

BOOKS, ARTS & MANNERS

Corcyraeanization

THOMAS G. PALAIMA

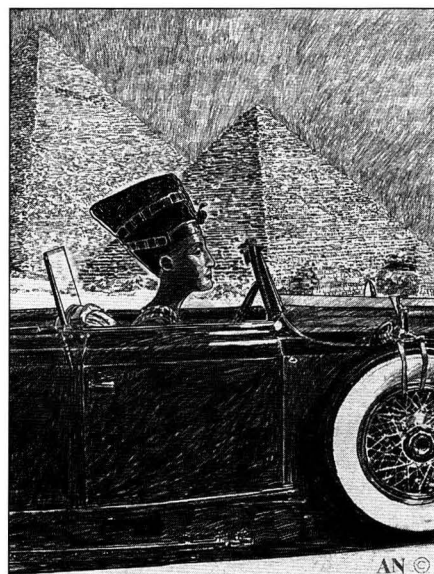
IN his case study of the horrors of civil strife within the Greek city-state of Corcyra, Thucydides clinically describes how opposing factions, in their pursuit of power and hatred of one another, dehistoricized the meanings of words and ideas and invented new ones. The Greek historian would consider it a small and predictable historical irony that recent factional warfare in the Balkan peninsula, where Corcyra itself is located, has made "Balkanized" the fashionable replacement for "Corcyraean" or "Orwellian" in discussions of such phenomena. But with what measure of irony would Thucydides observe the process of dehistoricization and intellectual "Balkanization" within American higher education that is the subject of this book?

In the 1950s, as Bob Connor has remarked, the architects of American foreign policy conceived of the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union in Thucydidean terms and planned strategy for the Cold War accordingly. They had studied the "father of scientific history" at their prep schools, colleges, or universities, and

Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History, by Mary Lefkowitz (Basic, 240 pp., \$24)

they understood the value of his analyses. At the same time, George G. M. James, a college teacher in Arkansas, was writing *Stolen Legacy: The Greeks Were Not the Authors of Greek Philosophy, but the People of North Africa, Commonly Called the Egyptians*. The book appeared in 1954. Its author disregards the principles of historical inquiry developed in Western culture from Thucydides onward. He is thus free to propose that Aristotle stole all of his philosophy from Egypt—we'll discuss the particulars below—and to narrate other surprising

facts about the beginnings of the Western intellectual tradition. Pre-Socratic philosophers derived their ideas about the origins of the world from "Memphite theology" transmitted through *Genesis* by Moses, who himself was an initiate into a complete system of learn-



ing known as the Egyptian Mysteries. Socrates traveled to Egypt, where he learned about astrology, geology, justice, and the doctrine of self-knowledge. The ancient sources indicating that Socrates traveled outside of Athens only

while on military campaigns within Greece are part of a "cover-up," beyond even Oliver Stone's imaginings, of Socrates' Egyptian sojourn. Plato derived many of his key doctrines from "Memphite theology" and plagiarized entire treatises that are now ascribed to him. This makes Socrates, of course, merely the "alleged teacher of Plato."

In sum, James denied that the ancient Greeks had any intellectual or creative powers of their own. They therefore stole from black Egyptian civilization all the cultural forms that, since the Renaissance, we have considered part of our Greek heritage. James never explained why a "contentious and noncontemplative people" would have gone to all the bother that such colossal thievery and deception would entail. But he argues that, for racist reasons, white European culture has hidden from black culture the fact of this wholesale cultural pilfering.

Absurd. Preposterous. Until now in American society an intelligent person could dismiss James's theories as nonsense, and racist nonsense at that, without a second thought. Most intellectuals still have never heard of *Stolen Legacy*. Unlike Socrates, none of us would have known what we did not know, nor would Mary Lefkowitz have written the book under review, had not a Sinologist at Cornell University in 1987, by self-admission in response to a mid-life crisis, begun to argue an even more comprehensive Afrocentric case. Martin Bernal's two *Black Athena* volumes and the public interest they inspired lent legitimacy, within American higher education, to the entire Afrocentrist intellectual movement of which *Stolen Legacy* is an important component. Like *Stolen Legacy*, Bernal's volumes satisfied the social, psychological, and even political needs of Afrocentrists, but, unlike the earlier work, they have all the trappings of legitimate scholarship. Bernal's "trickle-up" strategy of making his radical and, as we see here, hardly original thesis a media event ensured that the academy could not ignore his theories. They have been examined, discussed, and refuted by specialists, and most would have been consigned to decent obscurity but for the strong political voltage in Afrocentrism. Any rational discrediting of Afrocentrist theories meets with immediate charges of racism. Professor Lefkowitz's personal experiences at Wellesley, when she has tried to question the basic tenets of rad-

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ical Afrocentrism, prove that "preposterous" and "absurd" are no longer permissible responses, even when they are supported by closely reasoned historical arguments. The discipline of history is itself racially suspect and therefore rejected.

