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Black Hellas? A Footnote to the Black Athena Debate (Abstract)

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Since the publication of the first of his three-volume *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* in 1987, within Classics and the disciplines concerned with the history of the ancient Near East, Martin Gardiner Bernal (1937–2013) has been an object of much ridicule and a little curiosity. A sociology of knowledge of Classics, volume 1, subtitled *The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785–1985*, claimed that the fount of Western civilization, ancient Greece, in its remote past was conquered and civilized by its »superior« neighbours from Egypt and Phoenicia. This view of history, which Bernal labels the »Ancient Model« and which he claims is referred to in the writings of Classical and Hellenistic Greeks, was the accepted view on Greek cultural origins, until it was overthrown in the nineteenth century by an »Aryan Model«. Bernal attributes the overthrow of the Ancient Model – the victorious Aryan Model denied Egypto-Phoenician settlements in Bronze Age Greece and postulated an Indo-European speaking Hellenes' conquest of mainland Greece around 2300 BCE – *not* to contemporary scholarly developments within Classics, but to the cultural milieu of the age, which, in addition to being charged with notions of Romanticism, racism, and Progress, was beset, in the aftermath of the French Revolution, by fear of revolution. The controversial nature of the book's claims and its author's status as an outsider to Classics notwithstanding, volume 1 went on to win the *Socialist Review* Prize (1987) and an American Book Award (1990); was the subject of a Presidential Panel in the annual meeting of the American Philological Association (in 1989); and was translated into Arabic, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, Swedish, and Turkish.

Four years later Bernal came out with a second volume – this time, to *prove* the Near Eastern provenance of Western civilization. This new history – drawn up by means of »competitive plausibilities«, rather than proofs – had at its heart a contradiction: whereas the book's subtitle promised archaeological and documentary evidence, many of its major claims were corroborated through the analyses of myths, legends, and rituals, or through the employment of etymology. The book demanded a radical revision of the existent, accepted chronologies for the second millennium BCE Egypt and Aegean – the problem, though, was that the arguments and evidence offered for such a revision, and the methodology employed failed to persuade the specialists. All the same, the book won an A. N. C. Kwanzaa Award (1991), was the Mainichi Shimbun Book of the Year (2004), and was translated into French, Italian, and Japanese.

The hostile reception and outright rejection of his account of history saw Bernal, in between volumes 2 and 3 (2006), systematically responding to his critics and, in the process, coming up with the massive *Black Athena Writes Back: Martin Bernal Responds to His Critics* (2001). Perhaps, by now, Bernal's critics had realized the futility of their enterprise and given up: neither the response, nor the final instalment of *Black Athena* – aimed to furnish linguistic evidence for the claim that close to forty percent of the Greek vocabulary with no known Indo-European cognates has its roots, in fact, in Afroasiatic languages – elicited much of a response. The apathy notwithstanding, the period witnessed the Asiatic Society of Kolkata, in 2005, honouring Bernal with the Indira Gandhi Memorial Gold Medal, and him delivering a lecture

– published, later, in the Society’s journal – titled »India in the Making of Europe«. After China, Greece, and the Near East, it was now India’s turn to be taken under Bernal’s wing.

Within a history of the reception of *Black Athena* and the controversies courted by it – indicated above – the article juxtaposes the books’ main contentions with their major criticisms – in the process, demonstrating the import of Greece to the story of civilization. Further inquiry into the relation between Greece and civilization reveals that Greece as the fount of civilization is a retrojection from the inside that is civilization – thereby, undermining the view that civilization is by and because of Greece. But a theoretical, meta-historical account that discloses origin as a discursive imposition, and history as operating and operable within a site-of-the-moment – and *not* within space and time, thereby calling into question the relation between history and truth, and the notion of history as truth – can it (or better, should it), based on its credence within its domain, strive to influence the internal operations of its object of inquiry? The article, through an example – where radiology and the sociology of knowledge of radiology are juxtaposed – answers in the negative, and concludes that such an attempt is a case of mistakenly extending the rules of one domain into another. Bernal’s attempt to outflank Classics – a discipline informed by the rules of history – by means of his sociology of knowledge, and the Classicists’ attempt to fend off his assault were instances of this misapplication. The multiple forms of knowledge issuing from a plethora of object-framing practices have as their consequence *and* possibility incommensurability and the attendant bedlam; even so, given that disciplines emerge from discursive compulsions, and that they are embedded within an unfolding, groundless event – an event that transforms, engenders, and draws from disciplines and practices – cross-disciplinary influencing remains a distinct possibility. The proof of which, the article submits, is that Classicists themselves were – after the advent of social science history and the rise of postmodernism – moving away from an isolationist paradigm toward one that emphasizes contact and cross-fertilization by the time *Black Athena* appeared on the scene.

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