The Polis-Nation Conceptual Dualism from the Metaphysical Perspective of Jose Ortega Y Gasset

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Abstract: If the social, cultural and mythical-religious universe of Ancient Greece revolved around the notion and reality referred to by the term Polis, then it can be said, in the opinion of Jose Ortega Y Gasset, that the dynamics and convulsive formation of modern European civilization revolved around the concept of Nation. However, can we talk about the possibility of a Nation of the ancient Greeks? And, is the idea of a construction, in fact, of a modern-based re-construction of Polis founded? Ortega Y Gasset attempted a metaphysical approach to the conceptual resorts underlying the two existential paradigms.

Keywords: *Polis; Nation; citizen; Ancient Greece; Utopia; ideal; perfection; purpose.*

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1. Introduction. The Polis and the Nation: two paradigmatic realities with metaphysical valences

Graham (2001) mentioned that “Anticipations in things social, cultural and linguistic are alone striking enough to merit our prominent attention and to justify an extended investigation of his relation to both postmodernism and poststructuralism.” (Graham, 2001, p. 3)

As Leszczyna (2019) says, “The social and political reflections of Ortega, in spite of the fact that they originated in the first half of the 20th century, remain topical as they refer to two basic spheres of modern Western man’s life: the national sphere and the European sphere, and to their mutual relations. For some time, both of them have been seen as problematic (the current crisis of European unity and solidarity, the revival of nationalisms, unclear relation between the national and European politics, etc.), and therefore they need to be explained and defined.” (Leszczyna, 2019, p. 57) See also Juan Bagur Taltavull (2013) *Nación y Estado en el pensamiento de Ortega y Gasset*.

Seeking a strong metaphysical approach to the concept of nation, Jose Ortega y Gasset believes that a first analytical opening necessary for this approach is to correlate this concept with the idea of Polis or urbs. This idea came to us from the tradition of ancient Greece and Rome. The concept of nation belongs to the recent history of mankind and it carries a complexity that brings together political, social, economic aspects alongside philosophical ones. On the other hand, compared to the concept of Polis (Antonescu, 2018), it proves to be much broader, open to multiple ontical and gnoseological levels but, at the same time, more diminished in its metaphysical substance. In short, if the concept of nation is broader, the concept of Polis is deeper. For the ancient Greeks, the nation could not be thought of because, at a preliminary stage, it cannot be imagined, viewed, so that it can then be abstracted and transformed into a concept later on. They thought of the community within the parameters of a small family within which each can be seen and quantified as an individuality with a well-established past and an anticipated future. Thus, in the world of Greek cities there was no talk of Plato, but of Plato, son of Ariston. He therefore belonged to a tribe, to a genos, each member of the community carrying with him a clearly delineated individual history. Ortega y Gasset considers that for the world of Ancient Greece, the structure and cohesion of Polis was based not on utterance, on the expression formulated and embodied verbally, but on the dynamics of the gaze. The citizens of Polis were recognized, that is identified on the basis of the referral and separation

mechanisms offered by visual memory. This primacy of the gaze is typical of the thinking of Ancient Greece where looking into the distance means often seeing the end of the island and the open sea. The gaze allowed for control at the level of space, more precisely, the delimitation of a controllable space (Rezeanu, 2018), the circumscription of an area that could be taken into account and subject to precise regulations. Polis is such a region submitted to framing and control. (Ortega y Gasset, 2002, pp. 59-60) For the ancient Greeks, argues Ortega y Gasset, what could not be framed, measured and thought, according to the pattern of the Pythagorean geometric harmony, was part of the unthinkable, the incalculable, the uncertainty that could open to chaos and universal disorder. In his famous work *Politics*, Aristotle argued that citizens must know each other in order to be authentic citizens, that is members of an authentic fortress. They must see and hear each other easily, their crowd must be easy to grasp with the gaze. Thus, the leader can address to the city and this latter can follow it carefully and clearly, its message reaching each and every citizen. Aristotle considered that order cannot be imposed and maintained in a large crowd. (Aristotel, 2001, p. 175) Moreover, many of the Greek poets emphasized the idea that there is a measure in everything, its absence favoring the harmful appearance of chaos. One can talk about an extension, about a constant widening of the horizon of action and knowledge, of political and cultural mobility but by multiplying the number of cities, of Polis that can act like a system consisting of several active individual units that are in a constant symbiosis, like organic functions brought together in the biological dynamics of a single organism. The fact that the world of the ancient Greeks consisted of a multitude of colonies and Polis could constitute an argument in favour of the idea that what Aristotle tells us in this regard is a reality of his time, not just a simple theory or philosophical explanation.

