



*Ex Africa lux?*  
***Black Athena and the debate about Afrocentrism in the US***\*

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Writing about Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*<sup>1</sup> and its reception in the US is a formidable task. Few, if any scholars can claim competence on the numerous questions this book raises.<sup>2</sup> The prehistory of the Aegean world, Egyptology, Ancient Near Eastern Studies, Archeology, Linguistics, Classics, the history of philosophy and politics in Europe from antiquity to modern times, the history of scholarship—these are just some of the fields that Bernal touches. Hence, it was with some reluctance that I accepted the assignment to talk and write about this topic. The thought that the main part of my paper would not be about the assessment of Bernal's claims (about which more competent scholars have written extensively<sup>3</sup>), but rather about the fierce debate that his theses have triggered was small consolation because it meant I had to venture into fields I find even more alien, such as education and politics in the US. However, I believe that it is important for academics in Europe to learn more about this debate, not only because it has provoked such an immense amount of attention to the classical world but also because it can serve as an example for intellectual developments in the US which few Europeans know about. Moreover, I am convinced that it would be at our own risk, and to our own detriment, if we chose to ignore such developments or derided them as an American eccentricity that does not affect academics (and politics) in Europe. As I will try to show, we had better take these questions seriously since they are bound to be raised in Europe as well, and Classicists especially here in Germany have every reason to learn the lessons which this debate can teach us. Hence, although lacking the competence to speak authoritatively about all the questions involved, I have followed the discussion in scholarly and popular publications during a recent stay in the US, and I hope that an eye-witness account will be useful for intellectuals here in Europe.

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\* A number of friends and colleagues have shown interest in this article and have made many helpful suggestions. Josef Wiesehöfer talked me into writing it and supported me all the while. Ernst-Richard Schwinge offered helpful comments and let me use his collection of material on the history of scholarship. Gerhard Binder called my attention to some important contributions. And, last not least, Hartmut Leppin read an earlier version and made me rethink the arguments in the last section. I am indebted to all of them.

<sup>1</sup> Bernal [1987] and [1991]. References to these volumes will be given in parentheses.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Baines [1996] 42-3.

<sup>3</sup> See especially the articles in Lefkowitz/Rogers [1996] and Marchand/Grafton [1997].

My paper will be structured in three parts. Although this will not be (yet) another review of *Black Athena*, the first part will give a summary of Bernal's main theses and the scholarly reactions to them. In the second part, I will try to describe and analyze the wider implications of this academic debate. For many classicists, it was probably Bernal's book and the use that some quarters made of its conclusions which brought the phenomenon of Afrocentrism to their attention. Afrocentrism itself has to be understood within the wider context of American discussions about equal rights for and emancipation of ethnic minorities, especially African-Americans, multiculturalism and identity politics. I will try to analyze the ways in which the debate about *Black Athena* relates to these issues and to current political problems such as the controversies about affirmative action or curricula in history. Finally, I will give a (necessarily brief) outline of the importance this debate has for classicists in Europe, especially in Germany. I will argue that the society in our countries is bound to face similar problems with our own minorities and that we should try to avoid some of the mistakes which have exacerbated the controversy in the US. Finally, I will show that classicists in Germany have a special obligation to pursue the question raised by *Black Athena* whether our profession was and is influenced by racist assumptions.

#### An Outline of the Arguments of *Black Athena*

As Martin Bernal himself writes in the preface of the first volume of *Black Athena*, he was not trained as a classicist or Egyptologist (Bernal [1987] xii-xv). Prior to 1987, he had done work chiefly in the field of Chinese and East Asian studies and taught (and still teaches) at the department of Government at Cornell University, one of the renowned Ivy League schools. According to his own account, he developed an interest in the relations between Greek and Semitic languages in the second half of the seventies. Although he seems to have lectured on topics such as the development of early forms of Indo-European and Afroasiatic languages and the migration of the alphabet,<sup>4</sup> he had published very little on these topics. Accordingly, the publication of the first volume of *Black Athena* in 1987 was a big surprise to most scholars active in the fields of Egyptology, Classics and the history of ideas. This first volume began with a detailed outline of the argument of two more volumes to be published subsequently (Bernal [1987] 38-73). Volume 2 appeared four years later, in 1991. In it, Bernal announced that he had changed the original plan of his project and that *Black Athena* now was to comprise four volumes. So far,

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<sup>4</sup> Some of his unpublished papers are listed in the bibliography of Bernal [1987] 526; see the items Bernal 1980, 1983a and 1983b.

no further tomes have been published. Some of Bernal's critics concluded that he may have found the difficulties in producing the parts concerning the linguistic evidence (especially etymology) and the consequences of his theses for our view of ancient history so overwhelming that he simply abandoned the project. Yet the persistence with which Bernal has replied to almost every review and has participated in every debate about *Black Athena* suggests that he is still very interested in the subject and that he may still surprise everyone by publishing the third tome. However, in view of the fundamental critiques which he would have to take into account, this would be a difficult task.

The arguments in *Black Athena* can be divided into two main groups: on the one hand, Bernal treats the history of the last three millennia BCE in the whole Mediterranean, especially in Egypt and Greece, on the other hand, he is concerned with the history of historiography about these ancient Mediterranean cultures from the classical Greek period (fifth century BCE) to the present day. Although Bernal's theses about the history of the Mediterranean are mostly presented in the second volume, it is more convenient to begin with this part before looking at his contribution to the history of scholarship.

Bernal is convinced that the whole Mediterranean and especially Greece had experienced deep reaching and decisive Egyptian influence as early as the third millennium BCE. The earliest phases of this influence are most visible in Crete and in Boeotia. Although he does not assume large Egyptian colonies in mainland Greece at this point in time, Bernal is convinced that irrigation works in Boeotia (especially at lake Kopais) and other archeological remains show "that Egyptians were present in the regions in significant numbers" in the third millennium BCE (Bernal [1991] 146). Memory of this Egyptian influence has been preserved in the myths about Herakles, who is at once depicted as a Middle Kingdom pharaoh and a hydraulic engineer (Bernal [1991] 109-120). In Crete, Bernal sees proof of Egyptian influence in the bull cult which was adopted from Egypt in the 21st century BCE (Bernal [1991] 165-78); although "Egyptian rule or suzerainty over Crete and some of the islands at this time" cannot be proven, it is a plausible hypothesis (Bernal [1991] 185).

The next period of Egyptian influence is marked by the conquests of pharaoh Senwosre I, dated by Bernal to the 20th century BCE. Bernal assumes that this pharaoh should be identified with the Sesostris mentioned by the fifth-century BCE historian Herodotus (2.102-10) and the Sesosis mentioned by the first-century BCE writer Diodorus Siculus (1.53-58), and he accepts these

writers' accounts of his conquests. Sesostris led extensive military campaigns that took him to Palestine, Anatolia, Thrace, Scythia and even to the Caucasus (see the map Bernal [1991] 542), though not to Greece. Memory of these conquests has been preserved in the Greek legends of Dionysus/Osiris and of Memnon (Bernal [1991] 238-9, 257-69).

The most important phase of Egyptian expansion over the Mediterranean and especially Greece, however, was still to come. At some point in time, Lower Egypt was conquered by a foreign people "of unknown origin," as the Egyptian historian Manetho (third century BCE) wrote (quoted in Josephus, *Contra Apionem* 1.75 to *genos asêmoi*); these invaders came from the East and were called "Hyksos." It is difficult to give a precise date for this dramatic development because, as Bernal himself writes (Bernal [1991] 323), this "was one of the most confused periods of Egyptian history." Nevertheless, Bernal is confident that he can date this conquest to the 1740s or 1730s (Bernal [1991] 406) or the 1750s BCE (Bernal [1991] 323 and in the chart Bernal [1991] xxviii). Folk memory of the Hyksos conquest (and their later expulsion from Egypt) has been preserved in the Biblical story of Genesis and Exodus (Bernal [1991] 355-8). The ethnic makeup of the Hyksos as described by Bernal is a rather complicated matter. If I understand him correctly, he sees them as a "multinational corporation" (Bernal [1991] 345), the two oldest ingredients of which were Hurrians and Indo-Aryans (Bernal [1991] 346-8). They moved from their home in upper Mesopotamia into the Syro-Palestinian area in the 18th century BCE and there formed the warlike élite of what was a predominantly Semitic society. After that, they overran Egypt, adopting Egyptian civilization soon after their arrival. Very soon after this (around 1730, it would seem, see Bernal [1991] 364), the now "Indo-Aryan-Hurrian-Semitic-Egyptian" (Bernal [1991] 381) Hyksos again moved on to conquer Crete (where they established the Late Palatial society), the Cyclades and southern Greece (Bernal [1991] 406). The entire Mycenaean civilization, according to Bernal, should be interpreted as an amalgam of Levantine, Egyptian and Cretan elements imported by these Hyksos invaders who "established long-lasting heroic dynasties" (Bernal [1991] 405) and ruled large parts of Greece between 1720 and 1570 (Bernal [1991] 408). These new rulers founded "petty kingdoms following Cretan palatial bureaucratic customs and 'Hyksos' and native habits of frequent if not constant warfare with each other" (Bernal [1991] 449). Bernal is convinced that "it was from this society that not only the cultivation of the later Mycenaean palaces but also Greek language and culture—as they survive until today—first took shape" (Bernal [1991] 408). The extensive and intensive influence that Egypt exerted on Greece during this "formative period of Greek culture" (Bernal

[1991] 494) would warrant Bernal's assertion that "all Greek culture is permeated by Egyptian influence" (Bernal [1991] 266).

The Greek myths about the arrival of Kadmos and of Danaus preserve the memory of this Hyksos conquest (Bernal [1991] 501-4); however, the Greeks altered the historical facts in a significant way: they depicted Danaus not as a victorious conqueror, but as a refugee, thus intimating that the Hyksos only came to Greece after they had been expelled from Egypt. This distortion, according to Bernal, was due either to a desire to give "low dates" for any kind of events in order to appear "sober and reasonable" or to Greek patriotism which would find it less painful to accept the arrival of refugees than of conquerors (Bernal [1991] 364). It should be emphasized that the Hyksos conquest of large parts of the Mediterranean world within just one generation must have been one of the most remarkable feasts in human history—unfortunately, Bernal provides no details about the ways in which the immense logistical problems could be solved, and he does not explain how the Hyksos could adapt to the foreign civilizations they encountered with such amazing speed.<sup>5</sup> This adaptability, however, and the incredible swiftness with which the Hyksos moved help his argument a lot: whether he finds Anatolian, Levantine, Egyptian or Cretan artifacts or influences in Greece, Bernal can use any of these as proof of a Hyksos conquest (Bernal [1991] 406-7).

According to Bernal, the Hyksos were expelled from Egypt in the wake of the catastrophic consequences of the great volcanic eruption on the island of Thera, which he dates to 1628 BCE (Bernal [1991] 274-88). Nevertheless, close contacts between Egypt, the Levant, Crete, the Aegean islands and mainland Greece persisted during the next four centuries (albeit with some minor interruptions), mainly in "the form of state or private trading, certainly in luxuries and very probably in staples" (Bernal [1991] 447). During the expansion of Egyptian power in the 15th century under pharaoh Tuthmosis III, Egyptians seem to have claimed some sort of suzerainty over the Aegean (Bernal [1991] 434, 451), and this rule over large parts of the Mediterranean was "maintained by his successors for over a century" (Bernal [1991] 465). During this period, the Mycenaean civilization was only able to uphold its elaborate social structure and large populations because of Egyptian grain supplies (Bernal [1991] 485-7). Egyptian rule seems to have remained stable even as a new wave of immigrants from Anatolia, the Achaioi (whom Bernal identifies with the famous Ahhiyawa of Hittite texts), vanquished the Hyksos kings in southern Greece and established their own rule (Bernal [1991] 452-

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<sup>5</sup> On the alleged Hyksos invasion, see the remarks of Weinstein [1992] 382.

60). Bernal sees a memory of this conquest preserved in the Greek myths of the arrival of Pelops and his descendants from Asia and their victories over the Heraclids.

This relatively stable *Pax Aegyptiaca* began to disintegrate in the 13th century BCE when the balance of powers in the Mediterranean shifted and some empires (such as the Hittite) were destroyed. The entire Mycenaean civilization collapsed in this situation. At the end of his historical account of bronze-age Greece, Bernal gives a variety of reasons for this collapse (Bernal [1991] 520-1): "Mycenae was damaged firstly by local wars at Thebes and Troy and the subsequent dynastic feuds described in the epics and tragedies; secondly, by the breakdown of trade and civilization around the East Mediterranean after the Invasions of the Sea Peoples c. 1190 BC, with the consequent lack of the staples necessary for a specialized food-deficient economy. Thirdly, there were the migrations of northern Greek tribes around 1150 BC, which were possibly precipitated by the Hekla volcanic disaster."

