

POLITICAL THOUGHT

FROM PLATO TO MARX

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Brij Grover

POLITICAL THOUGHT

(Plato to Marx)

Prem Arora



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The Greek Political Thought

"Political thought begins with the Greek. Its origin is connected with the calm and clear rationalism of the Greek mind."

- **Ernest Barker**

Man is a rational creature which has been endowed with a speculative faculty. As such he has shown tendency to understand himself and the institutions around him. He has devoted himself to the study of the physical, biological as well as social environments and indulged in speculation about them. In this speculation the state, its nature, purpose, functions, organization etc. have occupied a prominent position. This speculation about the various problems connected with the state is generally designated as political thought. As such it can be said that the study of political thought is as old as the state itself.

According to certain scholar's political thought is not concerned only with the problems of the state and government but also includes study of the nature of man and his relations with the universe. According to Doyle three main aspects are included in the study of political thought. These include "the nature and functions of man; his relation to the rest of the universe which involves a consideration of the meaning of life as a whole; emerging from the interaction of these two problems of relation of man to his fellowmen. The latter is the main concern of political theory in the narrowest sense and involves a discussion on the nature, purpose and functions of the state." (Phyllis Doyle, A History of Political Thought, p. 15.)

ORIGIN OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

Some scholars have tended to attribute the origin of political thought to the ancient Greeks. For example, Ernest Barker says "political thought begins with the Greek. Its origin is connected with the calm and clear rationalism of the Greek mind." (Ernest Barker. Greek Political Theory, P. 1.) Barker was led to this conclusion because Greek Political thought is one of the most ancient thoughts which was preserved and passed on to the succeeding generations in the form of one treatise or the other. It has now been established that political philosophy was not the exclusive domain of the ancient Greeks and certain other countries like India, Babylonia, Egypt etc. produced political philosophies which are as old as the ancient Greek philosophy. They also produced as outstanding works on philosophy as the Greeks. However, the Greeks have an edge over them in so far as they could preserve their national heritage and pass on their treatise to the succeeding generations while the other countries failed to do the same. According to Maxey "The closer and fuller acquaintance with the civilization of remote millennium, which we now enjoy reveals an

astonishing abundance of the political ideas among the people of those vanished areas and shows how both in thought and practice they anticipated, paralleled and to some extent laid the foundations for ideas which subsequently appeared in European political consciousness. It was in those ancient political systems that the human mind first came to grips with the problems of governments and first attempted to formulate ideas to account for the phenomena of politics and to systematize the exercise of political authority"(Maxey, Political philosophies, p.8).

Even if the view expressed by Maxey is accepted, the no availability of non-Greek works of politics further renders them insignificant. The Greeks may not have been the first to develop political philosophy, but they certainly were the first to present the political ideas and concepts in systematic form and their ideas greatly molded the European thought and form the basis of modern political thinking. A logical question arises as to why the Greeks alone succeeded in laying foundations of an independent political philosophy. This can be attributed to a number of factors such as the rational character of the Greek mind, their secular outlook on life, the presence of a large number of city-states which greatly differed from the states in Babylon, Egypt, India etc. and the variety of political experiences which the Greeks acquired due to existence of different forms of governments in these city states. Prof. Bowle has attributed the growth of systematic political thought amongst the Greeks to "the free play of speculative intelligence, the brilliant formulation of vocabulary of thought in language expressive of subtlest shades of meaning and purposive coherence of Greek ideals."

FEATURES OF GREEK THOUGHT

The Greek Political Thought possessed certain distinct features, which deserve our consideration.

1. **Exclusively Political Character of 'treatise.** In the first place, the ancient Greek Political Thought of other ancient countries like Egypt, Babylonia, Syria, Persia, India, China etc. in so far as it produced treatise of purely political nature. On the other hand in other ancient civilizations, the political ideas were intermixed with mythology and religious literature. For example, in India, Ramayana, Mahabharata and *Manu Smriti*, which deal with the political problems were not purely political treatises. They were chiefly religious works in which the political ideas were intermixed with religion and mythology and one has to make special efforts to discern the political from the religious. On the other hand, the Greek political thought is characterized by the presence of a number of independent treatises which are exclusively devoted to the study of political problems.