2. The continuous present of the Polis and the inter-relationality of its members

For the ancient Greeks, the city, the Polis was only possible to be built on a flat surface, on a circumscribed spatial projection, delimited but also devoid of depth. Instead, the nation is being edified on those concave surfaces, which have deep curves like river whites. The citizens of Polis therefore exist and coexist as a group united in its entirety under the spectrum of light and full exposure. In this respect, they know one another and their social affiliation, family, concerns and ideals. The nation, by contrast, is a multivalent conglomerate that is arranged like an iceberg that

allows only the surface, the tip of its dynamic substance, to be observed, the rest, in fact most of it, being hidden in the depths, in pulsating areas. Thus, a nation hides its dynamics and creative and destructive energies, remains a mystery to the analyst who researches it in the hope of its social diagnosis. The Roman city lost its status as a social-political unit by being eclipsed by the mirage of the empire (Dura, 2019) when it no longer placed its citizens on a horizontal social surface, they became citizens of the empire who left the status of members of small communities. The nation or, more accurately, the nations of the Roman empire formed a conglomerate that hardly let the peak of its social-political and cultural-religious structures be seen (Clipa et al., 2018), much of which was hidden in depths that were difficult to probe. For the members of the Polis, states Ortega y Gasset, following Aristotle, in his accounts, everything had to be in plain sight, that is, open to the gaze that researches and quantifies. The citizens of the Polis had to know each other in a spirit of companionship, of camaraderie and of tranquility of companionship. The nation can also naturally possess ideals that require sacrifice, commitment (Nistor, 2018) and full adhesion. But its members, when united in the name of such an ideal, do not act by maintaining their identity, their distinct mental personality. On the contrary, they come together and form a common bloc, a single unit, a single organism in whose immensity personality is lost, the sign of psychic individuality is annihilated by being assimilated into the anonymity of the common force and action. The nation is constantly looking to the future and its hope is aimed at building a new, ever more advanced, more refined political, social and cultural state. In this respect, all a nation's expectations of its achievements are closely linked to that telluric background, its unseen depth. The nation's resources are in this obscure area from which is hoped to provide energies capable of generating general resurrections and metamorphoses that can lead to a better future. In the existential paradigm of the Polis, the future matters little. The present is the one that gives the measure and the ontic rhythm of the Polis. But this perspective should not be accused of supporting a state of stationary, of gridlock. The ancient Greeks, as citizens of the Polis, were not captive to social paralysis or an unproductively repetitive circularity. On the contrary, the fact that they are not as interested in the future as members of a nation led them to take a much more contemplative position regarding the destiny of man and his relationship with the gods. For the ancient Greeks, the moment holds greater depth than the future. In the moment, at the present moment, are concentrated the mysteries and principles of the universe waiting to be discovered. Far from being a neglect or a negligence, this attitude aims at

surprising the eternity in the fragments of time that follow their unabated fluency towards the future. The ancient Greeks seem to live according to the principle that suggests that we appreciate the moment and ponder, from within, on the meaning of human existence and cosmic infinity. The Polis, thus, reveals to be an environment more conducive to spiritual development than the nation where the emphasis falls on social-political expectations and the need for evolution on the scale of national but also universal history. In this respect, the notion of Polis can be said to be deeper than the term nation, in the sense that it holds the valences of a vertical human projection, while the nation brings into question a much more complex perspective, the projection of human thought and action being a horizontal one. Thus, the Polis seems to be more concerned with the axis that brings together the highs with the depths and the nation is constantly marked by the mobility between forward and backward.