Unusual as Bernal's picture of the early Mediterranean may seem, he claims that this view was universally accepted before the nineteenth century. The first volume of *Black Athena* provides an account of the history of this "Ancient Model" and its overturn by what Bernal labels the "Aryan Model." The first chapter argues that the Greeks of the classical and Hellenistic periods themselves knew about Egyptian colonization in the bronze ages. Greek sources claiming that Greek letters, philosophy, institutions and religion were imported from Egypt tell the truth; they are aware of these facts because of traditions whose origins can be traced back to the bronze ages. This view of Greek history remained unchanged until the Renaissance (Bernal [1987] 121): "[...] no one before 1600 seriously questioned either the belief that Greek civilization and philosophy derived from Egypt, or that the chief ways in which they had been transmitted were through Egyptian colonizations of Greece and later Greek study in Egypt." Many strains of Western religious and mystical traditions, such as Hermeticism, Kabbalistic mysticism, Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism or even some aspects of Christianity ultimately go back to Egyptian sources of the bronze age, transmitted via Greece.<sup>6</sup> The

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<sup>6</sup> Chapter 3 is an interesting, if not particularly original account of hermeticism and occultism during the Renaissance. Bernal succeeds in showing that these traditions have often been underrated and played down in order to produce a more rational, less strange picture of Renaissance intellectual history. However, the reader is left to wonder what exactly this account proves. Does Bernal really contend that all these Freemasons, Rosicrucians and magicians did indeed possess the wisdom of ancient Egyptian priesthoods, as they frequently claimed? Bernal never explicitly says so. If, on the other hand, this claim is fictitious, this whole section is a rather irrelevant digression.

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries even witnessed “The Triumph of Egypt,” as the heading of chapter 3 has it; scholars were convinced that Egypt had been an advanced civilization long before Greece and that the Greeks had derived their philosophy from Egyptian sources.

It was only in the second half of the eighteenth century that “Hostilities to Egypt” (heading of chapter 4) began. Bernal argues that four reasons were responsible for this change of attitude (Bernal [1987] 189): “Christian reaction, the rise of the concept of ‘progress,’ the growth of racism, and Romantic Hellenism.” Christianity could not accept claims that Egyptian religious traditions were older than the Hebrew Bible; the Protestant Reformation favored Greek studies and ultimately the superiority of Greek over Egyptian civilization (Bernal [1987] 190-5).<sup>7</sup> The concept of progress favored historical appreciation of societies that were supposed to be dynamic and developing and worked against Oriental civilizations, which were supposed to have been static and thus inferior. “[...] the introduction of the ‘progressive paradigm’ was ultimately fatal to the reputation of the Egyptians. Their antiquity—which had previously been one of their major assets—now became a liability” (Bernal [1987] 201). Romantic philhellenism, which had existed in the eighteenth century, was stimulated by the Greek War of Independence in the early nineteenth century, which was interpreted as “a continental struggle between Europe on the one hand, and Asia and Africa on the other” (Bernal [1987] 248). However, it was racism, together with European colonialism and racially motivated slavery, that was to prove most pernicious to the “Ancient Model.” The new racial “science” claimed to have scientific proofs for the assertion that Caucasian races were superior to all other human races. Scholars convinced of the validity of this view could not tolerate the assumption that “racially inferior” peoples such as Egyptians or other Africans could have exerted any deep reaching influence on Greece, the paragon of Western civilization, let alone have conquered and ruled large parts of Europe.

Hence, from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries, scholars attacked the “Ancient Model,” replacing it with the view that Greek civilization was by and large free from any outside influences and had been developed by an Indo-European people that had invaded Greece from the north during the late bronze age. According to Bernal, the development of this

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<sup>7</sup> Bernal remains somewhat vague on how Protestant interest in Greek language, literature and philosophy entailed disparaging Egyptian civilization; his statement (Bernal [1987] 194) “From using Greek to attack Roman Catholic superstition, it was not such a long step to employing it against Egyptian magic” is enigmatic rather than convincing.

new model was not due to new findings (such as the discovery of Sanskrit and the decipherment of cuneiform scripts), but “the destruction of the old model took place entirely for what historians of science call ‘externalist’ reasons. The Ancient Model fell not because of any new developments in the field but because it did not fit the prevailing world-view. To be more precise, it was incompatible with the paradigms of race and progress of the early 19th century” (Bernal [1987] 316). Ancient sources containing accounts of Egyptian colonization and the Egyptian origin of Greek religion and philosophy were discredited, not least because of the newly developed methods of historical positivism, the most important of which was source criticism (Bernal [1987] 217-8). Bernal sees source criticism as merely a form of arrogant *Besserwissen* (which, incidentally, is not a German word: we speak of “besser wissen” or of “Besserwisserei,” the noun “Besserwissen” does not exist): blinded by their ideological prejudices, the moderns think they “know better” than the ancients.

The new “Aryan Model,” as Bernal calls it, was constantly being modified and fine-tuned, yet the basic tenor remained the same throughout. According to Bernal, there was a tendency to derive a maximum of Greek words from Sanskrit precursors and to deny the massive borrowings from Egyptian and Semitic languages which he claims to have detected. Egyptian cultural influence was minimized. For a while, scholars accepted that the Phoenicians had played an important role in the development of Greek civilization, especially because “many Victorians had a positive feeling towards the Phoenicians as sober cloth merchants who did a little bit of slaving on the side and spread civilization while making a tidy profit” (Bernal [1987] 350). Yet with growing anti-Semitism at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, scholars insisted more and more forcefully that the Phoenician influence had come late in the development of Greek civilization and had had a very limited impact. Bernal calls this process “The final solution of the Phoenician problem” (heading of chapter 9).

Although the Aryan Model has become so entrenched that it now works as what Thomas Kuhn described as a scientific paradigm (Bernal [1991] 11-2), Bernal is confident that it is “untenable and that the Ancient Model will be restored at some point in the early 21st century” (Bernal [1987] 402). His own work could then be seen as ahead of its time. Bernal is certain that “much of contemporary work on the archaeology and ancient history of the East Mediterranean will have to be rethought” (Bernal [1991] 527), and he promises that the next volume to be published will be even more

revolutionary than the first two tomes (Bernal [1991] 527): “[...] the ‘outrages’ in this book are nothing to those I propose for the next volume [...]”

### The Scholarly Reception of *Black Athena*

So much for a short summary of Bernal’s arguments. Given the normal delays in scholarly publishing, the academic debate started almost immediately—insinuations by Bernal himself (Bernal [1991] xx-xxi) that some sort of conspiracy tried to suppress attention to his book are clearly unfounded.<sup>8</sup> In 1989, a discussion on “The Challenge of *Black Athena*: The Classicists’ Response” was sponsored as the presidential panel at the 120th meeting of the American Philological Association; the proceedings were published the same year in a special issue of the journal *Arethusa*.<sup>9</sup> In 1990, an issue of the *American Journal of Archaeology* comprised a number of articles on the book and the questions it raises. The most extended, if one-sided treatment so far has been the collection of responses and reactions in Lefkowitz/Rogers [1996]. The overwhelming majority of academic responses to Bernal’s book, while acknowledging its importance as a catalyst of renewed interest in the questions it raises, pointed out that its main theses were deeply flawed. What follows is just a selection of the most serious critical objections raised against *Black Athena*.

- The part of Bernal’s arguments that has met with almost unanimous disapproval was his linguistic evidence, especially his Egyptian etymologies for numerous Greek nouns and names. Critics pointed out that his supposed derivations are most often based on nothing but vague resemblances. Even if we admit that (conscious or unconscious) prejudice has led earlier scholars to underestimate the real number of Semitic borrowings and that conclusive proof cannot be attained in the slippery field of etymology,<sup>10</sup> it remains true that Bernal disregards the most elementary rules of linguistic developments. Accordingly, the judgment of trained linguists is harsh:<sup>11</sup> “No effort is made to go beyond the realm of appearances; known and inferable facts about the history of individual forms are systematically ignored, misrepresented, or

<sup>8</sup> Cf. McNeal [1993] 151 and Coleman [1996] 291: Bernal’s “claims of victimization act as a sort of preemptive strike against potential criticism; readers who even mildly disagree with some points may be reluctant to risk possible charges of racism for speaking out.”

<sup>9</sup> Peradotto/Levine [1989].

<sup>10</sup> Burkert [1992] 33-40.

<sup>11</sup> Jasanoff/Nussbaum [1996]; cf. Burstein [1993] 158 or Assmann [1992] 926.

suppressed.” Bernal’s linguistic evidence, which he himself says is a keystone of his argument (Bernal [1987] 62), is thus void.

- Bernal’s use of ancient documents, especially of Greek mythological narratives, is deeply flawed. On the one hand, his construction of an “ancient model” of Egyptian colonization and influence in which “the Greeks” are said to have believed, is simplifying to the point of misleading readers unacquainted with the sources. Greek beliefs about the origin of their own culture were various and contradictory, and different authors or groups constructed versions that fit their individual argumentative needs.<sup>12</sup> Bernal’s method consists in arbitrarily taking into account only versions that seem to support his thesis and disregarding conflicting ones. This becomes particularly clear in the case of Danaus, whose myth is fundamental to Bernal’s argument. Bernal often mentions that “the Greeks” told stories about Danaus’s flight from Egypt, his arrival in Argos and his accession to the throne (Bernal [1987] 75-98; 2.137-8, 502-4 and *passim*). He interprets this myth as preserving memories of a Hyksos colonization of Greece. However, he fails to mention that in these narratives, Danaus is of Greek descent: he is a great-great-grandson of Io, daughter of the Argive king Inachus. In Aeschylus’s tragedy *The Suppliants*, Danaus and his daughters emphasize this Greek origin to support their claim for protection from the king of Argos (274-326, see especially 274-5 “To cut a long story short: we claim to be of Argive extraction”). Bernal’s partial summary of the myth is thus deceptive.<sup>13</sup>
- This selective use of ancient documents demonstrates the absurdity of Bernal’s polemic against nineteenth-century source criticism, which he often (e.g., Bernal [1987] 118, 377; 2.200, 237, 308, 309) disparages as *Besserwissen*. Bernal goes so far as to assert that “the cultural, racial and temporal arrogance or *Besserwissen* of the critical method [...] has been a bane to the writing of history ever since” the early nineteenth century (Bernal [1987] 306). Yet Bernal himself obviously cannot accept the totality of the ancient documents;<sup>14</sup> he has to differentiate between what he deems more or less credible, or, as he would probably say, more or

<sup>12</sup> Hall [1992] 341; cf. Green [1989], Gordon [1993] and Burstein [1993] 161.

<sup>13</sup> Hall [1992] 338-9, Lefkowitz [1997] 18-20. Cf. also Bernal’s partial citation of Euripides *Phoenician Women* at Bernal [1991] 507. In Bernal [1992], he just attempts to obfuscate the issue.

<sup>14</sup> Bernal [1991] 404: “Although I have a great respect for the historical knowledge and judgement of the Greeks in Classical and Hellenistic times, I do not believe that they were infallible.”

less useful to his argument. He lays strong emphasis on the myth of Danaus, which he interprets as pointing to an Egyptian origin of Greek culture, yet he virtually ignores the myth of Pelops, who was described as coming from Asia minor and would thus symbolize “that Greece was colonized from the northwest corner of the Asiatic seaboard.”<sup>15</sup> When ancient sources do not fit his argument, Bernal is ready to criticize them in the spirit of *Besserwisserei* that he usually decries. For instance, the Egyptian historian Manetho is said to have “garbled” and “confused” several pharaohs (Bernal [1991] 196); his account is said to be “internally inconsistent and of only very limited value for this period” (Bernal [1991] 325); the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus is said to have misunderstood Herodotus’s account because of its linguistic ambiguity (Bernal [1991] 202)—thus Bernal believes he knows Greek better than a native speaker of the language.<sup>16</sup> Hence, Bernal’s critics are indubitably right when they denounce his repudiation of source criticism and historical methodologies as self-contradictory.<sup>17</sup> What his strategy amounts to is a return to the uncritical antiquarianism of earlier historians and a collection of fragments which suit the present purpose while everything else is neglected.<sup>18</sup>

- These flaws are especially prominent in Bernal’s treatment of myths as historical sources. In general, he seems entirely convinced that myths can be read as reliable traditions of historical events and social structures,<sup>19</sup> and he is inclined to accept even late sources: e.g., Bernal [1991] 173 a passage in the Greek writer Aelian (second century CE) is said to preserve correct information about a cult of the fourth millennium BCE, an “instructive example of the strength and durability of traditions over this huge expanse of time.”<sup>20</sup> When it is more convenient for his argument, however, Bernal dismisses Greek traditions because “the Greeks had no long-term cultural memory”

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<sup>15</sup> Hall [1992] 347 n. 2. She rightly points out this omission; however, Bernal mentions Pelops a few times in passing, e.g., Bernal [1987] 365, 491 n. 109 or Bernal [1991] 45, 446-7, 452-6. As Assmann [1992] 924 rightly remarks, the omission is symptomatic for Bernal’s overall neglect of the “orientalizing period” of archaic Greece.

<sup>16</sup> For further examples see Tritle [1992] 304-5.

<sup>17</sup> Tritle [1992] 305.

<sup>18</sup> See Liverani [1996] 424-5.

<sup>19</sup> Against this view, see McNeal [1993] 144-5.

<sup>20</sup> In this, as Baines [1996] 40 rightly remarks, Bernal curiously follows “older classicists in assuming that the Greeks were a people with quite special qualities.”

