of living may be a worthy goal and could have assured Greek wealth by exploiting the Mediterranean world. If Greece would have done what Italy did, it could have established its own *Pax Hellenica* and lasted another couple of centuries as the dominant power of the region, something that Alexander tried to do. But inexorably, other forces would have risen at its center or periphery to bring it down eventually.

As it happened five hundred years is not too short a period for any social system to last, as the city-states did. The Roman Empire did not do that much longer, and most later systems did much worse. Furthermore, the city-state did not die with an abrupt bang but a slow whimper. Only the state half of the duality gave up its sovereignty, the city part still continues the ups and downs of its autonomy to this day.

This conclusion is confirmed by the inevitable rise and fall of all states, nations, or civilizations, throughout history. So there is no point in further "what if" musings. What is more interesting is to compare then and now and contrast the similarities or differences which could help in our quandary. This after all is the main practical purpose of learning the lessons of history.

## Modern Transformations

In comparing the ancient and modern eras, we note two significant differences. The first is quantitative, resulting from the geographic discoveries of the Renaissance explorations four hundred years ago. The second is qualitative, resulting from the technologic inventions of the Industrial Revolution two hundred years ago.

As to quantity, according to the UN definition of a city as merely an agglomeration of more than 20,000 people, there are tens of thousands of such entities in the world now. If we raise the threshold of urbanhood tenfold, so that we have something comparable to ancient Athens, then there are over 2,500 cities of 200,000 or more people in the world. Most of them are in North America and Asia (750 each), then Europe (600), Africa and Latin America (200 each), and finally Oceania (50). Of these, only 150 cities have over 1 million people, 100 have over 2 million, 50 over 5 million, 20 over 10 million and only 5 over 15 million.

Of course, even large cities are not necessarily states. By our definition of city-state, i.e. a state with one city; it is estimated in the table below that about 80 or 40% of the present 200 potential states in the world could possibly qualify. Of them, about 70 are members of the UN's present 185 roster. These numbers show that the city-state is still alive and active in the contemporary world. If anything, they constitute the most recent additions to statehood, and the remaining potential ones are of the same type as well.

Type	City-States		Nation-States
	Smaller Cities <100,000	Larger Cities >100,000	
<b>Location</b>			
Islandia	20	15	40
Africa	5	20	45
Asia	5	5	45
America	5	0	30
Europa	5	0	40
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>200</b>

It is evident from the above tabulation that about half of present-day city-states are islands, situated in the Caribbean and Oceania, and the other half are continental states mostly in Africa.

Of them, the smallest -Vatican- with less than a thousand people, and the largest - Singapore- with over three million people, are the two city-states of any importance; and Hong Kong, with its six million, as a special autonomous entity. The others are much smaller and hardly make up 1% of the world's population therefore they are of rather minimal political significance.

As to quality, even if they are not states, cities are C<sup>3</sup> (command-control-communication) nodes of the world system. These urban foci of high social density and activity exchange matter (goods), energy (services) and information (news), thus forming centers of gravity or salient points of capital accumulation, resource allocation and policy determination.

As a result of an extraordinary economic development of the industrial world in two centuries, the class structure of cities has changed significantly by replacing organic with mechanic and slave with wage labor. Increased productivity raised higher standards of living and better quality of life for more and more people in the advanced countries of Western Europe, North America and Pacific Oceania.

Yet, most people in the rest of the world still live in conditions not that much better than ancient slaves. The infamous North-South gap of the modern world is just as deep and wide as the rich-poor or free-slave divide of the ancient world. Although slavery is no longer accepted in law, its existential reality has not changed that much. So our difference with the ancients in this respect is more legal and moral than actual and physical.

Similarly, although humanity is no longer divided between Greeks and barbarians, it is still split in countless other ways on racial, ethnic, religious, linguistic and other criteria. So much so that one doubts the possibility of eradicating these divisions of the human condition. It would seem that culture abhors a continuum, as much as nature abhors a vacuum. Therefore, we may always count on some distinctive dichotomies from the I/thou and we/they to whatever human ingenuity dreams up at various times and places.

Apart from obvious technological or geographical differences and economic or cultural similarities, the politics of the classic and modern worlds are strikingly comparable. In both cases, the macro-political system is composed of approximately the same absolute number of players (almost two hundred) and their relative importance: i.e. a handful of protagonists and a multitude of supporting cast.

