

Ancient greek racism essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

This essay sets out to investigate the types and extent of racism and tribalism that existed in Ancient Greece. This is a topic over which there has been considerable debate. Most modern scholarship converges around the belief that racism in its modern form, which is largely concerned with biological, physiological and physiognomic factors, did not have much of a place in Ancient Greece. By way of method, this essay considers some of the main arguments put forward by scholars alongside several of the most important contemporary sources, such as Plato's 'Republic' and 'Laws', and Aristotle's 'Politics'.

The findings of this essay suggest that racism in the modern sense did not exist in Ancient Greece, but that there was rampant cultural discrimination. It has also emerged that analyses of this topic could benefit from clearer use of terminology; the words 'race' and 'racism' in particular cause ambiguity.

Keywords: racism, tribalism, Ancient Greece, discrimination This essay will consider the role that racism and tribalism (which will be used synonymously henceforth) played in Ancient Greece.

A rigid definition of these terms will not be attempted, as differences in this respect deserve in-depth analysis. The first section will attempt to refute the notion that the ancient Greeks were 'racist' in the modern sense of the word. There will then be a consideration of some alternative propositions, such as Isaac's (2004) 'proto-racism' thesis, and Bakaoukas's (2005) conception of 'cultural racism'. It will be argued in summation that racism did not play an important role in Ancient Greece, but that discrimination of other kinds was rife.

Modern notions of racism, namely that there are ‘ number of basic human types, each embodying a package of fixed physical and mental traits’, only began to develop in the 17th and 18th centuries, and possibly later (Biddiss 1979: 11). Bulmer and Solomos (1999: 8) likewise suggest that ‘ only in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century does the term “ race” come to refer to supposedly discrete categories of people defined according to their physical characteristics’. The idea that the ancient Greeks were ‘ racists’ as we now understand the term, and even to speak of ‘ race’ and ‘ racism’ in the context of ancient Greek civilisation, is anachronistic and misleading (Bakaoukas 2005: 5).

This is not to suggest that the ancient Greeks did not discriminate, but rather that they were not concerned with characteristics that today we would associate with race. For example, Bakaoukas (2005: 2) points out that the enslavement of ‘ barbarians’ was commonplace among the Greeks, but that ‘ they considered Ethiopians no more barbarous than the fair Scythians of the north. Skin color and other somatic traits they attributed to the effects of climate and environment.’

Moreover, within Greco-Roman culture more broadly Ethiopians were held in high esteem. We should therefore ‘ be very careful not to categorize the ancient Greeks as white racists’ (Bakaoukas 2005: 2), and indeed as modern, biological or physiological racists of any kind. Isaac (2004: 4-5) believes that there was a form of ‘ proto-racism’ in Greco-Roman culture, which included some of the ‘ essential elements of later racism’. He cites the Hippocratic treatise ‘ Airs, Waters, Places’, which he believes reveals a ‘ racist’ environmental determinism.

For Isaac, racism exists when one assigns to ' individuals and groups of peoples collective traits, physical, mental, and moral, which are constant and unalterable by human will, because they are caused by hereditary factors or external influences, such as climate or geography. ' He suggests that in the eyes of the Greeks, ' once environmental factors have determined degenerate characteristics, these characteristics cannot be undone, even when an entire people permanently relocates to an optimal climate' (Bakaoukas 2005: 6).

According to the proto-racism thesis, groups of people were not regarded as inherently, or biologically, inferior by the Greeks, rather they were made so in perpetuity by their environment. Whether this constitutes racism is a matter of definition. In any case, the theory is contradicted in contemporary works. Champion (2005: 10) argues that political rather than environmental factors were preeminent in ancient Greek theories on collective characteristics.

In support of this position, he cites Plato, who claims that the politeia ' is the nurse of men' and argues for the predominance of institutional structures over environmental conditions in the ' Republic' and ' Laws' (Menex: 238, cited in Champion 2005). Aristotle also stresses the importance of political factors in shaping human nature in ' Politics', arguing that humans are above all ' political creatures' (Champion 2005: 11). Even in

Isaac's (2004) most important source, ' Airs, Waters, Places', there is arguably evidence contradicting his claims about environmentally-based racism. In a well-known passage on the educational properties of flute-

playing in ancient Arcadia, Polybius states that institutions overcame environmental factors (Bakaoukas 2005). There is, therefore, reason to doubt the environmental-determinist thesis for racism. Bakaoukas (2005) suggests that Greek thought contained a ‘cultural racism’.

This is supported by the cultural-intellectual bigotry found in Aristotle’s work, for example, who argues that those people ‘whose business it is to use their body, and who can do nothing better...are by nature slaves’ (Aristotle’s Politics 1254b, cited in Bakaoukas 2005). Aristotle is referring at least in part to the Greek-Macedonians, who crucially shared essential biological properties with the Greeks, but who were ‘lacking the capacity for being good and rational in the Greek way’ (Bakaoukas 2005: 5).

Green (1992: 89) also points to anti-Macedonian discrimination on the basis of cultural differences, such as their origins story about being descended from Hercules, their ritual slaughter of dogs, their use of a ‘less prestigious’ Greek dialect, and their ‘retrograde political institutions’. As Bakaoukas (2005: 9) suggests, discrimination against Greek-Macedonians ‘substantiates the ancient Greek cultural racism at issue’. Although Bakaoukas (2005) calls this ‘cultural racism’, it is far less ambiguous to describe it as non-racial discrimination.

It is a strong position, supported by figures such as Max Weber, who pointed to the systematic exclusion, on cultural grounds, of those Greeks and non-Greeks who were not ‘urban, clan-associated, and militarily trained warriorship’ (Weber 1922: 1285-90, cited in Bakaoukas 2005). Beard (2007) also adopts a cultural argument, claiming the ancient Greeks had ‘no

general idea of social, cultural or intellectual inferiority based on the colour of a person's skin', but rather on cultural practices such as speech, hygiene, and diet.

This is why the 'Greeks painted a contemptuous picture of the Persians as trousered, decadent softies who wore far too much perfume', all of which are cultural manifestations of inferiority (Beard 2007). It is pertinent that in its early form the Greek word 'barbarian' ('barbarous') meant 'speaking another language', a cultural rather than biological marker (Bakaoukas 2005: 10). In short, it seems likely that what has often been called racism among the ancient Greeks was actually cultural discrimination, or something akin to it.

In conclusion, racism did not have an important role in Ancient Greece. The Greeks were arguably 'proto-racists', determining collective characteristics according to an external geographical locus. However, this position is an uncertain one. Ultimately, discrimination is best represented by Bakaoukas's (2005) somewhat oxymoronic idea of 'cultural racism'. However, the word 'racism' is anachronistic, and it is far more sensible to stick to terms such as 'xenophobia' and 'discrimination'. That the Greeks had these qualities is beyond doubt.