(Bernal [1991] 319). Again, the absence of any historical methodology makes for an ahistorical eclecticism that has only rhetorical value.<sup>21</sup>

- Bernal's treatment of modern scholarship is as indiscriminate as his use of ancient documents. His sweeping generalizations ignore the discussions, controversies and doubts of historians, philologists, archeologists and philosophers about the origin and originality of Greek culture that had existed at almost every period of European scholarship. Neither was the "Ancient Model" as undisputed before the nineteenth century as Bernal implies, nor did all Europeans after 1800 accept the claims of "racial science" or believe in the inferiority of non-whites. It is certainly true that Bernal's "failure to recognize this variety"<sup>22</sup> is a serious flaw of *Black Athena*. His own first-hand knowledge of the most important texts of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European historiography, philosophy and political theory is so meager that his generalizations rest on very shaky ground.<sup>23</sup> Hence, Marchand/Grafton are justified in their harsh judgment about his contribution to the history of scholarship: "Bernal simply has not done enough work to deserve respect or attention as a historian of European thought about the ancient world. The ability to make noise entitles no one to a hearing, and up to now, Bernal has made noise, not historical argument."<sup>24</sup> This is especially true in the field of classical studies. It is simply not true that scholars have been as stubborn in their refusal to acknowledge Oriental influences on Greek culture as Bernal thinks they have been. Suffice it to mention just a few: F. Dornseiff in Germany, W. Burkert in Switzerland and M. L. West in Great Britain have been publishing well-known works about the interrelations between Middle-

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Assmann [1992] 922. See also Bernal's treatment of the myth of the Seven against Thebes (Bernal [1991] 459; repeated at 512 with n. 87): On the one hand, he states that these narratives "have so many mythic characteristics it is hard to believe in their historicity or base substantial historical constructions upon them"; on the other hand, he sees "no reason to doubt that there were two sieges of Thebes in the 13th century and that some of the heroes involved were historical figures and that the second siege ended in the city's destruction."

<sup>22</sup> Palter [1996] 359.

<sup>23</sup> As he acknowledges himself, see Bernal [1989] 26-7: "[...] it is perfectly true that I relied very heavily on secondary sources when treating the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century historians. [...] Obviously, I was skating on very thin ice over huge areas."

<sup>24</sup> Marchand/Grafton [1997] 3. For further negative evaluations of Bernal's arguments about the history of scholarship, see Turner [1989], Palter [1996], Norton [1996]; Jenkyns [1996], Stray [1997] 231.

and Near-Eastern cultures and Greece for a long time.<sup>25</sup> If these scholars do not see Egypt as a decisive influence on Greece,<sup>26</sup> this is certainly not due to any kind of prejudice, let alone racism, but reflects the evidence of our archeological, historical, and literary documents.

- Lastly, Bernal never states clearly whether his “Aryan Model” is due to a vast, worldwide conspiracy of classicists with the aim of suppressing the truth about the origin of ancient Greek culture or whether earlier scholars were merely influenced by the prejudices and beliefs of their times without actively manipulating the evidence. We will see shortly that Bernal’s failure to make this crucial distinction is not coincidental—rather, it amounts to a demagogic manipulation of his readers.

### The Background: Afrocentrism in the US

From the beginning, the scholarly debate about the argument and methodology of *Black Athena* had been accompanied by an intensive discussion in media aimed at wider audiences, such as the *New York Review of Books*, the *New Statesman*, or even the *Village Voice*. Initially, this debate was restricted to typical highbrow or middlebrow publications, but before long, a genuine craze set in. This was especially sensible after Mary Lefkowitz, who teaches Classics at Wellesley College, took up Bernal’s challenge and published her own reactions to Bernal’s book and related tendencies. Two articles in the *New Republic* and the *Wall Street Journal* in 1992 and 1993 started the controversy. The media were eager to transform what had begun as a scholarly discussion into an epic battle that was to be another chapter of the ongoing “culture wars” in the US. The real frenzy started when Lefkowitz published her book *Not Out of Africa* in 1996 and co-edited *Black Athena Revisited*; Bernal reviewed both books several times. Almost every major paper ran stories on the debate, there were programs on local and national TV and radio stations. When the publisher Harper Collins staged a debate between Bernal and Lefkowitz on the internet in April 1996, “some 2,200 people

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<sup>25</sup> See Dornseiff [1959], Burkert [1992], West [1971] and West [1997]. This is just a very small and subjective sample; many more books and articles could have been quoted; cf. Burstein [1994] 13-4.

<sup>26</sup> See also Morris [1989], who, on archeological grounds, argues for Levantine rather than Egyptian influence.

immediately signed up and have been deluging the discussion list"<sup>27</sup> with their contributions.

Although part of this enormous interest can be attributed to media hype, the genuine basis of the passion lies in the fact that *Black Athena* and the debate it triggered bear upon a subject which has never ceased to be of interest in American society, namely the relations between blacks and whites. Moreover, the question how history ought to be taught in schools and colleges and what kind of history should be taught has been on the political agenda for some time. Bernal's book, with its imposing bibliography, its scholarly notes and its Egyptian hieroglyphics, epitomized much of a debate which had been going on for a long time. A number of black writers had made similar claims since the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>28</sup> One of the first was Marcus Mosiah Garvey (1887-1940), who claimed that "Greece and Rome have robbed Egypt of her arts and letters"<sup>29</sup> in a number of articles published in the 20s. The most influential account was published in 1954 by George G. M. James, a college teacher in Arkansas.<sup>30</sup> Another important author is the Senegalese scholar Cheikh Anta Diop, who has published a number of books in French which attempt to demonstrate that Western civilization originated in Africa; some of them have been translated into English.<sup>31</sup> The main thrust of these books can be summed up in a few sentences: philosophy and science were invented by the Egyptians, a black people from Africa that had libraries and universities long before any Europeans had achieved such accomplishments. The Greeks learned from them and stole this Egyptian legacy. This historical fact has been systematically denied by a conspiracy of white historians (Napoleon even had the sphinx's nose shot off to conceal that it had a black face<sup>32</sup>), yet it continues to be remembered in the folk traditions of black people. Modern Afrocentrists have made it their task to unearth this hidden history. They claim to have found out that the Egyptians used electricity and airplanes,<sup>33</sup> and they demand that their view of Egyptian history be taught in schools and universities.

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<sup>27</sup> Editorial "New Spaces, Old Debates," *The Washington Post*, April 29, 1996, A16. The archives of the debate, at [www.harpercollins.com/news/news.htm#athena](http://www.harpercollins.com/news/news.htm#athena) appear to have been deleted by Harper Collins.

<sup>28</sup> See the account in Lefkowitz [1997] 122-54.

<sup>29</sup> As quoted in Lefkowitz [1997] 132.

<sup>30</sup> James [1954].

<sup>31</sup> E.g., Diop [1991].

<sup>32</sup> Roth [1996] 324, cf. Shipler [1997] 210-1.

<sup>33</sup> See Martel [1994] 40.

Scholars have repeatedly pointed out that accounts such as those by James, Garvey, and Diop are marred by numerous factual errors that make them worthless as historical scholarship. For instance, claims that Socrates studied in Egypt and was initiated into the “Egyptian Mystery System” are refuted by ancient testimonies: Plato states that Socrates never left Athens, except on military campaigns against Greek cities.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, these errors are still being repeated: in a talk he delivered at Wellesley College in February 1993, Yosef A. A. ben-Jochannan asserted that Aristotle had plundered the library at Alexandria which contained the books of Egyptian philosophy.<sup>35</sup> Of course, this library was not founded before the end of the fourth century BCE, at least 20 years after Aristotle’s death. Yet adherents to the theories delineated above claim that the entire methodology and the standards of historical research are a result of the white conspiracy that tries to lower black self-esteem by robbing blacks of their history and their identity.

Whoever encounters such theories for the first time will probably be taken aback and tend to react with impatience. It is difficult to analyze this belief in a universal conspiracy, this insistence on being a victim of dark forces in a rational, dispassionate manner. And yet, this is what we have to do. Even if these assumptions do not hold water, they have to be taken seriously as expressions of a widespread social malaise. Hence, it is important to grasp the causes of this distrust. People outside of the US often know too little about the recent history of blacks in America to reach this understanding. Therefore, I will give a very short summary of this history.

### The Origins of Afrocentrist Ideas: Race Relations in the US

The end of the Civil War in 1865 and the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution abolished slavery in all states of the Union. The Fourteenth (1868) and Fifteenth (1870) Amendments granted the former slaves equal civil rights, especially the right to vote. However, large parts of the white ruling élites in the Southern states resented these laws and were not willing to accept the new circumstances. They adopted so-called “Black Codes” that refused blacks the civil rights guaranteed by the Constitution. In order to establish control over the former Confederate States, Congress placed the South under military command. This period, which is known as “Reconstruction,” came to an end in 1877.<sup>36</sup> Southern States soon returned to

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<sup>34</sup> Lefkowitz [1997] 144-5.

<sup>35</sup> Lefkowitz [1997] 2.

<sup>36</sup> See Foner [1988].

their antebellum policies. Racial segregation perpetuated the predominance of whites in every part of social, economical and political life. "Jim Crow" laws (the term is derived from a derogatory name for black people) inflicted outrageous humiliations on black citizens, segregating schools, parks, cemeteries, theaters and restaurants, denying blacks voting privileges and reducing them to the role of second-class beings.<sup>37</sup> As late as 1896, the Supreme Court upheld the system of "separate but equal" facilities (*Plessy v. Ferguson*). In reality, however, segregated schools or other public institutions offered no equal opportunities; instead, they clearly were a form of discrimination.

Black activists had begun to fight racial segregation soon after World War II. They achieved a number of important legal victories, the most important being *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (May 17, 1954), in which the Supreme Court reversed its decision of 1896 and ruled that segregated schools violated the Fourteenth Amendment. Yet the white establishment, especially in the Southern states, was still unwilling to grant blacks equal rights. The following years witnessed the long, bitter and often violent struggle of reactionary and racist whites against desegregation. To quote just one famous example: in September 1957, the governor of Arkansas, Orval E. Faubus, obstructed a federal court order for integration of a high school in the state capital, Little Rock, and did not give up his resistance until President Dwight D. Eisenhower dispatched 1,000 federal troops to Arkansas. Segregation was formally abolished under President Lyndon B. Johnson with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Yet the Civil Rights Movement had to pay dearly for this final victory: many of its members and activists had been imprisoned, mistreated by the police and angry whites, or even killed (such as Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 4, 1968). And cities and communities throughout the countries fought many years against the laws ordering integration. To an extent, the US is still trying to finish the process that has been begun with the Civil Rights Act.<sup>38</sup>

Disappointment about this slow progress made several black leaders skeptical of the non-violent methods of the Civil Rights Movement. These disappointed activists such as Malcolm X made "black nationalism" and "black power" their rallying cry. They regarded whites as their enemies and were convinced that blacks would never be able to escape from discriminations unless they had a culture, perhaps even a nation of their own. These activists considered the historical myths of black thinkers such as

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<sup>37</sup> See Litwack [1998].

<sup>38</sup> See Higham [1997].

James or Garvey a welcome instrument to bolster black self-esteem. It is from these circles that the pseudo-histories spread and were accepted as truth by blacks whose distrust of the white government had grown into huge dimensions.

Yet, the long struggle for equal rights and the stubborn resistance of many whites affected even the larger part of the black population that was not willing to draw such radical conclusions. For many years, they had experienced a system of justice and law enforcement dominated by white élites that deprived them of their rights and treated them as inferiors. As Randall Kennedy has argued in a recent book, this experience contributed enormously to the feeling shared by many blacks that politics, laws, the courts and the police are merely instruments of white domination.<sup>39</sup>

For a long time, criminal law—not simply the biased administration of law but the law itself—was the enemy of African-Americans. In many places, for several generations, it was a crime for blacks to learn to read, to flee enslavement, or to defend themselves, their families, or their friends from physical abuse. It was a crime, in sum, for blacks, to do all sorts of things deemed to be permissible or admirable when done by others. More recently, during the civil rights era, African-Americans violated criminal laws (although many of these “laws” were subsequently invalidated) to uproot the Jim Crow system. That is why so many African-Americans lionized in black communities have had “criminal” records. The list includes Martin Luther King, Jr., Robert Moses, Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, and John Lewis. By using the criminal law against these and others involved in resisting racial oppression, officials have destabilized the moral meaning of conforming to law and violating it.

It is obvious why conspiracy theories are attractive in such a climate. They are a way of explaining, and thus making more tolerable, the powerlessness many blacks feel when they think of these hostile institutions. And who can claim that all these conspiracies are mere figments of the imagination? It is hard to imagine what pathological hatred drove the then director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, J. Edgar Hoover; it is hard to believe the passion with which he attempted to destroy the life and achievements of Martin Luther King, Jr. And yet, this conspiracy was all too real: Hoover really had a letter sent to King which suggested he commit suicide and failed to

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<sup>39</sup> Kennedy [1997] 26.

warn him of plots against his life.<sup>40</sup> Other cases are more difficult to assess. I will quote two examples. In his book on blacks in the criminal system, Michael Tonry quotes a study showing that “in Georgia [...] blacks who killed whites were [...] twenty-two times more likely to be sentenced to death than were blacks who killed blacks.”<sup>41</sup> Is it possible to deny that racist prejudices play an important part in this variance? Federal law in the US requires judges to treat the possession of one gram of crack cocaine as equivalent to the possession of one hundred grams of powder cocaine. While defendants in cases involving crack cocaine are almost invariably black, powder cocaine used to be the fashionable drug for (predominantly white) rich yuppies.<sup>42</sup> Crack is hardly a hundred times more dangerous than powder cocaine. Is the legal disparity between the two drugs an example of racist legislation? Legal experts deny this accusation.<sup>43</sup> Yet it is easy to see why many blacks believe it is true, and why they accept even more outlandish allegations.<sup>44</sup>

[...] large percentages of black Americans see contemporary crime and drug policies as a near-genocidal effort by whites to control blacks. [...] A *New York Times*/WCBS-TV poll in 1990 found that 29 percent of blacks (only 5 percent of whites) thought it was true or might be true that the HIV virus was “deliberately created in a laboratory to infect black people,” that 60 percent (16 percent of whites) believed it was true or might be true that government makes drugs available “in poor black neighborhoods in order to harm black people,” and that 77 percent of blacks believed the government “singles out and investigates black officials to discredit them.”