Most significant, like in Greece, the central conflict still rages among national sovereignty, transnational economy and international society. Where does domestic jurisdiction end and collective security begin? Does infranational legitimation negate supranational integration? Is transnational trade compatible with national state?

These and other such perennial questions, indicate that the main difference between the ancient and modern debates is quantitative rather than qualitative. Although our world is some orders of magnitude larger; for macropolitical purposes, Greece is an accurate microcosm of the modern world, as we are the ancient world writ large. Consequently, we can continue with the same process used above to expose the modern dialectical contradiction between the Realist and Idealist schools of thought.

The Realist thesis now as then is focused on state sovereignty whose supremacy does not recognize any higher authority. This modern nationalist thesis, as its classic political counterpart, sees sovereignty as a necessary and sufficient attribute of ethnic survival and fulfillment. Therefore, every national community must also enjoy political sovereignty as the best protection of its national interest.

The notion of sovereignty now rests on the image of a common fate reflected in the psychological loyalty of patriotism and the physical power of nationalism. This dual basis led to the modern Hobbesian realism of national sovereign absolutism which contrasts with the Grotian idealism of natural confederal relativism.

Moreover, the gap between legal sovereignty and political reality reflects the discrepancy between state independence and market interdependence. Thus, on the one hand there is state jurisdiction and interstate organization (regional or global); whereas on the other, there is individual responsibility (transnational) and collective loyalty (national).

The Idealist antithesis to nationalism in this respect is a federalism which insists in the transfer of at least some national sovereignty to higher central bodies. In its most specific example, the debate between these two positions takes place in the European Union, where member states have to balance their individual national interests with their common economic prosperity, political security and cultural integrity in a highly competitive global environment.

What was claimed for the city-state then is also demanded for the nation-state now. As the polis resisted a pan-Hellenic confederation, so states resist a European Union. The contradiction pitting the polis versus the nation there is translated to the nation versus the region here. That is why the analogy between the states of classical Greece and the nations of modern Europe is so apt.

Just like classical Greece, contemporary Europe is searching for a way to resolve the conflicts between parochialism, continentalism and globalism. The three exclusive domains for both situations are similar, having merely shifted up one level: from polis-ethnos-cosmos to nation-region-world. In both cases, sovereignty resides in the lowest level, whether it is city-state or nation-state.

From the Delphic Amphictiony and Boeotian Confederacy to the United Nations or the European Union, cities and states have tried to form intergovernmental organizations in order to resolve their common problems. Beyond a certain point, what began as an interstate organization becomes a supranational confederation. Thus, the many sovereign city-states of ancient Hellas are now urban centers within the single state of modern Greece. Similarly, many sovereign states of Western Europe are currently uniting to form a single confederal community. Beyond that, the United Nations is moving in the same direction of a world government, though it still has a long way to go towards that end.

At the same time as this integrating process is going on, ethnic groups and local authorities are clamoring for greater self-determination. This clash between powerful centripetal and centrifugal forces is reflected in the dilemma between local desires and global necessities. Most likely, some form of federalism can resolve this impasse, because it recognizes the right of local authorities to engage in world affairs. Thus it is most suitable to handle complex global interdependence by supplementing high diplomacy with low technocracy, thereby blurring the differences between foreign and domestic affairs.

Although, we know the historical outcome of the ancient struggle, the final synthesis of the modern dialectic has not yet been achieved. The two main contenders are global internationalism embodied by the United Nations and cosmopolitan transnationalism promoted by multinational corporations. Yet the regional synthesis of nationalism and supranationalism in a continental scale is so far a limited solution which still leaves our global problematic intact.

In any case, the point is not that realism is better or worse than idealism, but that both are present in exopolitics. People are patriotic, nationalistic and humanistic to some extent, so state behavior is based on power politics and national interest, as well as moral principles and international law. A proper synthesis should therefore take into account both forces because it is their particular combination that will determine our future one way or another.

