Sparta: Classes And Social Life

Sparta, located in the Peloponnesus peninsula, was a powerful city state that had it's own unique traditions and rules. Since most of Spartan's life was concentrated on war, their social life and class system also depended on survival. Leaders of Sparta were eager to raise fearless soldiers and were cruel to anyone who didn't support their vision of life. In this paper insight to the social life and class system of Sparta will be provided.

In order to get insight about social hierarchy of Sparta, first thing that needs to be examined is three social classes within Sparta society. Strongest and highest social class was called aristocratic Spartiate, which consisted of native Spartans. They mostly lived in barracks, sacrificing all of their life to war. Spartiate were the only ones who could participate in politics. Middle class of Sparta, Perioeci (meaning "those who live around"), had no any political rights, but had to pay taxes. They also had a right to own land, learn how to read and write. They were able to serve in the army and were Sparta's "economic muscle". Helots were the poorest, unfordable class in Sparta. They were used like a slaves. Even though Helots had a right to become free by joining Sparta's army, they were still frequently killed by upper classes. It was sometimes used as a practice for the young soldiers. Members of Crypteria were allowed to kill helots in order to demonstrate their superiority under them.

Coming to Sparta's governmental organization, what firstly needs to be mentioned is that Sparta had two kings. Kings were from the Agiad and Eurypontid families. The reason for having two kings was that there is a belief of Sparthans that their kings were direct descendants of Heracles. Along with kings, there were also elder council members(Gerousia). It was acting on the basis of Sparta's lawgiver(Lycurgus) set of rules. One could join Gerousia after having reached the age of 60. Elder council members actively participated in decisions kings had to face while giving them essential advices. It is also important to mention that Sparta was the first Greek city to establish roles and duties for its citizens.

Social life and traditions in Sparta were really attractive to explore, since it was completely different from that of the neighbors. The word "Spartan" itself was only associated with militancy. Everything was concentrated on war and everyone was expected to contribute for raising a great army. Engagement in any other type of activity was considered as shame and waste of time. It was a complete opposite of the Athens, where literacy, art and other artistic activities were prospering. Sparta was concentrated on the survival of strongest. The children of Sparta started fight for their life and position in the society the minute they were born. The tradition was that new born child needs to be examined whether he or she is able to survive in severe conditions. If child was considered to be strong enough, it is given a status of future great warrior. If not-infanticide was taking place. There were huge rates of child killing, especially if it was girls. For obvious reasons, girls were physically less strong than men, so they were killed frequently with no doubt. If Spartan had an opinion that child is not able to be warrior it was left somewhere in the heel side, sometimes in a basket. This decision was done not by parents of a child, but by city elders. Children who survived so called "test of strength" were then sent to future soldiers schools at the age of 7. Young boys were separated from their families and started a harsh Spartan school of surviving, called agoge. That is where they had to learn how to fight and survive, as well as deal with harsh climate conditions while sleeping in

the cold ground. Furthermore, boys were not fed well and sometimes had to steal food; if they were caught on that, children were strictly punished. At the age of twelve, boys started to interact with elder soldier of the agoge. Sources state that the relationship between teacher and child was quite close and friendly. Children were loyal to their mentors in battle. Such kind of behavior towards young boys was supposed to make them fearless soldiers with stony heart. In my opinion, Sparta's way of citizen's treatment was too harsh. Belief that everyone is born to be warrior and murdering the ones who don't "fit" was unfair and cannot be justified. Such way of treatment of boys may have raised a great warrior, but not a great people. Those people mind was only fight concentrated, they never had a chance to explore what love, family and belongingness means. In my opinion, child killing made Spartans lose a great poets and academics. Even though some people are not gifted with physical strength, they still could have contributed to Sparta's society in a measurably beneficial way. By raising only soldier nation, they significantly drop behind from their neighbors.

The issue is that, conditions for Athens men, in my opinion, were more beneficial. Men in Athens were more educated in different fields. They had more interests (art, poetry) and different opportunities. They had a right to choose how they want to live this life, while in Sparta everything was decided when a child was just born.

Nonetheless, some views of Spartans were more close to our days. Due to war concentration, some of their beliefs were more developed, if compared to other Greek neighbors. What can be considered as progressive in Sparta, is the role of women. Surprisingly, it was quite significant. Women of Sparta were able to have education, own property and engage in sports. They were able to express their opinion and participate in society's daily activities. One reason for such a freedom was the fact that women rarely saw their husbands. Men were allowed to see their wives only after having reached the age of 30, before that, everyone had to stay in barracks. Cases of running from barracks just to see the family were usually taking place. Such a separation from family gave women a huge freedom, but I consider it as something that made their men weak. If a Spartan men had a strong woman by their side, they could have been even stronger. In Athens women were not that much brave and independent, so they were useless to the society. Furthermore, Spartans believed only strong women can give a birth to a future great son of the army. Such kind of women role interpretation was more or less progressive. One more interesting fact to be mentioned is that women were also less engaged in household activity, since helots were doing household activities instead of them.

To conclude, even though Sparta's traditions and values may seem to be too war concentrated, especially if compared to Athens, the logic behind their overall strategy is understandable. They were completely different from their neighbors in all aspects, they were cruel to everyone, but that was for the purpose to be a winner. At the end, they raised great warriors, who were not afraid of death, pain and enemy, no matter what the sacrifice was.