It is easy to see why the climate of the fifties and sixties fostered belief in such theories. Kennedy’s observation that large numbers of blacks are alienated from the entire legal and political values of the American society explains the almost visceral distrust that many blacks feel towards the standards of the white majority. The traumatic consequences of this distrust can be observed almost every day. When lawsuits pit blacks against whites, public opinion is often sharply divided along color lines. This was especially visible in the highly publicized case of the black football star O. J. Simpson who was

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<sup>40</sup> The chilling account of Hoover’s machinations can now be found in Branch [1998] 528-9, 556-7; cf. Garrow [1981].

<sup>41</sup> See Tonry [1995] 42, cf. Kennedy [1997] 328-50.

<sup>42</sup> Tonry [1995] 41; Shipler [1997] 379-81.

<sup>43</sup> See Kennedy [1997] 364-86.

<sup>44</sup> Tonry [1995] 38.

accused of having killed his (white) wife and was acquitted in October 1995,<sup>45</sup> but other cases, which are less well known outside of the US, gave evidence of the same pattern of race loyalty. In 1990, Marion Barry, mayor of Washington, D. C., was caught smoking crack cocaine, yet a majority of blacks thought he had been framed by white officials; he was reelected mayor in 1994. In 1987, Tawana Brawley, a black woman, claimed she had been raped by seven white men; although a grand jury decided that her story was untrue, many blacks still are convinced that she told the truth.<sup>46</sup> The most violent effects of this calamitous situation occurred in 1992. After white policemen who had mistreated a black man were acquitted by a predominantly white jury, several days of furious rioting shook the city of Los Angeles.<sup>47</sup> Many blacks considered the trial and the acquittal unfair and saw their deepest suspicions about hidden racism in the legal system confirmed. And it would be difficult to claim that they had been entirely wrong: images of the extreme brutality that the police had used had been caught on videotape and broadcast all over the country. Accordingly, a second trial with a racially less uniform jury brought about the conviction of the accused. The conclusion that racism had been an important factor in the decision the first jury had reached was difficult to resist. And of course, such decisions bring back memories of the scandalous injustices in the American legal system during the Jim Crow era.<sup>48</sup>

It is understandable that this black distrust extends to standards in the sciences and in scholarship as well as to the legal and political system. For the underprivileged, all of these are just instruments controlled and manipulated by "the establishment," instruments whose design it is to oppress and intimidate those who are not part of the élite. Again, those who speak of the eternal truths and objective criteria of scientific and scholarly research should be aware that this distrust cannot be dismissed out of hand. Not too long ago, "objective" research and "racial science" were used to prove "irrefutably" the inferiority of all non-white races. Scholars working in these fields and drawing these conclusions were as convinced of the validity of their work as those who today declare that these enterprises should not be regarded as scientific research at all and that their results are void. Especially people whose own education in such matters is only superficial find it difficult to understand why they should trust the results of today's scholars any more than those of yesterday. Unfortunately, great numbers of blacks in

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<sup>45</sup> Much ink has been spilled on the O. J. Simpson case; I give only a few references: Kennedy [1997] 286-92; Shipler [1997] 395-401, esp. 397: "In general, two-thirds of whites thought Simpson was guilty, and two-thirds of blacks thought he was innocent."

<sup>46</sup> On these and similar cases see Kennedy [1997] 7-8, 24-6; Shipler [1997] 324-7.

<sup>47</sup> See Shipler [1997] 387-91.

<sup>48</sup> See Kennedy [1997] 41-69.

the US still belong to this group because for economic and social reasons, they are denied equal access to the educational system.

### The Teaching of History and Identity Politics

One field in which the argument about accepted standards and the distrust of conventional criteria has been especially strong is the study of history. Black intellectuals have been pointing to historical research and the teaching of history in schools as an instrument to subjugate blacks for a long time. In a book first published in 1933, the black historian Carter G. Woodson (1875-1950) writes, "The educated Negroes have the attitude of contempt toward their own people because [...] Negroes are taught to admire the Hebrew, the Greek, the Latin, and the Teuton and to despise the African."<sup>49</sup> If black children, the argument goes, see their ancestors in their history classes at all, it will be as victims; hence, they cannot but feel inferior. It is thus a reasonable demand that blacks be given their due share in history textbooks. They should be shown not just as victims and objects, but as subjects of history, and their contribution to American and world history ought to be appreciated so that black students can be proud of their own tradition and have their own heroes and role models. A black, African Egypt<sup>50</sup> and the contributions it made to human civilization are one important part of this effort to enhance black self-esteem.

Is it possible to insist that such historical accounts are untrue and that they should not be taught, given the bleak conditions of life of large numbers of the black population, given the poverty, violence and crime that many blacks have to face every day? Somebody holding the view that such myths ought to be banned from schools can easily be perceived as a nitpicker, a pure academic who sits in his ivory tower and has lost touch with the realities of everyday life. Let's be honest. Suppose that teaching Afrocentrist myths in schools could save a mere ten or even five percent of black youths from social decline, poverty and crime. In this case, who could presume to ban these

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<sup>49</sup> Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, quoted in Shipler [1997] 208; cf. Early [1994] 14. Similar views can be found in an essay written by Garvey in 1923, see the quotation in Lefkowitz, [1996] 7.

<sup>50</sup> It should be mentioned that Egyptians are not always happy with this picture, see the reaction of Egypt's cultural emissary to the US in 1988: "This is an Egyptian heritage and an Egyptian civilization 100 percent. We are part of the African continent. We cannot say by any means that we are black or white. We are Egyptian, with our culture and traditions and religions"; quoted in Levine [1989] 11 n. 3; cf. Roth [1996] 315.

myths and instead teach the historical truth?<sup>51</sup> Moreover, we have to admit that often, it would be irresponsible to answer for the absolute accuracy of this truth, given the scarce and frequently ambiguous documents which we have to interpret.

However, we have to ask whether the underlying presupposition is valid. The mechanism of influencing the thought and behavior of contemporary society by manipulating their perception of the past is not a new invention. When Plato thought about his ideal state in the fourth century BCE, he already made use of this instrument. The guards and all citizens of his state have to be persuaded that the earth brought them forth and that they are all brothers and sisters.<sup>52</sup> This “noble lie” will teach them to fight for their state and for each other. Yet Plato’s use of this means highlights the problems it entails. Applying this method is possible only in a strictly hierarchical society such as Plato’s ideal community, in which a small group of philosophers has seen truth itself and the highest good. These sages, then, are allowed to use this noble lie because they have absolute, certain knowledge of what is best for the state and for its citizens. In a democratic society, on the other hand, such a manipulation of history is extremely problematic. A democracy is based on rational and open discussion and on the idea that different opinions in society ought to be mediated via debate, compromise and voting. Assuming that some members of the body politic have more knowledge and accordingly a right to manipulate their fellow citizens is suitable for totalitarian societies only.

Therefore, critics of Afrocentrist teaching have time and again asked what will happen when young people who have been brought up in this fictitious tradition some day discover that they have been told myths, not history. Will this discovery bolster their self-esteem?<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, we have to question whether the goal of strengthening blacks’ self-image can be achieved this way. As Nathan Glazer writes, “What little evidence we have on the correlation between self-esteem and educational achievement is murky and

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<sup>51</sup> Cf. the thoughtful remarks of Ray [1997] 3-4.

<sup>52</sup> Plato, *State* 414 b-e. This passage had already been adduced by Lefkowitz [1996] 21.

<sup>53</sup> See Jenkyns [1998] 52: “There are good, high-minded arguments against the fabrication of the past: we think it contrary to our dignity to shy away from the truth, and it is surely condescending to other peoples to suppose that they cannot manage without the consolations of self-deception. But if high-mindedness fails to persuade, perhaps we can appeal to enlightened self-interest. One simple argument against heritage myths is that in the long run, they do not work: you cannot fool people all of the time; you have to shout ever louder to obscure the voice of doubt, and the angeriness of much nationalist rhetoric is the angeriness of fear.”

inconclusive.”<sup>54</sup> Not only is the intrinsic functioning of this process questionable, there is also every reason to suspect that the fierce debate about the teaching of history is a mere pretense. Concentrating on such issues helps politicians avoid the real problems that are at stake: the untenable economical and social conditions many blacks (and whites) still have to cope with. Yet after the “conservative revolution” of the eighties, it has become increasingly unpopular in the US to face such concrete problems when it is so much more convenient to point a finger at symbols with strong emotional appeal.<sup>55</sup> Unfortunately, some blacks have been taken in by this strategy. However, K. Anthony Appiah, who teaches philosophy and African-American Studies at Harvard University, is certainly right to point out, “No amount of knowledge of the architectural achievements of Nubia or Kush guarantees respect for African-Americans. No African-American is entitled to greater concern because he is descended from a people who created jazz or produced Toni Morrison. Culture is not the problem, and it is not the solution.”<sup>56</sup>

Despite such calls to remain cool-headed, the question of how history should be taught in American high schools and colleges has been the field of one of the fiercest battles in these “culture wars.” In the sixties, civil rights activists scrutinized the textbooks that were used to teach history, and they found that they tended to suppress the achievements of ethnic or religious minorities and of women. There can be no doubt that history as it was taught in American (and, for that matter, European) schools gave a distorted vision by privileging the white male view. Conservative thinkers often seem to imply that all the modern fuss about such matters will only serve to lower standards and teach myths instead of hard facts. However, Alexander Stille, in a recent review of history textbooks, rightly argues against a nostalgic vision of the teaching of history in past decades:<sup>57</sup>

Before we bemoan the decline of American history textbooks [...] we must recall how biased almost all children’s history books were until

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<sup>54</sup> Glazer [1997] 54; cf. Chavez [1994] 5-6; Early [1994] 14-5.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Gates [1989]: “[...] it sometimes seems that blacks are doing better in the college curriculum than they are in the streets or even on the campuses.” A similar point is made by Levine [1992a] 453. She writes about the “stolen-legacy-approach”: “Thus the story is told in terms that channel contemporary frustrations and anger away from their proper objects toward imagined despoilment in classical antiquity.” See also Walker [1994] 35-6. Cf. Lilla [1998] 4-7, who compares the “cultural revolution” during the sixties and the “economic revolution” during the eighties and concludes: “the cultural and Reagan revolution took place within a single generation and have proved to be complementary, not contradictory.”

<sup>56</sup> Appiah [1997] 36.

<sup>57</sup> Stille [1998] 18.

about thirty years ago. [...] there was never a golden age of textbooks. [...] practically all of them are openly biased and extremely narrow in their historical range. [...] The Indians are often referred to as 'savages' who had to make way for civilization. Some books take a tolerant view of slavery, portraying Reconstruction as a time of black corruption and disorder, and praising the rise of the Ku Klux Klan.

Yet he also warns against going too far to the other extreme: "That a black man was among the first to die in the American Revolution is certainly worth attention; so is the fact that he had been ignored by previous textbooks. But the heavy emphasis on Crispus Attucks to the neglect of other important figures is a classic example of the current tendency to political orthodoxy and homogeneity."

It is indubitably justified to demand that hitherto neglected groups such as ethnic minorities, women or the working classes be given their legitimate share, that their part of history be mentioned and analyzed, and most American textbooks now attempt to right past wrongs by emphasizing the historical role of blacks and native Americans, by telling not only "history," but also "herstory." European colonization is no longer seen as an altogether glorious achievement, and different perspectives are acknowledged. None but the most extreme conservative critics would reject this revision of traditional historical canons that Appiah calls "liberal multiculturalism."<sup>58</sup> Yet some adherents of revisions make larger claims and end up with a position that Appiah terms "illiberal multiculturalism." Not content with corrections and revisions of traditional historiography, they hold that objective history is impossible: all history books are written by the victors and serve as a retrospective justification for their deeds. Hence, they claim that every group in society be allowed to teach its own version of history in order to define its authentic identity and to bolster the self-consciousness of its members. Afrocentrists are merely the most vociferous proponents of these "identity politics," and attention in this highly publicized debate has concentrated on their teachings. Whenever history curricula for school districts or states were discussed, the reaction focused in on Afrocentrist positions. Two of the most notorious debates, pursued over many years and in many media, exemplify this tendency: the controversies about the *African-American Baseline Essays* adopted at Portland, Oregon, and about the new social studies curricula in New York State.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Appiah [1997] 33.

