

Willful Distortions of History

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Since I am a classicist, I regard myself as something of an interloper on a history panel. But although I normally spend most of my time on the interpretation of ancient Greek literature, I have for the last two years been involved with one of the most significant challenges to our understanding of the ancient world. These are the issues that have been raised by Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*. It seems to me a most remarkable fact that despite the existence of many excellent studies of the ancient world, the one work on antiquity that many non-classicists have read, or at least heard of, is *Black Athena*, which was written by a professor of government at Cornell University who is an expert on Sinology. Why do people refer to Bernal rather than the work of a scholar like Walter Burkert who is one of the greatest experts on the ancient Greek world? The reason is because of the political orientation of the *Black Athena* project, which argues that the great achievements of Greek civilization were "borrowed" from the African culture of ancient Egypt.

In the 10 February 1992 issue of *The New Republic* I reviewed *Black Athena* along with a number of other Afrocentric books. My review, and what I have written on the subject since, addresses the central question of how to use historical evidence. I would argue that, on the basis of the evidence we have, some things are possible and others are not. Bernal argues that Greek philosophy was "massively borrowed" from Egypt; others have alleged that Aristotle stole his philosophy from the library in Alexandria (even though the library was only built after his death), and that Socrates and Cleopatra were black. These contentions, and others like them, are apparently being taught as truth in a course on "Africans in Antiquity" at Wellesley College. When I mentioned to the then dean of Wellesley that there was no evidence to back these claims, she assured me that the instructor of the Africans in Antiquity course had his view of ancient history and I had mine. Another colleague insisted that the issue was unimportant. "I don't care," he said, "who stole what from whom." Since most people regard ancient history as a sideline, I do not believe that the quality of this instructor's teaching would ever have been scrutinized had he not begun to use in another class and openly praise as an "excellent study" another book of questionable scholarly merit, the Nation of Islam's *The Secret Relationship between Blacks and Jews*. This book claims that the Jews are primarily responsible for the slave trade, a contention that has repeatedly been shown to be false. The fact that *The Secret Relationship* was being used as a text, and that anti-Semitism was being taught, struck right

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at the heart of the institution, namely, its pocketbook. Even though there are no living ancient Greek alumnae, we do have Jewish alumnae (I'm one of them), and I know how they (we) feel.

I learned from these events that many people care more about the alleged purpose of history writing than the accuracy of the work and the qualifications and authority of the writer. The problem, alas, isn't limited to Wellesley. When I spoke last fall about these same issues to faculty at Sarah Lawrence College, my remarks about ancient history elicited an angry response from an anthropologist who specializes in modern native American cultures. How could I claim that Aristotle didn't steal his philosophy from Egypt, or allege that there was no such thing as systematic ancient Egyptian philosophy or an Egyptian "mystery system"? I explained that the notion of an Egyptian mystery system, with a highly organized educational program, derives not from known Egyptian sources but from an eighteenth-century AD novel by a French priest, the Abbé Jean Terrasson. This novel, *Séthos*, although now completely forgotten, was very popular in its day. It provided the inspiration for the ritual of Freemasonry and, with it, the testing and trial of the hero of Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*. The Afrocentric notion of an Egyptian mystery system clearly derives from Freemasonry. But the "Egypt" of these rituals is almost totally European in character. Terrasson based his story on Greek and Roman sources, because it was not possible for him, or anyone at the time, to read Egyptian sources. In fact, until hieroglyphics were deciphered in the 1830s, they were completely misunderstood; they were regarded as mystical symbols, when in reality they were used as a kind of alphabet. When I had explained all this to the faculty group at Sarah Lawrence, the anthropologist said: "I don't believe you. Folk memory could have preserved the knowledge of the meaning of the inscriptions." I assured him that the evidence suggested that all knowledge of hieroglyphics had been lost, and that in any case most people in antiquity did not know how to read at all. The anthropologist responded by stalking out of the room.

What can I say? This incident seems to me illustrative of history teaching in the nineties. The basic axiom of this approach is that if something could happen, it did happen; if something was possible, it is probable, and indeed actual. Practitioners of this approach also assume that it is desirable to allow current social practices to shape our understanding of the past. The Sarah Lawrence anthropologist was looking at history from a non-sexist, non-racist, non-elitist, and non-colonial viewpoint. White classicists like myself are bound to be sexist, racist, elitist, and colonialist; therefore classicists have colonized antiquity for themselves, just like the evil colonizers of Africa. But surely the anthropologist also is imposing a point of view that is both anachronistic and misleading.

Let me offer a few other examples of such allegedly "value-neutral" assertions about ancient history. First, the question of whether or not Cleopatra

was black. It is significant that until recently no one seems to have thought of asking the question; previously it was always assumed that like every other member of her family she was a Macedonian Greek. The *possibility* that she might have been black depends on the identity of her paternal grandmother, the mistress of Ptolemy IX, who was the father of Cleopatra's father. No one knows who she was. It is of course possible that she was an Egyptian, or a Nubian, or for that matter, a Jew. She may have been a slave, but since no ancient writer mentions her, or points out that she had a different or slave origin, it is much more likely that she was, like the Ptolemies themselves, a freeborn Macedonian Greek. The Ptolemies did not associate with Egyptians very much, so that, if they did so (as in one instance), it was noted. But normally they kept away from the native population. Cleopatra VII (69–30 BC) was the first Ptolemy to wear Egyptian dress and to speak their language, but she did so for political reasons. It is simply wishful thinking to imagine that Cleopatra wanted to be an Egyptian, or actually even was an Egyptian. To insist that she was, or that (as has recently been suggested) she stands for suffering African humanity is a colonization of the past as egregious as any practiced by nineteenth-century European scholars.