## **Future Anticipations**

At the turn of the millennium, our transition from the modern to the post-modern world is just as dynamic and dangerous as the transition from the Hellenic to the Hellenistic era. In both periods, powerful forces created contradictory stresses and strains which deformed the social fabric by destroying cultural traditions, threatening political institutions and upsetting economic activities. Moreover, growing environmental problems (our third neglected dimension) pit the natural ecosystem against both the human egosystem and its global sociosystem.

Following the Agricultural Revolution which produced the classical world and the Industrial Revolution which resulted in the modern; the Technological Revolution going on presently opens up the post-industrial era of the third millennium. In this brave new world, emerging out of Toffler's Third Wave, a plethora of artificial slaves make manual and increasingly mental labor unnecessary. Thus most of humanity is not even worth enslaving or exploiting any longer and is simply expelled or excluded.

In its stead, the extensive exploitation of the environment accelerates natural entropy to the point of planetary ecosystem collapse. The carrying capacity of the biosphere is now challenged by a population explosion which is befouling its own nest. Thus, urban culture, of which the Greek civilization was so justifiably proud, is getting out of control and threatens to implode in the high density slums of megalopolitan black holes.

From these ecologic and economic developments emerge growing political and cultural contradictions stemming from the perennial opposition between centripetal and centrifugal forces. Every social system is always susceptible to being pulled apart by its members, as well as pushed together by larger environmental pressures. Poleis then were threatened by their internal tribal factionalism and external pan-Hellenic nationalism; just as states now are squeezed in the middle by both their internal ethnic infranationalism and external economic supranationalism.

The present realistic nation-state thesis is therefore challenged by two directly opposite forces: subnational urbanism and transnational continentalism. The former tendency decentralizes state sovereignty downwards to its municipalities, whereas the latter integrates it upwards to intergovernmental organizations. So nations are

increasingly pressured to share their jurisdiction with smaller and larger entities: i.e. cities and continents.

Much like the Greek city-states in their twilight years, contemporary nation-states still hold on to all the accoutrements of sovereignty, as their governments persist in their largely irrelevant if not impotent rear-guard actions to stem the tide of overwhelming pressures and intransigent problems. Meanwhile, tremendous forces beyond their control batter them from all sides and threaten to engulf them entirely.

In order to explain these contradictory phenomena, Naisbitt's Global Paradox claims that the larger a system becomes, the more numerous, stronger and smaller are its components. Since the bigger the system, the more efficient and effective must be its parts. So as a system grows and develops, its parts shrink and consolidate.

This explanation sees our global trend towards greater political independence along with greater economic interdependence as the effect of technology and telephony which increase community participation and enhance collective communication, thereby strengthening tribal assertiveness. So people can think locally and act globally, as well as *vice versa*. Consequently, representative institutions may be declining and direct democracy may be reemerging from its birthplace in Greece to spread around the world.

With such increase of global interdependence and rapid dissolution of national boundaries, the position and role of cities and regions cannot but increase proportionately. Urban dynamics have composite variables based on the comparative advantage of cities. So as the world impinges increasingly upon cities, they react directly to protect and promote their distinct interests.

As long as municipal authorities feel the need and have the opportunity or resources to affect their environment, they will do so with alacrity and impunity. Thus city activities are bound to increase in the international arena in spite of what their national governments do or say.

Already, there is a marked development and empowerment of cities in the new transurban phenomenon reflected in a global network of semi-sovereign metropolitan centers. These neopoleis are centers of power where all important political, economic and cultural activities take place.

These proto-city-states are developing their own transnational relations according to their municipal foreign policies, almost independently of their nation-states. Indeed, what we see emerging is a transurban network of international cities as part of the emerging global order in which national state borders are of decreasing significance.

It is this planetary network that characterizes to a large extent the global system dynamics in what has been called the New International Cities Era (NICE). In this view, it is incontestable that the world is not only urbanizing, but rapidly transurbanizing. Presently, its growing urban population -almost half of humanity- is becoming increasingly inter-connective and interactive.

The conditions of peace and detente which prevail today widen the margin of maneuver of sub-national units and project them to the inter-national arena. World-cities are increasingly unhooked from their nation-states as their destiny is determined more by foreign than domestic factors. Such cities are colonized by international capital which is highly mobile and volatile because it is not under the control of any particular state.