<sup>59</sup> On the *Baseline Essays*, especially the gross factual errors they contained, see Martel [1994], Shipler [1997] 196-200; on the New York controversy see Glazer [1997] 22-33.

## The Controversy about Historical Standards and Methods

Most Afrocentrists claim that they are not merely telling myths in order to heighten blacks' self-esteem, but that their version of history is true. Engaging them in a scholarly debate has proven excessively difficult for many traditional historians. The Afrocentrists' line of defense has either been to assert that a sinister conspiracy of white historians has constantly worked to conceal this truth. Accordingly, they claim that lack of documentation does corroborate, not weaken their tenets as it proves the machinations of this conspiracy.<sup>60</sup> White historians have distorted or destroyed evidence and developed historical methods which are merely tools for oppressing the concealed truth. Or the Afrocentrists recur to the relativistic argument that there are several truths which are all equally valid. This latter argument can be tied to a widespread feeling of uneasiness about concepts such as "objective truth" or "historical facts."<sup>61</sup> These sentiments have been voiced in many fields of the humanities (and even of the sciences) since the late sixties; they are attacks against the "hidden agenda" and political implications of positivism and historicism, which are often labeled restrictive and ideological. Although it is impossible to pinpoint the precise origin of these attacks, we can at least name several developments that have contributed to their diffusion:

1. When Jacques Derrida published his *Of Grammatology* in 1967, he coined the well-known phrase "There is nothing outside of the text."<sup>62</sup> Derrida wanted to point to the difficulties we face when we try to reach reality, the referents, via the linguistic signs of a text; he certainly did not want to deny the existence of the extratextual world. Yet later accounts of deconstruction made Derrida's statement sound more unambiguous. As, e.g., Vincent B. Leitch writes, "The world is text. Nothing stands behind. [...] There are no facts as such, only assemblages. There is always already only interpretation."<sup>63</sup> In a world

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One can also compare the debate about national history standards in 1995-6, see Glazer [1997] 66-73 and Nash/Crabtree/Dunn [1997].

<sup>60</sup> See Lefkowitz [1997] 137.

<sup>61</sup> Bernal refers explicitly to the "liberal loss of faith in the mystique 'science' and the deep suspicion of positivism since the 1960s" (Bernal [1987] 437).

<sup>62</sup> Derrida [1974] 158, cf. 163. See the original French version, Derrida [1967] 227 "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte," and 233 "Il n'y a rien hors du texte."

<sup>63</sup> Leitch [1983] 58. Against, see the more circumspect explanation in Norris [1991] 146-58. By acknowledging this affiliation, I do not mean to endorse the unacceptable generalizations made by some conservative critics, cf. Early [1994] 13: "[...] the rise of everyone from Jacques Derrida to Stephen Greenblatt has been just as important to Afrocentrism and its off-shoot, multiculturalism, as the political turmoil of the 1960s."

where no facts exist, it obviously makes no sense to ask for historical truths.

2. One variety of this belief which has been especially influential in the US was developed by Stanley Fish. His position could be described as “Deconstruction Meets Reader-Response Criticism.” In a number of widely read articles and books, Fish has argued that it is impossible to differentiate between raw facts and their interpretations.<sup>64</sup> Whenever we look at something, we employ the strategies and filters with which our interpretive community provides us. Of course, raw uninterpreted facts do exist, yet we have no access to them because we cannot choose to be outside of all interpretive communities (the most we can do is to see something from more than one perspective). Fish does not address the problem of how criteria could be developed that would allow us to evaluate divergent interpretations. Hence, his position inevitably leads to an all encompassing relativism in which facts are inaccessible and the interpretations of different interpretive communities all have equal truth-value.
3. In the field of historiography, the most important arguments have been put forward by Hayden White. Since the seventies, White has published a number of articles and books which argue that historiography ought to be understood and analyzed as a form of rhetoric. According to White, our perception and description of events is directed by the rules and laws of narrative. Historical facts are not given, they are construed by the observer (and narrator) in telling. Though White has repeatedly defended himself against the objection of being a relativist and making historical studies helpless against revisionist accounts which would, e.g., deny that the Holocaust ever happened,<sup>65</sup> I find it difficult to understand how his arguments could avoid being relativistic. Whatever his own intent, it is obvious that his position can be (mis-)used by those who want to argue that all historical accounts have equal value.<sup>66</sup>
4. Finally, the theses of the historian of science Thomas Kuhn<sup>67</sup> have been read as showing that every scientific understanding is merely one possible “paradigm” that can be replaced by another one. “If scientific theories can only be judged within the context of a particular paradigm,

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<sup>64</sup> A point also made by Bernal, see Bernal [1991] 65.

<sup>65</sup> E.g., White [1987] 76-82.

<sup>66</sup> On White’s theses, see Momigliano [1981] 259-68.

<sup>67</sup> Especially in Kuhn [1970].

then in this respect the scientific theories of any one paradigm are not privileged over other ways of looking at the world, such as shamanism or astrology or creationism. If the transition from one paradigm to another cannot be judged by any external standard, then perhaps it is culture rather than nature that dictates the content of scientific theories."<sup>68</sup> Scholars outside of the sciences have made use of Kuhn's model to argue that there is no such thing as "reality," and have repeatedly claimed that if "hard" sciences doubt about the truth, it follows *a fortiori* that the humanities should abandon all hope of attaining truth. This discussion came to the attention of a wider reading public in 1996, when Alan D. Sokal, a physicist, published an article in the journal *Social Text* that purportedly showed that modern physics had given up the notion of an unalterable reality.<sup>69</sup> As Sokal himself later revealed, this article had been a spoof meant to demonstrate the absurdity of all such claims.<sup>70</sup> A highly publicized debate discussed the consequences of what is now widely known as "Sokal's Hoax."<sup>71</sup>

Some conservative critics have certainly drawn an exaggerated picture of the influence of such relativistic beliefs in the American academe (and have thus fallen victim to a conspiracy paranoia of their own, with the dark forces of some unspecified leftism threatening to take over the country).<sup>72</sup> Such opinions were never undisputed, and their proponents certainly constituted only a minority of American intellectuals and academics. Yet we have to acknowledge that these proponents were unusually vociferous and canny in claiming a high degree of public attention for their provocative theses. The nineties, however, have witnessed a considerable decline of academic success for such ideas. A malevolent observer might draw the conclusion that at least some of those who had been eager to provoke the academic establishment calmed down as soon as they had themselves become part of this establishment. Furthermore, during the last years, there has been a number of well-informed and persuasive attacks on the kinds of relativism described above, in fields as diverse as the sciences, the law and the humanities.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Weinberg [1998].

<sup>69</sup> Sokal [1996a]. Sokal's article has been reprinted and expanded in Sokal/Bricmont [1998].

<sup>70</sup> Sokal [1996].

<sup>71</sup> See Weinberg [1996].

<sup>72</sup> This is visible in, e.g., Gross/Levitt [1994] or Ellis [1989]. For classical studies, cf. the sweeping and vitriolic attack in Hanson/Heath [1998].

<sup>73</sup> To quote just a few examples: Gross/Levitt/Lewis [1996]; Farber/Sherry [1997]; Harris [1996]. See also Crews [1998] and the ensuing debate in *NYRB* October 8, 1998, 53-6. Of course, the debate is far from being over, see the lively exchange about Gross/Levitt [1994] between Gross/Levitt and Richard Lewontin in *NYRB* December 3, 1998, 59-60.

Yet we find here a frequent phenomenon: ideas gain acceptance with a wider public precisely at the moment when they are abandoned or strongly modified by the experts in the field, and of course, they are accepted in their most crudely simplified and superficial form. The slogan “All history is written by the victors; there is no objective truth” may no longer be taken seriously by historians, yet it has become commonplace with some journalists and advocates for special-interest groups. Such tenets are especially useful for any kind of revisionist historiography. Afrocentrists use these slogans to dismiss not only the results of traditional historical studies, but also their methods, claiming that they are merely tools of oppression. In their view, every group has a right to its own truth that cannot be gauged by allegedly objective scholarly criteria. As Constance Hilliard said in an interview, “Truth isn’t something you find by marching into a library [...]; you have to open your soul.”<sup>74</sup>

For those who belong to the academic establishment, it is not easy to understand this assault on scholarly methods and to argue against its proponents. Of course, Afrocentrists and their adherents can always claim that someone attacking their theses is merely pleading for his or her own interests, not trying to reach a “truth” whose very existence they deny. I think the most successful strategy to reopen a discussion that has all too often run the risk of ending in complete mutual misunderstanding might be to appeal not to lofty standards and allegedly impartial methodologies, but to enlightened self-interest. I wonder if those who want to dismiss all standards of objectivity, or to be more modest: all means to negotiate between different claims to truth, are really aware of the consequences of what they are doing. First of all, accepting that every group’s view of history is as valid as any other’s means throwing the door wide open to new racisms of all kinds<sup>75</sup>—and I do not accept the premise that blacks cannot be racists because they have not enough power to oppress other groups.<sup>76</sup> When Leonard Jeffries, an Afrocentrist who teaches at the City College of New York, differentiates between creative African “sun people” and destructive, violent European “ice

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<sup>74</sup> Dembner [1996].

<sup>75</sup> See Lefkowitz [1997] 52.

<sup>76</sup> This view is held, e.g., by Coleman Young, the mayor of Detroit, see Hacker [1992] 29; cf. Shipler [1997] 460: “Many blacks define racism as prejudice plus power, thereby labeling the practice so that it lies beyond the reach of powerless people like themselves. [...] Many blacks have used [this definition] to confer a kind of immunity on themselves, a permission to be racist without admitting to it.” I think this view should be rejected because it entails a one-dimensional view of power that cannot be accepted: power cannot be equated with institutionalized political might; it occurs at all points of society in a decentralized way. Most blacks may have less power than most whites, but they are certainly not totally deprived of it.

people," this is ugly and abominable racism;<sup>77</sup> when Mary Lefkowitz's colleague at Wellesley, Tony Martin, calls her books a "Jewish onslaught," this is Antisemitism, a special form of racism.<sup>78</sup> Critics of Afrocentrism rightly point out that its theories are Eurocentric in their own way,<sup>79</sup> as can be observed in Bernal's project and the warm welcome Afrocentrists have given it: "It is simply another form of colonialism to insist that the Egyptians and Phoenicians have value only if they taught the Greeks 'civilization.'" <sup>80</sup> As Richard Jenkyns writes, "no one cares a straw that Britain's influence on ancient Greece was nil. It is because blacks are, seemingly, outside the traditional European story that Bernal wants to find them a place in that sun; and however well-meaning this aim, it can hardly help being patronizing."<sup>81</sup>

Moreover, it could be argued that the importance of race in Afrocentrist theories works within the tradition of Romantic or even racist ideals that Afrocentrists try to eschew. Modern psychological research has taught us the importance of memory for our personal identity. We perceive our past as a meaningful narrative that explains why and how we became who we are; our identity is formed by what we perceive as the story line of our life. This may seem uncontroversial. Yet the idea that our entire personality, our behavior, talents and skills, our whole life is shaped by the history of our "people" or "race" is a figment of Romantic ideology. Do only blacks have the right to be proud of the achievements of other blacks; can Germans and only Germans understand and appreciate Beethoven's music; may only Dubliners read *Ulysses*? These tenets strike me as ludicrous and, yes, racist, yet they seem to underlie Afrocentrist ideas.<sup>82</sup> When we accept the theory that our group defines our identity and our truth, there is hardly a way of avoiding a new tribalism in which every dialogue between members of different groups is

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<sup>77</sup> On Jeffries' theories, see Hacker [1992] 28-9; Shipler [1997] 234; Gates [1991] 47: "Bogus theories of 'sun' and 'ice' people, and the invidious scapegoating of other ethnic groups, only resurrects the worst of 19th-century racist pseudoscience—which too many of the pharaohs of 'Afrocentrism' have accepted without realizing." In the meantime, the City University of New York (of which City College is a part) has brought legal actions against Jeffries who is not allowed to teach his theories in the classroom any more, see Lefkowitz [1997] 172-4 and Glazer [1995] 14-40.

<sup>78</sup> Martin [1993], cf. Ringle [1996]. On black Anti-Semitism, see Shipler [1997] 464-5.

<sup>79</sup> E.g., Walker [1994] 34-5: "[...] Afrocentrism actually fails to transcend European categories of race, class, and culture. [...] Ultimately, Afrocentrism is Eurocentrism in blackface. It repeats what it sets out to repudiate." Cf. Roth [1996] 318, Ray [1997] 4, Lenz [1993].

<sup>80</sup> Rogers [1996] 442; cf. Baines [1996] 45; Jenkyns [1996] 419-20; Jenkyns [1998] 52; McNeal [1993] 138-9.

<sup>81</sup> Jenkyns [1996] 420; cf. Baines [1996] 45, Lefkowitz [1997] 156.

