

Book of the week: Out of Athens: The New Ancient Greeks

Tom Palaima is persuaded to think in new ways about classical culture

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If you want to know why you should read Page duBois' *Out of Athens: The New Ancient Greeks*, begin with the final chapter, "Twenty-first century high theory and the Classics". Do not be put off when you read that "contemporary interpretant" Judith Butler uses Sophocles' *Antigone* as a "fruitful site of investigation and even of productive misreading", and that she can do so because *Antigone* in Sophocles' play and in Greek myth is "a discursive catachresis". When you go back to the beginning and read straight through, the mysteries of such paradoxical expressions as "productive misreading" will be revealed; and the annoyance, if you feel any, of frequent jargon terms such as "discursive catachresis" and "ventriloquising" (for quoting, or adopting the views of, other thinkers) will be slight.

Trust me. I have done it. In chapter ten and in other chapters on Spartacus; Sappho in Africa and Asia; slaves and the social history of Greek tragedy; the revolutionary force of ancient Utopias; Jesus, Socrates, Dionysus and the homoerotic; freaks, wise men, shamans, magi and deviants, ancient and modern; and the prominence of the figures of Oedipus and *Antigone* in 20th-century European intellectual and psychoanalytical thought and social and political theory, duBois acts as a guide to key works of the past decade or so that take the ancient Greeks out of Athens and to other cultures and places within the modern human experience where they can still do lots of good.

It will help to take seriously, as duBois does, the claim by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their study of modern globalisation, *Empire*, that "the sovereignty of nation-states has declined, but not sovereignty itself, which is now located in a more abstract, fluid transnational domain". Hardt and Negri issue a challenge to ancient historians that I think duBois in *Out of Athens* well fulfils. Since, in their opinion, American world hegemony was based on an ancient Greek (and Roman) "imperial" rather than "imperialist" model, classicists need to engage the primary works that supported this model, including Thucydides, Livy, Tacitus and others. This will help us see clearly that the new transnational corporate-controlled Empire (sic) "is formed not on the basis of force itself, but on the basis of the capacity to present force as being in the service of right and peace".

Keep in mind that duBois' book was ready for release well before Barack Obama gave his Nobel Prize acceptance speech. In it he justified his decision to send 30,000 more soldiers into Afghanistan as a move towards peace. Newspeak and old speak alike have their roots in classical texts.

In all ten chapters, duBois uses the work of "high theorists of a left-leaning sort", who themselves return to Greek and Latin texts "as they think about problems of the present". They use many different perspectives: queer theory and resistance; anti-imperialism; Marxist class struggle; postmodernism, post-feminism and post-structuralism; universalist and enlightenment ideas of the rights of man; and engagement with the moral and philosophical dilemmas posed by totalitarianism, death camps and genocidal acts from the 1930s onwards.

In chapter two, on Spartacus, I was so infuriated by what I still consider hyper-intellectual interpretative gymnastics in Alain Badiou's reading of Spartacus' slave rebellion that I almost threw *Out of Athens* out of my car window while reading it in a shopping mall parking lot in northwest San Antonio. But the rest of *Out of Athens* changed my perspective.

I now reason that if Badiou makes duBois think in new ways and she gets readers like me, and perhaps you, to think in new ways, there is place and purpose among intellectuals for Badiou's reduction of the "Spartacus narrative" to "the matheme of the faithful subject, e/ϕ ? p. I still find this kind of theorising about the historical human tragedy that is Spartacus' revolt repugnant, but duBois helps us see it as a means to an end, to a new truth, "that the fate of the wretched of the earth is never a law of nature, and that it can, if only for the duration of a few battles, be revoked". As duBois puts it, there may be "a slave who will benefit from the fear produced in his master by Spartacus' revolt to receive a tiny amelioration of his situation".

In chapter seven, "Histories of the impossible", duBois cites Walter Benjamin, a victim of Nazism, on why it is important that classicists pay attention to new ways of looking at classical texts. Benjamin knew before George Orwell made it common knowledge for schoolboys that those in power will control the past in order to control the present, and that victimising the dead keeps them in power: "The only historian capable of fanning the spark

of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious."

In hearing Benjamin's voice here, alert readers will recall duBois' sanguine lesson, in this book's first chapter, about what happens when we cede the terrain of history to classical historians who collaborate with the dominant power. The George W. Bush Administration, in preparing the invasion of Iraq, considered a "programme of covert infiltration code-named 'Anabasis'". Dick Cheney bought and circulated copies of neoconservative classical historian Victor Davis Hanson's books for his staff and had an aide regularly consult him. Hanson, Cheney's "war guru", argued in his book *The Soul of Battle: From Ancient Times to the Present Day, How Three Great Liberators Vanquished Tyranny* that generals George Patton, William Tecumseh Sherman and Epaminondas of Thebes had correctly advocated the use of ruthless force to crush enemies. Hanson's and Cheney's views of the past won out in the present. Their views are still victorious, despite their awful consequences.

DuBois notes that 100 years ago, the German seminar system became the model for classical research for most of the 20th century. It is rightly, even humorously, characterised as a discipline based on "a sort of apostolic succession from such great men as Wilamowitz", a line of descent made manifest in scrupulous footnoting. Yet duBois cites approvingly Steve Nimis' view that "Wilamowitz's call for disinterested scholarship is neither more nor less ideological than Nietzsche's call for an all-out appropriation of the past". DuBois wisely recommends knowing, but avoiding, both extremes.

In her fifth chapter, "Slaves in the tragic city", duBois follows her own advice. She reconstructs vividly what the "omnipresence of slaves and the horror of enslavement" rooted in "social death, anonymity and ethnic difference" meant for free Athenian citizens watching the grim fates of the enslaved in tragedies such as the *Agamemnon*, *Hecuba* and *Trachiniae*. Citizens in Greek polis culture, after all, depended on omnipresent human beings in a state of slavery. She apologises, briefly, here for her traditional historicist approach.

If we are now part of an increasingly global culture, it behoves us to see Greek and Roman civilisations in a globalist light. DuBois calls on classical specialists to be tolerant of the inadequate grasp "crucial, influential, contemporary theorists" may have of ancient languages and technical scholarship, and to be open to their perspectives on the past, including their productive misreadings. And she demonstrates to all readers, without using mathemes, the important insights to be gained by such new ways of looking at classical culture and history.

THE AUTHOR

Page DuBois is distinguished professor of Classics and comparative literature at the [University of California, San Diego](#). She specialises in Greek, feminist theory, psychoanalysis and cultural studies.

DuBois says she started studying Greek after reading Sappho in translation but reveals that it wasn't her first choice of language: "I thought about Chinese, reading Li Po, but I had a fear of characters."

A PhD graduate of the [University of California, Berkeley](#), duBois is the author of texts including *Torture and Truth*, *Sappho Is Burning*, *Trojan Horses: Saving the Classics from Conservatives and Slaves and Other Objects*.

Her favourite books, however, aren't those of Homer and Ovid but instead come from a more modern source. She says of her reading habits: "I voraciously devour mystery novels by the likes of Margery Allingham."

Out of Athens: The New Ancient Greeks

By Page duBois

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