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 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 learning 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 theftery 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-
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 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 sees it, 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.

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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, “Corycrazeanization.” Readers who understand the significance of the latter word can take up Not Out of Africa for the pleasure of having their hard-

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