<sup>82</sup> See Lenz [1993].

impossible.<sup>83</sup> I am certainly in no position to prescribe or even suggest how underprivileged and discriminated groups should react; I merely wonder if it would not be wiser and more effective to cheerfully state that a heritage cannot be stolen, that the Greek (and the Kushite and the Chinese) civilization belongs to all of us.<sup>84</sup>

However, the Afrocentrist claims entail calamitous consequences not only for society as a whole, but also for the minorities themselves. This can best be shown when we look at the example of the so-called Melanists.<sup>85</sup> Adherents of this theory claim that blacks process information differently from whites, and that therefore, they should be taught in a different manner. Again, we see that race is the decisive factor. No one would deny that the scholarly performance of children from socially disadvantaged families can be improved when teachers adapt their methods to these students' special needs, e.g., by using less abstract language or by giving strong encouragement. Yet the entire functioning of modern societies is based on the consensus that "all men are created equal," that race does not affect our mental capabilities. The emancipation of blacks in the US would never have happened if it had been impossible to convince large numbers of white intellectuals and politicians that a person's dignity, freedom and intellect does not depend on his or her skin color. Melanists who proclaim a new essentialism jeopardize this consensus and the cohesion of the entire society. If blacks are fundamentally different from whites, why should whites, who still hold more social privileges, be willing to share these privileges and grant blacks equal access to political power and educational facilities? It is but a small step from accepting that blacks think in a different way to believing that their mental capabilities are inferior, as has convincingly been argued by David Nicholson in 1990: "Material given to teachers by the Multicultural/Multiethnic Education Office of the Portland, Ore., Public Schools, for example, quotes psychologist Na'im Akbar that the black child 'uses language requiring a wide use of many coined interjections (sometimes profanity)'—an observation that probably would be roundly condemned if made by a white."<sup>86</sup> Such convictions are indeed worthy of the worst white supremacists. The arguments of the Melanists are yet another path to the "tribalization" of the US described by Nicholson,<sup>87</sup> and blacks have nothing to win, but a lot to lose from this way of thinking.

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<sup>83</sup> See Minow [1997].

<sup>84</sup> As has been suggested by Lefkowitz [1996] 22.

<sup>85</sup> See Flint [1994], Ringle [1996], Shipler [1997] 234; cf. Hacker [1992] 171-2.

<sup>86</sup> Nicholson [1990]. On the debate about "black English" or "Ebonics," see Shipler [1997] 75-8.

<sup>87</sup> Nicholson [1990]; cf. Chavez [1994] 10.

This is not to say that all of Afrocentrism's aims and interests are illegitimate. Most scholars agree that if we subtract the conspiracy paranoia and unsound scholarly methods, interest in and teaching of the achievements of Egyptian and other African civilizations can serve meaningful purposes, as has been argued by the Egyptologist Ann Macy Roth in one of the most thoughtful contributions to the entire debate. She rightly reminds us that some white extremists still entertain the absurd idea that Africans contributed nothing to human civilization. "[...] the Pennsylvania chapters of the Ku Klux Klan give each new member a leather-bound book with the gilded title *Great Achievements of the Black Race*, which is filled entirely with blank pages."<sup>88</sup> Even if white-supremacist views such as this one are today on the fringes of American society,<sup>89</sup> black children will inevitably encounter similar opinions, be it in scholarly or literary works or in everyday hate speech. Knowledge of the real (as opposed to invented) accomplishments of African peoples can be an immensely effective antidote against such absurd and racist allegations. I would argue that in this context, it is unproblematic to reclaim ancient Egypt as a "black" civilization. The argument that Wilson Moses has put forward, "In fact many of the Pharaohs, if transplanted across time and onto the Chattanooga Choo-Choo in 1945, would have a hard time obtaining a Pullman berth or being seated in a dining car,"<sup>90</sup> is indeed valid—not because the term "black" and "white" can be ascribed to the Egyptians then or now in any meaningful way (see nn. 50 and 103), but because it demonstrates the utter absurdity of modern racist definitions of black, especially the "one-drop-rule" that makes a person black if any of his ancestors was of African descent.<sup>91</sup>

However, even such a mitigated version of Afrocentrism will have to be administered carefully lest it result in a vitriolic calculation of which "race" gave which contribution to humanity. It can only be a first step towards the acknowledgement that ultimately, no one can derive prerogatives from the accomplishments of his real or imagined forebears. And it is to be feared that arriving at such a reasonable Afrocentrism will be a long and arduous process. The debate has become too emotional and sharp, and both sides have become entrenched in their mutual distrust. Bernal's book, to which we will now come back, is unfortunately a case in point.

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<sup>88</sup> Roth [1996] 317.

<sup>89</sup> However, prejudices that blacks are lazy and somehow less intelligent than whites die hard, see Shipler [1996] 278 and *ibid.* 283-8 on the enormous debate about Herrnstein/Murray [1994].

<sup>90</sup> Sundiata [1996]; cf. Roth [1996] 319.

<sup>91</sup> See Njeri [1992]. On the one-drop-rule, Shipler [1997] 112 rightly remarks: "In this regard, the United States remains firmly locked in the eighteenth century."

## Bernal's Place in the Debate

Although Bernal claims that he reached his conclusions before he became aware of the work of early proponents of Afrocentrist theories such as George G. M. James, he sees these scholars as his intellectual harbingers (see Bernal [1987] 401-2). And it is easy to perceive the common elements: like the Afrocentrists, Bernal believes in a sinister conspiracy of white ("Aryanist") historians that has obliterated the truth; like them he is convinced that the scholarly methods developed in the nineteenth century are merely tools to accomplish this goal.<sup>92</sup> And of course, the picture he draws of the Mediterranean during the bronze age coincides with the Afrocentrist view of history: civilization began with the black peoples in Africa; it has subsequently been stolen by the Europeans.

Furthermore, our knowledge of the background will help us understand to which audience *Black Athena* is addressed. One of the most unfortunate misunderstandings in the whole debate has been the tendency to view it in terms of "progressive" vs. "conservative." By stating that "the political purpose of *Black Athena* is, of course, to lessen European cultural arrogance" (Bernal [1987] 73), Bernal gave the impression of being a natural ally for progressive thinkers involved in post-colonial projects. The fact that a number of critical responses to his work was published in conservative periodicals (such as *The New Republic* or the *Wall Street Journal*) and that these criticisms were embraced by right-wing commentators (such as George Will<sup>93</sup> and Roger Kimball) contributed significantly to this impression. With what can be called a visceral reaction, academics who consider themselves progressive or left-wing seem to have taken sides in this debate. Somebody who had been attacked by these known conservatives had to be right. Accordingly, Bernal was praised by scholars like David Halperin, John Winkler and Froma Zeitlin or Shelley Haley.<sup>94</sup>

Yet we should take a closer look at what Bernal terms a matter of course. When he writes that his aim is "to lessen European cultural arrogance," we have to ask whose arrogance he is referring to. Today, the (almost obsessive) need to ground one's present in tradition and to reclaim an (artificial) "Western civilization" as one's own heritage is an American, not a European phenomenon. Bernal is attacking part of the academic and political élite in the US. Yet he must have been aware that the cultural arrogance of these

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<sup>92</sup> See Bernal [1987] 221 on source criticism.

<sup>93</sup> Will [1996] 78.

<sup>94</sup> Halperin/Winkler/Zeitlin [1990] 5; Haley [1993] 30 and 39 n. 10.

people is in no way apt to be diminished by his hypotheses—the critical reception of *Black Athena* has shown that the opposite is the case; criticism against Bernal's arguments has rather welded together conservative members of the establishment. With this conveniently vague formulation, Bernal tries to achieve an altogether different aim: he wants to muster up support from his own constituency by presenting them a common enemy. It is depressing to see that so far, a number of liberal academics has swallowed this bait. I would thus argue that Bernal's aim in *Black Athena* is not an attempt to convince by making verifiable arguments, but an appeal to emotions, addressed to a specific audience.

Accordingly, I would suggest that large parts of *Black Athena* ought to be analyzed according to rhetorical, not scholarly standards.<sup>95</sup> In his book, Bernal is not primarily writing for those who are interested in the early history of the Mediterranean and want to know more about the relation between Egypt and Greece; instead, the public he is aiming at is already certain of the truth of his theses and needs to be reassured with attacks against a common enemy. It is within this framework that a number of unusual characteristics of *Black Athena* can be understood. I give a few examples only.

Bernal uses the term "Indo-European" to refer to the family of languages, but he often implies that there is such a thing as a people of "Indo-European-speaking Indo-Europeans" (Bernal [1991] 67). Using the term "Indo-Europeans" may be a convenient short-hand to avoid the cumbersome "speakers of a variety of Indo-European," yet reviewers were right to point out that Bernal's confusion of linguistic and ethnic (or even racial) categories is neither innocent nor inconsequential,<sup>96</sup> as is shown by his use of the terms "Aryan" or "Aryanist."<sup>97</sup> Of course, he is aware of the political implications these words have—at one point, he makes them explicit when he speaks of the "Aryanist or even Nazi image of the Indo-Europeans as a 'master race'" (Bernal [1991] 322). When Bernal calls a scholar "Aryanist" or even "the extreme Aryanist Francis Vian" (Bernal [1991] 192), this is clearly a form of "hate speech" carrying with it a host of despicable connotations: these scholars "dream of a conquering élite" (Bernal [1991] 348); they succumb to "the power of the Aryanist imagination" (Bernal [1991] 465) and to the

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<sup>95</sup> Cf. Assmann [1992] 929: "Meiner Meinung nach gehört *Black Athena* zum politischen, nicht zum wissenschaftlichen Diskurs."

<sup>96</sup> Jasanoff/Nussbaum [1996] 180.

<sup>97</sup> Against Bernal's use of these words, see the protest of Coleman [1996] 290; on the modern history of the term "Aryan" see Wiesehöfer [1990].

“irresistible” “appeal of linking the arrival of the Indo-Europeans to the arrival in Greece of the chariot—that symbol of the ‘master race’” (Bernal [1991] 399). The same insinuation can be observed when Bernal counters Lefkowitz’s demonstration that Socrates was an Athenian citizen with the statement that he did not necessarily have an impeccable European lineage.<sup>98</sup> Again, the adjective “impeccable” surreptitiously intimates that Lefkowitz would consider African ancestors some kind of fault.

As we have seen, Bernal depicts these scholars as not merely holding opinions differing from his own, but also as being fascist proponents of “Aryan” supremacy. This rhetorical strategy can be seen at work when Bernal writes about the supposedly Egyptian scarabs found in the tomb of the Frankish king Childeric: a contemporary French scholar who doubts their existence is insidiously connected with the fascist Vichy régime, for no good reason—as Palter rightly says, this “is not only farfetched but approaches defamation.”<sup>99</sup> This strategy of calumniating other scholars reaches its unsavory climax in the heading of chapter 9 of Bernal [1987], “The Final Solution of the Phoenician Problem.” This sly reference to Hitler’s genocide of the European Jews is absolutely unacceptable, and I am deeply shocked that the editors of Rutgers University Press let it pass.

Bernal is thus eager to convey the impression that what he is writing about are not scholarly controversies, but acts of war, and the vocabulary he uses strengthens this impression. Again and again, Bernal uses martial metaphors to describe discussions: his is a world in which reviewers want to “blast his ideas out of the water,”<sup>100</sup> in which hypotheses are “blown sky high” (Bernal [1991] 480), “hostile writers”<sup>101</sup> scrutinize each others’ work “in a hostile way” (Bernal [1987] 162) and scholars are guided by emotions of love (Bernal [1987] 118) or hatred (Bernal [1987] 107). In brief, Bernal is constantly catering to the Afrocentrist view that somehow, most scholars are involved in some kind of world-wide conspiracy.<sup>102</sup> To give one particularly obvious example: Bernal mentions in passing the short-lived Egyptian empire of Mohamed Ali in the early nineteenth century (Bernal [1987] 249-50). He is surprised that this empire is not referred to in the writings of ancient historians (Bernal [1987] 250).

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<sup>98</sup> Bernal [1994].

<sup>99</sup> Bernal [1987] 466-7 n. 88; Palter [1996] 351. See also Weinstein [1992] 383 on Bernal’s “none-too-subtle intimations of racism and anti-Semitism on the part of those who hold opposing views.”

<sup>100</sup> Quoted in Dembner [1996].

<sup>101</sup> Bernal [1989] 32.

<sup>102</sup> Cf. Tritle [1992] 308-9.

The failure on the part of contemporary ancient historians to mention the contemporary Egyptian successes in general, and conquests in Greece in particular, cannot be entirely explained away on the grounds that recent events are no concern of the professional historian, or that there had been a complete rupture in Egyptian history with the coming of Islam. [...] The reason for the double standard is obviously racist.

Again, this is patent nonsense, and it is slander. We might as well argue that Bernal himself is a racist because he fails to mention Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-70), the founding father of modern pan-Arabism. Absurd allegations like Bernal's poison the climate of scholarly exchange. They are not meant to prove anything or to convince anybody; instead, they want to score points with an audience that is already convinced of their own position's correctness and their adversaries' maliciousness.