There is very little national governments can do to shield their cities from these extraterritorial forces which do not respect national boundaries. Cities are thereby forced to resort to their own devices for protection and projection. Urban politics will then become more important concurrently as world politics become more significant. The loser in both cases will be the old nation-state.

In that case, we can expect political power to devolve to the local level, thus remaking urban citizenship a real decision-making avocation. Only such strategy will effectively combat the wide-spread anomy and apathy resulting from modern urban life styles.

For this to happen, cities will have to improve themselves physically (economically), psychologically (culturally), and politically (cybernetically), thus raising their capacity to face their multiple challenges. The alternative, which is happening in many cities, is the gradual degradation towards an urban jungle.

The more humanity acquires the means to affect all life, the more decisions are spread out to be taken collectively at various levels. Already, sufficient technology exists to reestablish direct democracy, so there is no longer much need for distant governments, even if they try to be representative. Interactive telecommunications via the information highway make it possible for citizens to participate in public policy-making just like in the Greek polis.

An emerging telecommunitary democracy can create a virtual agora in which everyone can get involved to some degree. Such teledemocracy could transform the global village into a cosmopolis in which decision-making power will most likely be shared by a condominium of international organizations and transnational corporations, as well as infranational regions and megalopolitan centers, in addition to traditional nations or states.

The hypothesis that the importance of the nation-state decreases as its numbers increase is confirmed by the exploding UN membership along with increasing member impotence and irrelevance. The fifty members of the UN in 1950, doubled in 1960, tripled by 1980 and will probably quadruple to reach 200 by the year 2000.

These states range from the mega, with over a billion people, to the mini, with only a few thousand each. The few of the former can hardly keep their motley populations together, while most of the latter are so small as to be hardly viable.

It seems that present opposing centripetal and centrifugal forces either tear apart large states or bring together small ones into medium communities between five and ten million people, which are not that much larger from the classical Greek ideal. Under the circumstances, most nation-states are subjected to the stresses and strains created by three contradictory tendencies from:

- Above, by supranational IGOs (Inter-Governmental Organizations);
- Beside, by the international TNCs (Trans-National Corporations);
- Below, by the infranational LOCs (Local Ethnic Communities).

Increasing global interdependence makes stronger international law and tighter supranational organization imperative conditions of maintaining a dynamic world order. For chaos to be avoided, systemic complexity must be directly proportional to cybernetic harmony. So, if present integrating tendencies continue unabated, a strengthening of

planetary institutions of legislative, executive and adjudicative functions will inevitably accelerate into the next century.

In parallel, transnational globalization goes on besides nation-states, interpenetrating their jurisdictions by socioeconomic forces which do not respect national borders or state politics. Multinational institutions and transnational flows of people, goods and money are now making nation-state divisions anachronistic and meaningless.

Finally, subnational forces emanating from about a thousand provincial governments and five thousand ethnic languages or imagined communities in the world divide nation-state sovereignties among their local constituencies. (The former USSR alone officially recognized a hundred ethnic groups. South America also has a hundred, Indonesia three hundred, Europe seventy-five and China fifty). If the recent trend of large state breakdown into smaller ethnic components continues unabated, the present hundreds of nation-states could multiply into thousands of city-states.

Consequently, the future ecumenical synthesis could turn out to be a vertical pyramid resting upon a thousand small city-states, supporting a hundred large nation-states, organized around ten continental federations, which finally compete and cooperate in a single global UN system. Horizontally, this cohabitation among local political communities would coordinate their policies within regional cultural societies, whose cooperation optimizes economic interdependence in the global system and its natural environment.

This optimistic scenario combines both realistic and idealistic theories, as well as synchronic and diachronic dialectics. By synthesizing ancient philosophy with modern technology, it describes and prescribes a probable future society. The classic principles of strong local community, integrity and simplicity join with modern notions of humanity, equality and liberty to create a peaceful, tolerant, multicultural coexistence thus avoiding both pessimistic scenarios of either chaotic anarchism or sclerotic totalitarianism.

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- This essay is based on a reedited chapter of the author's monograph: Exopolitics: Polis-Ethnos-Cosmos; Classical Theories and Praxis of Foreign Affairs. Nova Science Publishers, New York, 1999 & 2005. Its Greek translation was published by Leader Books, A.E., Athens, 2001.

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