The Polis, argues Ortega y Gasset, lives in a continuous present. It manifests itself as a closed unit for horizontal dynamics but with full predisposition for vertical ones. Instead, the nation shows itself to be reluctant to these openings on the axis of spiritual ascendancy and willing to make full commitments for horizontal movements, movements involving social, political and economic pragmatism. From this pragmatism there are also gradual annexations of different smaller national environments that are assimilated or symbiosis with another equally gifted nation. The Polis is not aimed at conquering or being in symbiosis with another spiritual, political or economic environment. It is an atom with the function of instrument, of utensil in order to achieve a total, a complete goal. Ortega y Gasset notes the proximity of the Greek terms *telos* which means purpose and *teleiosis* which refers to the idea of perfection. Therefore, perfection for the Polis universe is not projected into a future that must be touched or built as the nation believes. On the contrary, for the citizens of Polis perfection must be achieved and lived now and here, the city of the ancient Greeks being the reality capable of achieving such perfection in its concrete present. In this sense, Plato's central idea in the Republic is not as utopian as we would think at first impression. In fact, when we consider the ideal city evoked by Plato as a Utopia, that is, a construction that is nowhere, a structure without place, according to the Greek term *U-topos*, we make ourselves the exponents of the Nation, the proponents of the ideas of the Nation. But from the perspective of the ancient Greeks, Plato's Utopia was achievable, perfection being possible to achieve in the continuous present they were experiencing. Polis could achieve this perfection, becoming a viable utopia, an achievable paradox. The city of the ancient Greeks represented, from the

beginning, a clearly delimited administrative, military, economic and political core, it represented the State by excellence. Thus, it can be said that the Polis is inaugurated on the basis of the architecture of the State when the Nation, in an overturned way, reaches the notion of the State and tries to assimilate and concretize it only in the stages of maturation, in the final stages of its evolutionary process. The term *polites* refers to the idea of citizen but also *civis*, that is political concern. Thus, the Polis of the Greeks represented the space for the gathering of the ideas and opinions of all the citizens who saw, heard and knew each other. This atmosphere of companionship or citizenship has generated the constant common concern of the ancient Greeks for the ideal social format and for the most advanced constitutional formulas. Tyranny, despotism and democracy have found in this environment one of the most productive ideological and metaphysical laboratories.

3. The collective anonymity of the Nation

According to Ortega y Gasset, the term Nation actually indicates an environment, a framework encompassing our individual actions and thoughts. “For Ortega, the nation was a task consisting in the exploitation of the potential inherent in it, which required the commitment of citizens, the development of citizenship in them as well as the responsibility for their own acts” (Leszczyna, 2019, p. 42)

Therefore, it represents an ontological background, a primordial anteriority in which we were born and which we inherit being anchored in its soil by spiritual potentialities. So we do not generate the Nation, we do not build it, as it would initially seem, but we are born within its structures and mobilities. Hence the idea that we are, for the most part, sons of the Nation and not its Parents or its founding taxpayers. In the city we are con-citizens, who became compatriots within a Nation. The nation, argues Ortega y Gasset, represents the force behind, the hidden environment that sustains and propels, instead, the Polis or the city is what is seen, what is located in the openness of our eyes, projected and maintained in front of our sight. The nation carries us like a natural reality and is devoid of the principle of humanity. This principle can be added to it later, but it initially acts as a blind engine factor, an anonymous propulsion that loses any individual attempt at affirmation. Instead, the Polis owes its progress precisely to individual affirmation, to the action of distinct personalities, for the Greek city the principle of humanity being paramount, this principle being summed up in the paradigm of each individual individual regarded as a stand-alone entity.