This audience is constituted by Afrocentrists, as can be seen when Bernal refers to "the time when a black pharaoh received tribute from the known world" (Bernal [1991] 475). Bernal himself is aware that this image is misleading; in a discussion of his books, he said, "I make no claim that the Egyptians were black [...]." <sup>103</sup> Yet he also knows that it taps into Afrocentrist myths and will appeal to those who firmly believe in these myths. The same explanation holds for the ambiguity about the question whether the mistakes of earlier scholars are due to the prejudices of the *Zeitgeist* or betray the machinations of a universal conspiracy. We have seen that the belief in such a conspiracy is part of the Afrocentrist lore. Again, Bernal knows that scholars cannot help being influenced by intellectual and political tendencies of their time; <sup>104</sup> again his intimations that they might have known better, yet concealed this knowledge for sinister reasons appeals to the conspiracy theories of Afrocentrists. <sup>105</sup>

Bernal is aware that his book and its arguments are being appropriated by "Black racists." As he admits, some friends reproached him for this misuse (Bernal [1991] xxii):

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<sup>103</sup> Bernal [1989] 30. Most modern scholars refrain from applying the terms "black" or "white" to the ancient Egyptians, see Snowden [1996] 112-28, Weinstein [1992] 382

<sup>104</sup> See, e.g., Bernal [1989] 28.

<sup>105</sup> See Liverani [1996] 424: "[Bernal's] stress on a Western 'conspiracy' instead of on inevitable conditioning (for which allowance must always later be made), and on racial rather than political and economic distinctions, is politically disruptive and historically regressive."

My answer to this is that I am disturbed because I hate racism of any kind. I would prefer to be in my position than theirs, however, as I am infinitely less concerned by black racism than I am by white racism, and white racists, directly or indirectly, make constant use of orthodox views of the classical world and the Aryan Model.

This answer is clearly insufficient. Levine is right to point out that someone claiming the moral high ground such as Bernal<sup>106</sup> is responsible for the misuse of his arguments and ought to distance himself more unambiguously from all sorts of racism.<sup>107</sup> By utilizing inflammatory and consciously misleading rhetoric and by manipulating the evidence,<sup>108</sup> Bernal has contributed to an exacerbation of the debate which is scientifically unproductive and politically disruptive—as Glen Bowersock remarked, there is “the disturbing possibility that we are attending a dialogue of the deaf.”<sup>109</sup> To a certain degree, then, Bernal is one “of a few atypical cult authors who shamelessly exploit the fears and resentments of contemporary readers.”<sup>110</sup>

Yet in a sense, his success proves Bernal right. No book about the history of the Mediterranean world in the bronze age has ever attracted so much public attention. However, while this interest is certainly to be welcomed, Bernal’s demagoguery has made it difficult to pursue the discussion in a cool-headed manner. Unfortunately, in this he is also part of a major trend in the US. The year 1997 witnessed not only the start of a “national conversation on race” initiated by President Clinton, but also a growing resentment in large parts of the population against measures that were meant to remedy the consequences of past discrimination and racism. And for the first time in several years, this resentment resulted in actions against these measures, especially against “affirmative action,” a program which encourages public employers to hire members of minorities. Already in 1996, voters in California, the largest state of the Union, had approved of Proposition 209 which abolished affirmative action in admissions to public colleges and universities. In the following years, there was a sharp decline in minority enrollment at all state universities.<sup>111</sup> Similar projects are expected to be

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<sup>106</sup> Cf., for instance, Bernal [1989] 25: “[...] the scheme set out in *Black Athena* is better on ethical grounds [...]”

<sup>107</sup> Levine [1992a] 456-9; cf. Snowden [1996] 117.

<sup>108</sup> For two especially clear examples, see Williams [1994].

<sup>109</sup> Bowersock [1996].

<sup>110</sup> Moses [1994] 21. Cf. similar remarks by Ray [1997] 4.

<sup>111</sup> See Holmes [1998a]; Bruni [1998] or the editorial “Proposition 209 Shuts the Door,” *The New York Times* April 4, 1998, A 12.

brought before the voters in Washington and other states.<sup>112</sup> In 1998, voters in California abolished bilingual education by passing Proposition 227.

There has been an enormous controversy about affirmative action in the last years, and it is obvious that this issue will be on the agenda for a long time.<sup>113</sup> Polls show that Americans are deeply divided on these matters and that their opinion about affirmative action depends to a great extent on semantics, not facts.<sup>114</sup>

For example, asked their views on programs that “give preferential treatment to racial minorities,” only 26 percent—including 21 percent of whites and 51 percent of blacks—said they would favor such programs. Just 19 percent—15 percent of whites and 48 percent of blacks—said they would favor programs that “impose quotas for racial minorities.”

But asked their views about programs that “make special efforts to help minorities get ahead,” Americans of both races seemed vastly more comfortable with this vaguer language. Fifty-five percent of the respondents, including 50 percent of whites and 80 percent of blacks, said they would favor such programs.

Of course, the effects and consequences of affirmative action and similar programs are exceedingly difficult to assess, and I do not intend to pass judgment on the public debate in the US. However, it is clear that most blacks have a rather clear view of what is happening: for many of them, the abolishment of affirmative action signals that the white majority is abandoning them and will not support efforts to ameliorate interracial relations. And to some extent, their fears seem justified. In a recent book, the sociologist Alan Wolfe comes to the conclusion that “the history of America is a history of generosity and caring” and that interracial relations are good.<sup>115</sup> This is self-congratulatory and smug, and it will foster the fears of many blacks that all whites are satisfied with the status quo and unwilling to make new efforts to overcome the consequences of past wrongs. As Andrew Hacker

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<sup>112</sup> See Holmes [1998b].

<sup>113</sup> An immense flood of books and articles has been published on affirmative action; I quote three review articles that give a wealth of further bibliographical references: Fredrickson [1997]; Dworkin [1998a] and Dworkin [1998b].

<sup>114</sup> Verhovek [1997].

<sup>115</sup> Wolfe [1998].

wrote in a rightly acerbic comment, "It should not be surprising that most writing about racial progress comes from white authors."<sup>116</sup>

As one black student at the University of California at Berkeley put it, "If the university does not want people like me anymore, that means I'm unwanted."<sup>117</sup> This situation warrants pessimistic expectations. Narratives that make sense of the interracial problems by blaming racist conspiracies and bolstering self-esteem through myths will find eager listeners and are bound to prosper. These will be difficult days for sober reason and painstaking analysis of evidence. There is thus little hope that the debate about *Black Athena* will soon be pursued in a less antagonistic mood.

### The Relevance of the Debate for Germany

I hope to have shown the wider implications and the social and political background of Martin Bernal's work and the discussion it triggered. I want to close this paper by looking at the situation in Germany. Classicists in Europe and particularly in Germany have thus far considered that the debate about *Black Athena* is a purely American phenomenon that does not affect them. As far as I can see, no scholarly journal in Germany has reviewed Bernal's book; there was only one (totally dismissive) review of the German translation of Bernal [1987] in a national newspaper.<sup>118</sup> It is indeed tempting to dismiss this debate as "typically American extremism" and return to our ivory tower, "far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife." However, I would firmly advise against this reaction. For a number of reasons, I think the debate and Bernal's positions are highly relevant to academics in Germany as well, and I am convinced that we can and should learn from it.

Obviously, Germany does not have a race problem comparable to the situation in the US. However, ethnic minorities, especially Turkish immigrants, represent an ever growing part of the population and will continue to grow during the next decades, if demographic prognoses can be trusted. Many Germans are still convinced that the integration of these people

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<sup>116</sup> Hacker [1998] 29.

<sup>117</sup> Quoted in Bruni [1998]. Reactions were similar after California abolished bilingual education, as witnessed by Terry [1998]: "[...] words like 'racism,' 'prejudice' and 'discrimination' often came up in interviews after Tuesday's balloting."

<sup>118</sup> Schuller [1992]. For another, largely uncritical, review cf. Schölzel [1996]. Assmann [1992], though not being a full scholarly review, is the most thorough discussion of *Black Athena* that has appeared so far (however, Assmann's view that the general readership is "bored" by Bernal's theses (930), has proved to be completely wrong).

will not be a problem—they just assume that all immigrants will have to adapt to the German way of living. “Multiculturalism” (often in the abbreviated form “multiculti”) has become a familiar slogan in Germany, yet most of the time it is used in a highly polemical way, as a vision of a future we do not want. Many conservative politicians like to point out that immigrants simply have to forget their original identities and become “German.” One of the most vociferous proponents of this view has been Jörg Schönbohm (CDU), Secretary of the Interior (“Innensenator”) of Berlin, who complained that certain parts of the city of Berlin do not “feel like Germany” any longer and referred to German civilization as a “Leitkultur,” i.e., the part of civilization that serves as a model for all inhabitants of the country.<sup>119</sup>

If we look at the debate about multiculturalism in the US, an alarming parallel becomes obvious. As Nathan Glazer describes in his latest book, intellectuals and politicians in the 60s and 70s (among whom Glazer himself had been prominent) expected that the integration of blacks (and other minorities) would be unproblematic if not speedy. Yet the actual development in the past three decades has proved this optimism wrong:<sup>120</sup>

If one had been asked at the time of the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 to project how matters would stand thirty years in the future, what well-informed person would have predicted the degree of separation between blacks and whites that now exists in residence, in economic conditions, in family patterns, in attitudes?

No matter which development we desire for our society here in Germany, whether we hope for a full-scale assimilation or for some sort of cultural pluralism, we certainly all wish that these developments will take place in a peaceful way, without causing harm or discrimination to any group. This means we have to acknowledge that there currently is a great cultural diversity and that especially the Islamic sections of our society (which are the fastest growing) are unlikely to simply drop their old identities and assimilate. Instead, they are already raising claims that their religion and their history be given a place in the German educational system. Although circumstances in the US cannot be equated to those in Germany, the events there suggest that a smooth integration of these people is impossible unless the society as a whole and the public institutions in particular make special efforts to facilitate this process. This would first require a consciousness of the problems we face. Many citizens and politicians still like to pretend that the

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<sup>119</sup> See Schuller [1998] and Siemons [1998].

<sup>120</sup> Glazer [1997] 123. Cf. Wicker [1996].

demands of the immigrants will go away if we choose to ignore them. This would mean repeating the mistakes that have been made in the US. It is simply naïve to assume that the return to a culturally homogeneous society can be decreed. Cultural pluralism is here to stay, and it is up to us to keep it from balkanizing our society.

While these are general political lessons that we can learn from the American debates about Afrocentrism and multiculturalism, German classicists also have special reasons to take up Bernal's challenge. As I have shown, we ought to reject his sweeping generalizations and exaggerations about eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholarship: not all classicists and historians in this period were racists and anti-Semites. Yet reviewers have rightly emphasized that his arguments about the history of scholarship are the most valuable aspect of his work.<sup>121</sup> I would thus recommend making use of his work in the manner described by Marchand/Grafton: "Perhaps the way forward will be to try to take Bernal's questions and leave aside his answers."<sup>122</sup>

Classicists here in Germany have a special responsibility to pursue these questions. The belief that "race" is a meaningful category for analyzing human behavior and history was widespread in most parts of the Western world during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet it was in Germany that this belief shaped the policy of a whole nation and entailed its most catastrophic consequences.<sup>123</sup> Ancient History and the Classics were no exception, and numerous scholars in our disciplines, too, were influenced by such prejudices. One of the most infamous theoreticians of "racial science," Hans F. K. Günther (known as "Rasse-Günther"), published a "racial history of the Greek and the Roman people" in 1929,<sup>124</sup> and many teachers in German High Schools and Universities eagerly accepted the racial categories set forth by such "scholars."<sup>125</sup> German publications on the ancient world betray the

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<sup>121</sup> E.g., Turner [1989] 104; Pounder [1992] 464; Burstein [1994] 12.

<sup>122</sup> Marchand/Grafton [1997] 31. A similar approach has been suggested by Liverani, [1996] 427: "We will keep and we like [...] his baby, but we must throw out all his dirty water." Cf. Stray [1997] 231.

<sup>123</sup> On the development of racial (and racist) paradigms in German historiography see Oberkrome [1993] and Weber [1996]; cf. the other contributions in Puschner/Schmitz/Ulbricht [1996] for the pervading influence of such ideas in all parts of society.

<sup>124</sup> Günther [1929]; cf. Günther [1935].

<sup>125</sup> On the reception of racial categories in historical studies in general see Schönwälder [1992] 111-9; Wolf [1996] 185-200; on Ancient History in particular see Binder [1987] 44-50; Apel/Bittner [1994] 242-69; Cancik [1982]; on archeology see Binder [1991] 20-24. Recent studies have exploded the older view that this racism had no influence on the

influence of these ideas in many different ways. The following passages are no more than a few arbitrarily chosen examples to which many others could be added. They are not chosen because they are especially spectacular or shocking but because they show that racial thinking influenced even seemingly objective scholarship.

In 1931, Max Fluß<sup>126</sup> wrote the article “Illyrioi” in Pauly-Wissowa’s *Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, arguably still the greatest monument of classical scholarship. Here is a brief extract from Fluß’s treatment: “Racial affiliation. Anthropomorphic measurements have demonstrated the inaccuracy of the assertion made in older studies that the I[Illyrians] were short, brachycephalic people of dark complexion [...]. The dark complexion, which is alien to the Nordic race to which they belong, must certainly be ascribed to the strata of populations that the I[Illyrians] encountered while advancing south.”<sup>127</sup> These words undoubtedly illustrate a belief in racial science and an Aryanist (here the term is appropriate) vision of Nordic races advancing south and conquering and displacing racially inferior peoples.<sup>128</sup> Wilhelm Brandenstein’s<sup>129</sup> article “Tyrrhener” was printed in 1948, yet we can be certain that it had been written during the Third Reich. Brandenstein shows the same belief in racial science when he writes that the Tyrrhenians “belong to the Near-Eastern race, viz. to the subcategory with a sharp-boned nose (not the fleshy six-shaped nose).”<sup>130</sup> Obviously, nobody in 1948, just three years after the end of World War II, thought it necessary to correct such references to races which are measurable by the form of the nose (assumptions about racial traits had played an important part in Nazi propaganda against the Jews).