2. **Main Concentration on Nature of State.** Another notable feature of the ancient Greek Political Thought is that it concerned itself mainly with the nature of the State and the concept that man is a

political animal. The Greek writers did not concern themselves with the problems relating to the relations between the State and the Church, or State and industry which formed a part of the political thought of the later thinkers. As they conceived man as a social animal they naturally did not conceive him as an isolated and independent unit and tried to understand him in relation to the social whole viz., the state. Naturally the state became the centre of Greek political thinkers. They discussed the origin as well as the end of the state and distinguished between various forms of states such as Monarchy, Aristocracy, Oligarchy, Democracy, 'tyranny etc. They also highlighted the point that the forms of government undergo constant change and tried to determine the order in which the changes take place in the form of the government as well as the laws governing them.

3. **Social Nature of Man.** The Greek thinkers were the first to lay stress on the social nature of man and emphasise that an individual could not be conceived as an isolated and independent unit. He could attain perfection only in a healthy state. Hence they considered the state necessary both for the sake of life as well as good life.

4. **The City State:** Another notable feature of the Greek Political Thought was that it centred around the city states, in which the community of men shared a common life and purpose. It was a complete social organisation in which the citizens continuously participated. In fact, the Greek political thinkers did not distinguish between the state and the society. As Barker has observed, "The Greeks were never tired of telling themselves that while in their communities each man counted for what he was worth and exercised his share of influence in the common life. It was the place of a common life and the home of a union of classes. Life within common walls drew men natural intimacy. It did not abolish the prestige of wealth and birth and culture, it established a tradition of easy intercourse between all class." Similarly, the city-state was also not different from church. It was the be-all and end-all of the activities of its citizens and included the entire collective activities of the citizens. It was a whole outside which member could not be envisaged.

5. **Importance of Education:** Greek thinkers attached great importance to education and emphasised its importance in bringing the people at par with the spirit of the constitution. They emphasised on practical system of education which could help in promoting modesty, self-control, patriotism, sociability and other similar qualities. The State was responsible for the promotion of education among the citizens and hence considered not only a moral and political institution but also an educational institution. In other words, the Greek thinkers laid emphasis on state controlled system of education.

6. **Rationalism:** Greek thinkers assigned a significant position to rationalism in their thought. They believed that reason is the quintessence of the providence and a man was free only as long as he

had freedom of reasoning. Reason enabled the man to identify himself with the corporate life, abandon his personal and selfish interests and leap into the realm of wider views and higher purposes. Naturally the Greek thinkers assigned privileged position to persons possessing rational faculty and relegated those persons who did not possess reason, for much inferior status. In short, we can say that the Greek political thinkers attached great importance to reason and were against acceptance of a thing which was not justified on grounds of reason.

7. **Concept of Law.** The Greek concept of law was intimately linked with their belief in reason. They considered law as the life- breath of the state because it represented the acme of the rational being. As the law givers were inspired by divine power it was also the manifestation of God. The Greek thinkers considered Law and Justice as two sides of the same coin and asserted that justice is that which is according to law. However, this did not mean that to them all the laws were just and could not be improved upon.

8. **Views on Justice.** Justice occupies an important position in the ancient Greek Political Thought. The Greek thinkers considered justice as an important virtue which enabled a citizen to discharge of proper duties and contributed towards the development of human faculties. Justice was also implied to mean willing obedience to laws of the state. According to Plato "Justice was the virtue of soul and injustice its vice".

9. **Views on Citizenship.** To the Greek thinkers' citizenship did not merely imply payment of taxes and a vote. It meant direct participation in the management of the state as a soldier, as a judge, as a legislator in person, not through a Deputy. Thus the Greeks clearly ruled out the concept of representative government. Again, the Greeks did not extend citizenship rights to the slaves because they felt that the slaves could not discharge their obligations towards the state. Even the working classes were denied the right to rule on the ground that they did not possess a speculative mind. As citizenship required active participation in the affairs of the state only the classes which enjoyed leisure and owned lands, and were hence free from economic worries, were given the citizenship rights. Thus in the Greek Political Thought the concept of citizenship was quite restricted.