In the sphere of the Nation, the collective anonymity eclipses any form of individual affirmation. About Polis, argues Ortega Y Gasset, it can be said that it is the multitude of Greeks understood as citizens, as members of a community, the Polis implies lucidity and individual consciousness (Simbotin, 2020), force of choice and personal meditation. In the case of the Nation, the situation is overturned, so that it is not individuals who form a nation but the Nation that forms its individuals, the unconscious factor taking precedence. The individual consciousness therefore leaves the place to a collective energy, an anonymous general impulse that manifests itself unconsciously, in the sense that it does not appeal to everyone's discernment, but subordinates it to values and landmarks arbitrarily postulated. Thus, when it is said that the City calls you it means that its citizens have agreed to call you, perhaps for the purpose of investing you with a task, with an exceptional mission. Instead, when the Nation calls you, we are in the situation of an anonymous call, a request from an area where unconscious impulses and drives are wearing the mask of a collective anonymous authority that wants to represent the positive desires of the masses but often shows itself to be merely the expression of their need to be controlled and subordinated to a totalitarian voice (Ortega y Gasset, 2007, p. 151) . Despite appearances, the individual is not concerned with the Nation because he considers it a reality that exists by itself, which has its own well-established resorts and grounds. Nationalism as a phenomenon, argues Ortega Y Gasset, is not a spontaneous and authentic phenomenon, it does not arise from within the human personality, it is not the result of its direct choice. On the contrary, it seems to be more of an artifice projected over individuality but also over the dynamics of the crowd as a whole. Thus, the notion of patriotism was often abused by being over-referred to in order to falsely justify conflicts whose interests were of a political or economic nature. Moreover, under the banner of patriotism, arose violent phobias and psychic complexes, totalitarian leaders, as well as ideologies based on racial or social discrimination. On the other hand, civics or politicism represented, for the ancient Greeks, a form of intense concern for the City, for the dynamics and evolution of the Polis. The citizens of the Polis were all part of their destiny and each had a duty to contribute to the progress of the community in a visible, measurable and quantifiable way. (Vernant, 1995a, p. 21) Within a Nation, individuals are not regarded as holders of far-reaching political solutions, they are not accepted as active resorts that can contribute to collective well-being through their concrete contribution. The meaning of the message and imperatives developed within a Nation is from the top down, from the height of an abstract concept that is the Nation, supported

by the idea of combative nationalism, to the lower social areas, where people listen and rush to join the signal and orientation imposed from the upper levels of community life. In the case of Polis, this flow of social information develops from the bottom up. Thus, citizens participating in the life of the community, transmit requests, imperatives and suggestions or even innovative ideas to the upper levels that can effectively decide the fate of the entire complex of the city. Each member of the Polis has an obligation to dialogue with others, to analyze, interpret the situation of the community and even to propose positive solutions. For their part, others have the duty to listen to their fellow citizens and to ponder on his position and proposals. Such an inter-community mechanism is indeed based on the knowledge of the other, the sight and recognition of one's social and family identity. By participating in political life, the citizens of the Polis became, in a way that was not necessarily conscious, politicians in the sense of contributors to the decisions of the city.

The question arises whether, however, these Greek islands of civilization and culture lived in a permanent demarcation (Grodska et al., 2020), like closed atomic zones, each maintaining its status as a political, economic, social and spiritual-religious individuality. However, the work of Homer or Hesiod shows us a world of a unitary Ancient Greece. Tragedies, fulfilments, conflicts, plagues, or divine blessings seem to be experienced by all Greeks at the same existential rhythm, on the same ontic frequency. It seems that the world of Elada behaves like a single universe made up of multiple individual configurations. Although one cannot speak of a Nation of the Ancient Greeks, as mentioned, however, the existence of a Greek unitary consciousness seems plausible. From this consciousness probably arose the mythical dimensions of the Iliad and the Odyssey. Ortega y Gasset believes that we must be circumspect when we evoke the possibility of a common consciousness of the ancient Greeks because we are very close to falling into the trap of the recognition, ultimately, that they could have held a Nation, despite the individuality of the Polis. However, one can talk about a common factor, a common trait for all Greeks that could form the basis of a Greek para-nationality. Homer and Hesiod made their works known as reflections of this common layer for the entire dynamic of the Greek world, but they do not evoke the idea of a national unit, the thesis of a single Greek nation. But neither does the image of Polis as it was transmitted to the following centuries acquire a crystallization in these early works of the Greek spirit. Subsequently, the beginnings of Greek metaphysical thinking will be felt in the universe of the polis, a universe that Homer and Hesiod did not yet know, as they were not contemporary with the cultural apogee of the