Why should individuals across the political spectrum read what Mrs. Lefkowitz has written and care about the issues she addresses? In a word, "Balkanization" or, for the sake of nostalgia, "Corcyraeanization." Readers who understand the significance of the latter word can take up *Not Out of Africa* for the pleasure of having their hard-acquired knowledge validated. They may also derive a perverse amusement from reading about the alternative techniques used by an Afrocentrist speaker and by Mrs. Lefkowitz's own colleagues to dismiss her objection that Aristotle could not have stolen Egyptian Mystery texts from the Library of Alexandria for the simple reason that he died before Ptolemy I Soter and Demetrius of Phaleron even got going on the Library. The speaker outdoes Frank Lloyd Wright in mastery of imperturbable disdain. A colleague shows impatience with Professor Lefkowitz's tiresome concern for historical truth: "I don't care who stole what from whom."

To her credit, Mrs. Lefkowitz has not seized the chance to write a broad lampoon, but addresses the serious problems here seriously. She argues sympathetically that Afrocentrist scholars do themselves and their students a disservice by refusing to test their ideas according to long-established scholarly criteria. "Know thyself," whether Delphic or Egyptian, is still a valid dictum.

Mrs. Lefkowitz lays out with meticulous clarity how limited the Greek debt to Egypt was, the difficulties Greeks from Herodotus onward faced in getting reliable information about Egyptian culture, the non-existence in the Library of Alexandria of any systematic compendium of Egyptian learning, and the mostly anecdotal basis of accounts of the debts of Greek thinkers to Egyptian wisdom. From my scholarly experience with would-be decipherers and even with Bernal and Bernalites, I guarantee that none of this will persuade confirmed Afrocentrists. All such thinkers inhabit a simultaneous universe of logic and reasoning. Only posit what some want to believe and those same some will follow.

Mrs. Lefkowitz also explains how the

myth of Egypt as the *fons et origo* of all European learning and culture was invented in the eighteenth century in a popular *Bildungsroman*. It was then embedded in the lore of Freemasonry, and finally taken up by influential figures in the struggle for black rights in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By tracing an intellectual pedigree from Terrasson through Blyden, Du Bois, and Garvey to James, Mrs. Lefkowitz reveals that Afrocentrism is not a passing fancy of this half-century. It is long-established doctrine in certain black intellectual circles. Challenging its premises by applying Thucydidean historical methods will be just as effective as appealing to Darwin in discussions with creationists.

The frightening message of *Not Out of Africa*, then, is that radically different modes now coexist with genuine historical thought and reasoning in American

higher education, with little open challenge. The unifying force of a shared belief in dispassionate, rigorous historical research has been replaced by factional advocacy of self-validating belief systems. What we have here is the Corcyraeanization of the very institutions in our society that should offer students of all backgrounds and persuasions the intellectual tools to examine together the world, present and past. This collective process ideally should lead, Professor Lefkowitz quotes Schlesinger as saying, to "respect for divergent cultures and traditions, and unflinching protection for those unifying ideas of tolerance, democracy, and human rights that make free historical inquiry possible." Tolerance has now taken on a wholly new meaning. History is what any particular faction declares it to be. To find out where this is heading, go read Thucydides. □

Art for an Empty Universe

HADLEY ARKES

ARISTOTLE remarked, in the *Physics*, that if the art were in the material, ships would be growing out of trees. The presence of art indicated the presence of a shaping hand. Art would of course be governed by the laws of matter, but plainly also art was something apart from the world governed by the "deterministic" laws of

The Culture of Hope: A New Birth of the Classical Spirit, by Frederick Turner (Free Press, 292 pp., \$23)

cause and effect. No laws of physics would produce El Greco's *Annunciation*; and even if we could reproduce the pattern of electrical activity in the brain of Shakespeare, the sequence of neural firings would still not yield the 18th Sonnet.

That ancient understanding seems to be deeply at odds with the scheme offered by Frederick Turner, even as he seeks, in this book, to restore "classical" principles of art. Turner, an occasional contributor to *NR* and a professor at the University of Texas at Dallas, has

the advantage at least of beginning with the things nearest at hand, and with complaints that are accessible to people of ordinary understanding: In this age of postmodernism, we have seen shows at the Whitney Museum in New York exhibiting simulated vomit and excrement. Taking the idea of minimalism to the limit of its logic, one artist "mounted" a collection of blank canvases, and the Tate served up to its public an empty gallery.

Turner would reject this arid work as he would reject at the root that collection of self-consciously "modern" pos-

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