10. **Belief in Inequality.** The Greeks considered equality as impracticable, unnatural and undesirable and argued that just as the individual was subordinate to the whole, the majority of the individuals who were intrinsically inferior, indolent, unfit, for education could be sacrificed at the altar of the minority of the excellent and the wise. They considered inequality natural and permitted the dominance of the Greeks over barbarians; of the freeman over the slave; of the gentleman over the artisans etc. However, the Greeks permitted equality within a class. This equality was also to be proportional rather than arithmetical. The Greek thinkers emphasised that equality as such

was not an ideal thing, on the contrary it was something unnatural and hence impracticable and undesirable.

11. **Individualistic Element.** The Greek political thinkers assigned a prominent position to the individual in their thought and insisted on the right of the individual to formulate his own thoughts, to express these thoughts publicly and to act in accordance with the dictates of conscience. Plato highlighted individualistic element in his laws and said society is an aggregate of individuals and the individual was a self-determined whole. Similarly, Epicurus said "there is no such thing as human society. Every man is concerned for himself. Justice never is anything in itself, but in the dealings of men with one another in any place whatever and at any time, it is a kind of contract not to harm or to be harmed." Thus individualism constituted an important feature of the ancient Greek Political Thought.

12. **Primary of Discussions.** Another notable feature of the ancient Greek Political Thought was that it attached great importance to discussion. They adopted the method of discussion for presenting their ideas and philosophy and held that truth could be discovered only if there was proper reasoning and discussion. The normal method adopted by the Greek thinkers was a discourse between two parties one initiating the issue and the other replying to those issues with a view to present the philosophical ideas. The Greeks asserted that Truth goes in hide in the absence of discussion; it comes to light through discussion. They virtually raised discussion to the pinnacle of glory and brought it to the point of perfection.

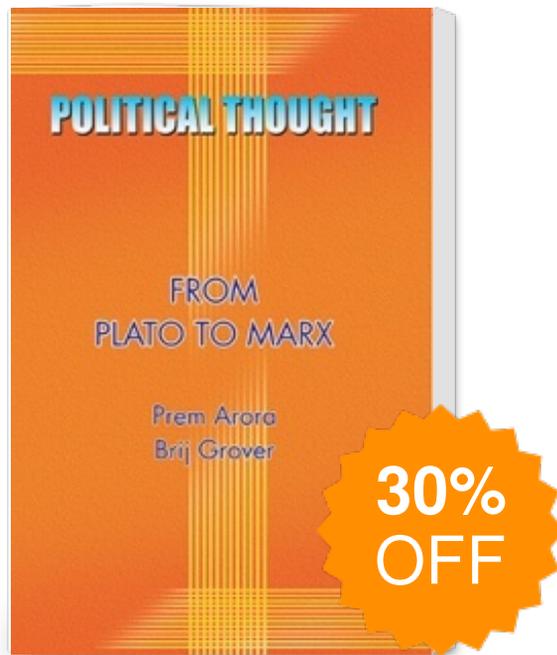
A brief survey of the above features of the ancient Greek political thought shows that the Greek political philosophers were great realists and tried to analyse the problems present before the city-state with great foresight and penetration. Still more important is that the ideas and the concepts which they developed formed the basis of most of the development of political thought which took place thereafter According to Mayer (Mayer, Political Thought, The European Tradition, p.7) "The categories of European thought and approach to understanding of life have been permanently moulded by Greeks to the from the very of beginning." In fact some of the ideas and concepts discussed by the ancient Greek Political thinkers form focus point of discussion of political thought even in our times

IMPACT OF THE GREEK POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY ON EUROPEAN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Of all the political philosophies which flourished in the ancient times the Greek philosophy alone was widely studied and borrowed by the Europeans. This was largely due to easy accessibility and clarity of the Greek philosophy. Some of the important ideas and concepts which found their way into the European political thought were as follows.

1. **Concept of Democracy.** In the first place, the concept of democracy was borrowed by the Europeans from Greeks. Democracy

Political Thoughts (Plato To Marx)



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