Greek cities. (Copleston, 2008, pp. 14-15) The mythical dimension is the binder that allows narrative and symbolic homogeneity that characterizes masterpieces such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* or *Works and Days*. This dimension constantly evokes the relationship between mortals and gods, the inevitable connection between human destiny and divine will. Therefore, the idea of a national destiny, of a fate belonging to the national totality of the Greeks, is not revealed. Basically, the impression left by these masterpieces is that of not approaching or avoiding subjects related to the themes of nationalism or patriotism. Heroes are representatives of the destiny of mankind and the gods point to transcendent decisions that can tilt the balance of human evolution, on an individual or social scale, for better or for worse. But good and evil do not belong, in this context, to the mobility of a nation, but only to the path of individual consciences or collective consciences of the city. Thus, in the accounts of Homer or Hesiod we frequently encounter the names of cities such as Athens, Sparta or Troy, as well as the names of citizens belonging to these communities, Athenians, Spartans, Trojans. As for the great heroes, as the central characters of these epics, they are also remembered within the genealogical boundaries, so we encounter formulations such as Achilles, son of Peleus or Odysseus, son of Laertes.

4. Paideia as a binder of Para-nation to the ancient Greeks

From the perspective of Ortega y Gasset, however, one can speak of the incipient configuration of a Greek para-nation in Antiquity from two major aspects. A first aspect is the confrontation with the Other, as Ortega y Gasset calls the world of the Persian empire and the entire East. Although Thales of Miletus already proposed a possible political unity of the Greeks from his perspective as a mathematician, a perspective in which the para-national unity constitutes the geometric and arithmetic harmony of the component parts, of the Polis, and authors such as Herodotus or Isocrates expressed their faith in such a unity, however, it was hardly a real and ever-increasing danger as the proximity of the Persian empire to the Greek cities was a powerful factor of cohesion between them. The most profound repercussion generated by the impact between the two civilizations was cultural. In practice, the confrontation with the spirituality of the Orient has led to the unitary highlighting of the culture and religion of the space of the old Elade that manifested itself, perhaps for the first time in its history, in a unified way. It is not only a nation that faced the Persian empire but a world,

a cultural and mythical religious, political and social world, the world of the Greek Polis.

A second aspect, which supports the idea of the old Greeks paragon, is actually a natural extension of the first. Talking about a unity of the Greeks refers to a unitary structure that encompasses art, rhetoric, philosophy, music, art, grammar, gymnastics, military technique, religious cults, structure that could be defined by the term *paideia*, the notion that means not only culture, but also the man's tendency to perfect spiritually, to evolve at the level of consciousness, contemplation, inter-relational organization and its relationship to the possibility of existence of transcendence. In this respect, The Ortega y Gasset recalls Isocrates' remark about the Greek name, which originates from the term *genos*, that is gender and blood unity. To Isocrates, this name indicates not only a philogenetic unity, but also a cultural one. Participation in such a spiritual paradigm defines to a greater extent the quality of Greek than a simple biological membership. However, the cultural activity, the productions of the great thinkers and artists of Ancient Greece were not a historical force that could generate and support the establishment of a Nation itself. This happened, in the opinion of Ortega y Gasset, not because this activity did not have sufficient strength and value, on the contrary it was one that marked the universal cultural destiny. But the interest of the entire cultural and spiritual endeavour of the ancient Greeks was not centered on building a future. Concentrated in the cores of the Polis, it was targeting the present moment. Temples placed in the midst of the cities were meant to give a sense of transcendent stability, of unseen connections to divine guarantee and protection, and the discourse of poets and philosophers came to witness this relationship between moment and eternity. (Vernant, 1995b, p. 50) Thus, the prayers asked the gods for benefits for the present moment and not for the construction of a prolific future, and philosophical meditations aimed at a timeless dimension, like Plato's world of Perfect Ideas. Hence the disinterest in planning a higher future in which the Greek fortresses become a great Nation under the banner of a common political ideal. The exception to this reality was, of course, the adventure of imperial proportions at the political and cultural level, of Alexander Macedon. But this exception, like the great exceptions, comes to strengthen the rule of the Greek world, the rule of the concentration of this world at the level of the functional unity of the Polis. The Macedonian empire did not succeed either in providing history with a Greek Nation, but it extended the Hellenistic factor into the vastness of the Eastern space, which would allow, centuries later, the preservation and rediscovery of the culture of the ancient Greeks, a phenomenon that

supported the emergence of new forms of spiritual expression such as the scholastic thinking.