Another example of modern colonization of the past is Martin Bernal's contention that there was a massive Egyptian influence on Greece in early times and that Egyptians actually invaded the Greek mainland. Bernal suggests that ancient historians have discounted Egyptian and Near Eastern influence on Greece because of anti-African and indeed anti-Semitic prejudices, or at the very least, indifference to anything other than Greece and Rome. His "evidence" for these claims is derived from his own tendentious reading of European writers. His assertions about the importance of Egypt rely heavily on his own interpretations of mythology and of linguistics, very few of which stand up to scrutiny. For example, he suggests that the name Athena was derived from *Ht Neit*, "house of Neith," a goddess who was later associated with Athena. But in fact this derivation is no more likely than that Athena is derived from Satan. Another example: Bernal supposes that in the seventeenth century BC the Hyksos, a Semitic people, invaded Greece from their base in the Nile delta, bringing Egyptian culture with them. In fact, new archaeological evidence suggests that the opposite was true. Bernal insists that the Greek word for suppliant, *hiketis*, derives from the name Hyksos, but this etymology is as unlikely as the derivation of Athena from Satan. Despite Bernal's claims, there are only a relatively few words in Greek that derive from Egyptian, and these do not belong to the conceptual vocabulary of philosophy, but to the practical vocabulary that tradespeople use, such as the words for boat and pot.

Bernal might seem to be on stronger ground when he argues that Greek philosophy was "borrowed" from Egypt, because ancient writers state that famous Greeks such as Plato, the mathematician-astronomer Eudoxus, and

the legendary Pythagoras studied there. Bernal and the Afrocentrists suggest that modern scholars because of their anti-African prejudices have not acknowledged fully the importance of this Egyptian "connection." That is of course *possible*, but there is a better explanation. Ancient historians have not taken seriously the ancient evidence about Greeks studying in Egypt because we have reason to believe that it is not literally accurate. Before the conquest of Egypt by Alexander in 323 BC, very few Greeks could travel there, since the country was under the control of their enemies, the Persians. No contemporary of Plato mentions his studying in Egypt; the legend that he did developed only centuries after his death. The ancient writers who claim that Plato and other famous Greek philosophers studied in Egypt do so in order to show their respect for Egypt and the antiquity of its civilization, but they had no direct evidence that these men ever spent time there. In effect, they created a connection because they wanted such a connection to exist—we would now call the result myth rather than history.

Some of you will remember from my article "Ethnocentric History from Aristobulus to Bernal" (*Academic Questions* Spring 1993) that this type of historical myth-making was common in antiquity, particularly among subject peoples. The Jews in Hellenistic Alexandria said that Plato had studied with Moses! In making this claim, they did not concern themselves with the question of language or problems of chronology. Rather, their aim was to establish that their civilization was more ancient than that of the Greeks. For the same reason, when Egypt was under Greek domination, Egyptian priests were eager to point out to Greek tourists the houses and the names of the teachers with whom the famous Greek philosophers were supposed to have studied. This type of "reconstruction" of the past was common in antiquity, and can be found even in the authors who created the notion of serious historical writing, such as Herodotus and Thucydides. It is not hard to see why they did so. Ancient writers were often compelled to rely on guesswork or imagination. They did not have an accurate system of dating, the resources of archaeology, or libraries to turn to. Even when they had access to books, it was difficult for them to find exact references because the books were in the form of papyrus rolls.

The Afrocentrists are using the same imaginative methodology when they claim that Greek culture was stolen from Egypt. But where the ancients can be understood and forgiven, because they did not have access to research tools and accurate information, we cannot be so indulgent to their modern followers who simply choose to ignore or disregard the serious research that has already been done. As such, Afrocentric "historical" writings represent a giant step backwards. Of course modern Egyptologists and Classicists cannot give a day-by-day account of what happened in remote antiquity in the way that we can describe the events of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But we do know more about antiquity than the ancients did, and we also

understand more about our own tendencies to colonize the past. Just because we do not know everything and probably will never know everything we want to know about antiquity, there is no reason to assume (with the Afrocentrists) that *any* hypothetical reconstruction is possible. Certainly we ought to be suspicious of hypotheses that are constructed primarily to meet the needs and desires of special interest groups, and recognize them for what they are, mythology rather than history.

**From "The Affirmative Action Catch-22" by Matt Selove in
The Harvard Salient, 12 February 1995, page 5:**

I challenge anyone who supports affirmative action yet opposes all stereotypes to provide a coherent set of answers to the following questions: If there are significant differences among races, what are they (be specific), how do they contribute to the Harvard community, and why do you accuse of bigotry anyone who points them out? If there are no such differences, what is the value of racial diversity, and how can it possibly outweigh the losses of accepting less qualified minorities over more qualified non-minorities?

These questions leave . . . a paradox as inescapable as anything Joseph Heller could ever imagine.