

### Jean-Marc Narbonne

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This book offers a “mega-narrative” of the birth and development of the Western intellectual tradition (p. 23; p. 104). Jean-Marc Narbonne’s (hereafter N.) personal view is that the “Greeks” should not be seen as mere for-runners of the Western Enlightenment or Modernity. Instead of adopting a Hegelian narrative, according to which the Greeks could “not yet” or “not possibly” be as evolved as we are, N. advocates another narrative according to which the Greeks were “already” or “almost” as modern as we are (pp. 105-106). In point of fact, N. does not mind calling the Ancients “modern” (e.g. about Quintus Aurelius Symmachus, p. 103) and he often adopts modern notions or concepts (critical thinking, radical atheism, artistic creativity) to shed light on Ancient Greek intellectual history.

N. takes issue with Hans Blumenberg (*Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, 1966), Rémi Brague (*Europe, la voie romaine*, 1993), and Marcel Gauchet (*Le désenchantement du monde. Une histoire politique de la religion*, 1985) to press the point that these other “mega-narratives” are wrong in downplaying, as they do, the Greek influence which helped shaping Western modernity from the Renaissance onwards. According to N., each of these mega-narratives falls prey to the mistake of belittling the Greek legacy in the modern era. Their main faults are: not to take into proper consideration the role of “creativity” in Greek art (Blumenberg); to think that the Romans were the main influence behind the Western world (Brague); and to assume that a world deprived of God is a modern “invention” (Gauchet). Although it is not the aim of this review to adjudicate between these various mega-narratives, let it nonetheless be pointed out that N. spends little time in reconstructing each of the three rival points of view. Neither does he provide a clear explanation as to why these particular authors are singled out for criticism. Other authors, who have also produced this kind of “mega-narratives”—Panofsky, Heidegger, Gadamer, to name but a few—are mentioned but barely discussed in the book.

In order to substantiate his interpretation of the Greek legacy to the Western tradition, N. puts forward a series of arguments taken from the history of Greek literature and philosophy, which he takes to shed light on aspects of Ancient Greek thought deserving of closer attention. Mostly following Vernant, Popper, Hadot on the topics of rationality and critical thinking, N. adds further considerations of his own. For instance he highlights that the Greeks recognized the essential part played by invention and imagination in the production of works of art (p. 27-54). This particular section of the book combines what N. takes to

be decisive examples taken from texts as early as the Vth century B.C. (such as Gorgias of Leontini). It may well be that our contemporaries tend to ignore the great variety of Greek texts on imagination and invention—even Panofsky seemed not to have been aware of them all. But does this legitimize the conclusion that artistic creativity is the child of the “Greek mind”? It would certainly be a gross overgeneralization to claim that it is. In any case, interesting though it is, the topic of artistic invention soon drops out from the rest of the book.

The larger portion of N.’s positive evidence on the “modernity of the Greeks” dwells on Lucian of Samosata. If N. is to be believed, Lucian should be seen as a major influence in the shaping of the Western Enlightenment, mainly for the following three reasons: his taste for literary invention, his atheistic stance, and his advocacy of tolerance. In N.’s view these essential elements of the Western intellectual tradition have unfolded from the Greek cultural and democratic identity (“le pli culturel démocratique grec”, p. 86), funnelled through the channel of Lucian’s writings, the real hero of this story. It is hard to assess the truth of this claim, since it would require close reading of hundreds of authors scattered over as many centuries, and interpretation of a constellation of facts still needed to be accounted for.

While his narrative is not entirely new, N. can be praised for making a convincing case that Lucian inspired many people, including Erasmus and Voltaire. Even so, N. occasionally overestimates Lucian’s role in the Western tradition. One example may suffice: Lucian is probably not the sole influence behind the bee analogy which Montaigne used to depict eclecticism favourably (p. 158-160). Galen has a claim to have been the most notable and consistent promoter of eclecticism in Antiquity (see P. L. Donini, “The History of the Concept of Eclecticism”, pp. 15-33, as shown by J. Dillon and A. A. Long in *The Question of ‘Eclecticism’*, Berkeley, 1988). One might add that the same bee analogy to praise the virtues of eclecticism is also found in Seneca (*Letter 84* to Lucilius) and Plutarch (*De Audiendi*, 8), both writers Montaigne declared as his major influences.

Making generalizations is inherent to mega-narratives, but some of N.’s run contrary to solid pieces of evidence. For instance, it is hard to base the conclusion that Socrates was an atheist from a single page of the *Clouds* (li. 345 sq.; pp. 65-66). This is especially so since Socrates does not say there that he is an atheist, but that the Clouds, daughters of Okeanos (li. 277), are the only real Goddesses of the world. Somewhere else, N. claims Plato’s political “absolutism”, and his “dogmatic, authoritarian, and despotic” views on politics is a fact everybody should accept with no further discussion (p. 198).

A last cause for worry is the great amount of factual and typographical errors. For instance, Erasmus is said to be the “Voltaire of the XVIIIth century”