In the vision of Ortega y Gasset, the ancient Greeks remain at the stage of full attachment to the city, to the social, economic, military and spiritual unity represented by the Polis. But the lack of a nation for the whole Ancient Greece is not a deficit, a substantial lack. The Polis is not an inferior or intermediate stage in relation to the Nation. It cannot be said of the ancient Greek city that it represents a lower stage of development compared to the structure of the Nation. We are actually witnessing two different universes, two worlds that hold distinct existential dynamics. So there are two universes of general human experience, two paradigms or ontic and non-similar gnoseological environments. However, one can speak of a belonging of Greeks to a common fund of conscience, a belonging reflected by the common cultural and mythical-religious phenomenon. If we make an analytical leap over time, we will find, argues Ortega y Gasset, that current Europeans, although claiming to belong to distinct nations, are nevertheless linked (Cebotari & Serjant, 2017) to a common telluric environment, an environment in which important religious and cultural factors come together. "Ortega longed for political integration and union, resulting in his early call for increased European cohesion in the form of a "United States of Europe," seeing in the latter the possibility for "the plurality of Europe" to be "substituted by its formal unity." (Westler & Crăiuțu, 2015, p. 582) The notion of European or Europe tries to evoke this common spiritual background. "(...) Europe had become much more ready to turn "supranational" in the "European Union". However, Ortega expected, as postmodern, it would develop differently from a "United States of Europe" (Graham, 2001, p. 329) So, one cannot speak of a European Nation per se, as, for example, one can recall about the American Nation. "Ortega's critique of mass society sought to provide an answer to the erosion of faith in political opposition and critical debate, the twin principles undergirding the functioning of the very representative institutions that had contributed to the progress of European civilization". (Graham, 2001, p. 580) Although distinct European nations cannot resemble the Greek Polis, however, their reference to the idea of a common unitary universality can be compared to the belonging of Polis to a common consciousness of Ancient Greece. Similarly, from a comparative perspective, it can be said that the achievement of a European Nation is as difficult to achieve as the formation of a single nation for the ancient Greeks.

"For Ortega, the nation is the historical reality and therefore its development does not depend so much on the state as it depends on the

understanding attitude of its citizens and their knowledge of their own history. Yet, it was not about the history of dates, battles, fates of prominent persons but about becoming a part of the structure of historical reality of the nation which makes it realise the limits of its possible development (Ortega's concept of historiology)"(Leszczyna, 2019, p. 45)

5. Conclusions. The modern polis between the reality of the commission and the abstract of the ideal

It can be said that it is difficult for the 21st century European to transpose himself into the universe that gave the world the epic poems the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*. The notion of Polis might appear incomprehensible to him. However, as Ortega y Gasset mentioned, if for almost two thousand years, European peoples have endeavoured to crystallize conceptually and to practically transpose the idea of nation, precisely from these efforts, a possible understanding of the concept of Polis and the ontic universe indicated by it could be opened up. World conflagrations of the past centuries but especially of the 20th century had as one of the main motivations the struggle for and on behalf of the Nation. It raises the question of whether this colossal sacrifice was worthwhile. If the ideality of the concrete realization of the Nation has been achieved or, on the contrary, it has remained, as before, at the project stage, an endless project that only promises millennial peace and well-being for every civilization. In relation to this huge effort to conceptually clarify and implement the idea of Nation, the reality of Polis appears to us as a record that reassures, settles, tempers this kind of collective expansive impulses. The Polis, compared to the Nation, can appear as an island of social, cultural, economic and religious tranquility, a form of spiritual oasis in a desert of conflict-like pragmatism manifested by each people in its furious ascent to the idealism of a nationality, or more precisely, a competitive and often even combative nationalism. But how would it be possible, theoretically and practically, to reiterate Polis's adventure in our contemporary world, and whether it will be able to bring back with it the existential charm and spiritual productivity of the times of Antiquity? At the moment, every effort to imagine the modern Polis is pursued by the danger of slipping into a fantastic, unrealistic approach in relation to the needs and crises of modernity.

It is important to remember that Ortega, as Westler and Craiutu (2015) said, "defended liberty, pluralism, and political moderation and displayed remarkable courage and responsibility as social and political critic" (Westler and Craiutu, 2015, p. 578).

For a proper understanding of this theme we also recommend to read Enrique Aguilar (1998), *Nación y Estado en el pensamiento de Ortega y Gasset*, Ciudad Argentina, Buenos Aires.

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