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teaching of Classics in High Schools, see, e.g., Kirchner [1939]; cf. Binder [1987] 55-8; Apel/Bittner [1994] 299-323, 345-357 and Fritsch [1982].

<sup>126</sup> Fluß contributed numerous articles, especially on prosopographical subjects, to *PW* in the 20s and 30s.

<sup>127</sup> Fluß [1931] 326-7: “Rassenzugehörigkeit. Die Unrichtigkeit der Behauptung älterer Forschung [...], die I[Illyrier] als kleine Leute von dunkler Komplexion und kurzer Schädelform anzusehen, haben anthropometrische Erhebungen ergeben [...]. Die ihrer Zugehörigkeit zur nordischen Rasse fremde dunkle Komplexion ist jedenfalls den Bevölkerungsschichten zuzuschreiben, auf welche die I. bei ihrem Vorstoße nach Süden trafen [...]”

<sup>128</sup> The same vision can be found, e.g., in Hofmann [1942] 2223, where the author writes about “developed peoples” and “primitive races” (“höherentwickelte Völker” vs. “primitive Rassen”).

<sup>129</sup> Brandenstein (1897-1967) was professor of Greek language at the University of Graz, where he continued to teach after the war.

<sup>130</sup> Brandenstein [1948] 1917.

Hans Herter was one of the most renowned Hellenists in Germany; he taught at the University of Bonn well into the 1970s. On January 30, 1941, the anniversary of the Nazi takeover of power (“Machtergreifung”), the University of Bonn offered honorary degrees to SA Oberführer Landesrat Hans Joachim Apffelstaedt and to Hugo Scheur, publisher to the University. On this occasion, Herter delivered the ceremonial lecture on the topic “People and Fatherland as Nordic Experience” (“Volk und Heimat als nordisches Erlebnis”). It was published the same year as a small brochure.<sup>131</sup> The booklet details the sequence of events: Herter spoke after the address of the University’s Rector; his lecture was followed by “veneration of the Führer and songs of the nation” (“Führerehrung und Lieder der Nation”). His speech celebrates the Greeks as a “Nordic” race and emphasizes the close consanguinity between Germans and Greeks.<sup>132</sup>

My last example is a brief passage from a work of Hermann Bengtson, who was one of the most important ancient historians in Germany after World War II. Bengtson writes about the famous massacre of Italian residents in Asia Minor that Mithradates VI ordered in 88 BCE: “80,000 Italians, men, women and children, were butchered in the pogrom arranged by Mithradates, a crime that could only have been planned by the mind of an Asian barbarian.”<sup>133</sup> The racism of this sentence is genuinely shocking. What is even more shocking: Bengtson wrote these words in 1950, only a few years after his fellow Germans had proved at Auschwitz that they surpassed every “Asian barbarian” when it came to butchering innocents. Bengtson did not even hesitate to use the word “pogrom,” which (as he certainly knew) was regularly used to denote anti-Semitic riots, of which Germany had witnessed so many during the Nazi years. Yet the most shocking discovery for me was the fact that this heinous sentence has been reprinted in every new edition of Bengtson’s extremely popular *Greek History*, which exists in an inexpensive edition that most students of the classics have on their shelves.<sup>134</sup> Did no

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<sup>131</sup> Herter [1941].

<sup>132</sup> Herter [1941] 13: “Unter allen Indogermanensind es nun aber die alten Hellenen, mit denen uns eine besonders enge Verwandtschaft verbindet, und wir sind der Überzeugung, daß es gerade die nordische Dominante ihres Wesens ist, die gleichgestimmt die unsere anspricht.”

<sup>133</sup> Bengtson [1977] 508: “80000 Italiker, Männer, Frauen und Kinder, fielen als Opfer eines durch Mithradates befohlenen Pogroms, wie es nur im Hirne eines asiatischen Barbaren erdacht werden konnte.”

<sup>134</sup> Bengtson [1986] 488-9.

editor, no publisher, no reviewer or reader ever think twice about this embarrassing monument of bigotry?<sup>135</sup>

Assessing the importance and meaning of “race” in historical studies during the first half of the twentieth century is a complicated issue. Racial science was by no means confined to Germany, and not every scholar who used the word “race” or explained historical developments by applying racial categories was a Nazi or approved of the Holocaust.<sup>136</sup> What we need, then, is a careful analysis of the different strands of racial science. We have to study their origins, forms and developments. In every single instance, we have to ask whether it is merely “racial” or “racist.” We must also study to what extent even seemingly innocent uses of racial categories contributed to diluting scholarly standards<sup>137</sup> and strengthening convictions that would lead to the Nazi extermination of “inferior races.” Moreover, we have to be careful to look at every single scholar’s life and work. Was he a racist or was he merely trying to further his own career by demonstrating his allegiance to the ruling ideology? Was he trying to make his academic discipline more acceptable to the rulers<sup>138</sup> by adding a thin veneer of buzzwords, or was he willing to give up his scholarly standards in order to glorify the racist doctrines that the Nazis proclaimed? And we have the right, even the responsibility to ask which stance scholars took after the war: did they explicitly retract their former statements, did they pass them over in silence, or did they continue publishing similar views, with minimal adaptations to the changed political order?

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<sup>135</sup> Cf., however, the critical reference to this quotation in Bichler [1989] 80, and the general remark of Christ [1996] 167: “[...] dort, wo Bengtson pathetisch wird, ist die Lektüre peinlich.”

<sup>136</sup> To give a few examples: articles about race in antiquity could follow the Nazi ideology, as do, e.g., Schuchardt [1933]; Geyer [1935]; Erbt [1936]; Gerlach [1939]; Hommel [1939]; Kraiker [1939] (Kraiker also published a number of articles in the infamous periodical *Rasse*). Or they could be sober and cautious, as, e.g., Matz [1939]; Fuchs [1939]; Altheim [1941].

<sup>137</sup> See Binder [1987] 47: “Während der ganzen Zeit des Dritten Reiches ist zu beobachten, daß einzelne Hochschullehrer (entsprechendes gilt für ‘Schulmänner’) ohne Not über das von offizieller Seite erwartete oder geforderte Maß hinausgingen und damit den Druck auf Kollegen verschärften, die in Forschung und Lehre zu keinen oder nur zu geringen Konzessionen bereit waren.”

<sup>138</sup> Despite Hitler’s frequent references to Greek and Roman history in *Mein Kampf*, the Nazi administration was highly critical of teaching ancient history and classical languages in High Schools, see Apel/Bittner [1994] 283. Therefore, many historians found it important to demonstrate the political relevance of their studies; cf. Badian [1997] 7-8, who draws some disquieting parallels to the current situation of classical studies.

There can be no doubt about the fact that the Afrocentrist myths are racist and that every scholar has a moral obligation to say so and to refute them. But whoever claims to raise her or his voice for the ideals of science and dispassionate search after the truth, is also obliged to decry the excesses of German classicists and to point out what they really were: racist propaganda of the worst sort. And the case of Bengtson's *Greek History* demonstrates that we cannot excuse ourselves by asserting that these were just a few isolated cases on the fringes of our discipline.<sup>139</sup> Other examples could be adduced. One of the most blatant and vicious proponents of racist "scholarship" during the Nazi era, Hans F. K. Günther, reissued his absurd pseudo-science in the fifties.<sup>140</sup> Scholars like Helmut Berve<sup>141</sup> or Hans Oppermann<sup>142</sup> had their articles reprinted after the war, with only cosmetic changes; Fritz Schachermeyr was still "a high priest of racism" in the 60s.<sup>143</sup> (Interestingly, Schachermeyr, a convinced and unrepentant Nazi,<sup>144</sup> is one of the few modern scholars whom Bernal cites approvingly, see Bernal [1991] 375, 467. Schachermeyr attributes "Nordic spirit" to the Egyptians, and his overall view of history is precisely the "Aryan model" that Bernal repudiates.<sup>145</sup>)

It is a curious phenomenon that the last five years have seen a renewed interest in the Nazi past here in Germany (and elsewhere) and that some academic disciplines are only now coming to grips with their own role in this past. Yet despite the chronological distance, this process is still fraught with difficulties. This became clear when in September 1998, a panel on the topic "German Historians in the Third Reich" was organized at the 42nd annual convention of the German Historical Association ("Deutscher Historikertag") in Frankfurt. The ensuing debates were very lively, to say the least.<sup>146</sup> Even now that most of those who were directly involved in the events have long since died, their relatives and children, their students and assistants are still holding important positions. Given the close personal relationship between

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<sup>139</sup> A tendency to absolve the discipline as a whole while acknowledging that "very few" of its members wrote "embarrassing passages" is present in Dihle [1997] 242.

<sup>140</sup> Günther [1956]. The book even was dignified with a review by C. Bradford Welles, *Gnomon* 30 (1958) 546-8, which shows no doubts about the fundamental concepts of racial science.

<sup>141</sup> Berve [1949].

<sup>142</sup> On Oppermann, see Faber [1991], Holzberg [1994] 293-4; Malitz [1998], esp. 541.

<sup>143</sup> Momigliano [1968] 45 "quel flamine del razzismo che continua a essere Fritz Schachermeyr." On Schachermeyr's work after the war see Badian [1976] 284-7, Christ [1982-3] 3.202; on his career in general Badian [1997]; Dobesch [1997].

<sup>144</sup> See above, n. 143, and below, n. 151.

<sup>145</sup> See Schachermeyr [1933] 38 and Schachermeyr [1944]. On Schachermeyr's view of Egypt, cf. Dobesch [1997] 14.

<sup>146</sup> See Ullrich [1998], who mentions a number of recent books on the subject.

German Ph.D.-candidates and their supervisors (“Doktorväter”), acknowledging the wrongs of beloved teachers still does not come easy to some scholars. Yet a new generation of historians seems determined to pursue the truth in this matter.

Attempts to explore the lives and works of German classicists and the development of classical studies from 1933 to 1945 had been rather scarce until recently. In the 1970s, Volker Losemann, a student of Karl Christ, wrote a Ph.D.-thesis on the development of the discipline of Ancient History in the Third Reich;<sup>147</sup> Karl Christ himself published a number of smaller studies on similar topics.<sup>148</sup> The fact that the only comparable attempt for the history of classical philology was written by a high school teacher and was published in a relatively obscure Belgian periodical is certainly not accidental, but betrays a disturbing lack of interest.<sup>149</sup> Yet during the last years, this situation has started to change for classical studies, too. To quote just a few examples: We now have studies on the general development of classical studies in Germany in the 20s and 30s, a book on the ancient historian Joseph Vogt, a collection of articles on Werner Jaeger, and Cornelia Wegener’s book on the history of the Institute for Classical Studies in Göttingen.<sup>150</sup>

Yet the debate is still problematic, as the recent controversy about the work of the ancient historian Joseph Vogt (1895-1986) demonstrates. In 1943, Vogt edited a volume on Carthage filled with approving references to racial science. Three of the nine contributions have the term “race” in their title; none of the contributors fails to quote buzzwords such as “Rasse” or “völkisch.”<sup>151</sup> Vogt’s own introduction declares that the entire volume is

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<sup>147</sup> Losemann [1977]. Although he concentrates on ancient historians, Losemann also mentions a number of philologists.

<sup>148</sup> See Christ [1990], where references to Christ’s older publications are given in the notes.

<sup>149</sup> Nickel [1970], Nickel [1972].

<sup>150</sup> Flashar [1995]; Canfora [1995]; Näf [1986]; Königs [1995]; Calder [1992]; Wegeler [1996].

<sup>151</sup> Vogt [1943]. The contributions are Fritz Schachermeyr, “Karthago in rassengeschichtlicher Bedeutung,” 9-43 (by far the most chilling read); Fritz Taeger, “Völker- und Rassenkämpfe im westlichen Mittelmeer,” 44-82; Matthias Gelzer, “Der Rassengegensatz als geschichtlicher Faktor beim Ausbruch der römisch-karthagischen Kriege,” 178-202. For the other contributors’ references to racial terms, see, e.g., Alfred Heuß, “Die Gestaltung des römischen und des karthagischen Staates bis zum Pyrrhos-Krieg,” 83-138, 87 “Offenbarungen semitischen Volkstumes,” Reinhard Herbig, “Das archäologische Bild des Puniertums,” 139-77, 145 “das rassische Bild der punischen Bevölkerung,” Franz Miltner, “Wesen und Gesetz römischer und karthagischer Kriegsführung,” 203-61, 221-2 “völkische und rassische Veranlagung,” Wilhelm Enßlin, “Der Einfluß Karthagos auf Staatsverwaltung und Wirtschaft der Römer,” 262-96, 280 “semitisch-phoenikisches Blut,” Erich Burck, “Das Bild der Karthager in der römischen

dedicated to the problem of seeing the conflict between Rome and Carthage as a racial war between the “Nordic” Romans and the “Semitic” Carthaginians and that different traits of their character have to be explained by their “racial structure.”<sup>152</sup> In her study of Vogt, Königs poignantly remarks that these articles were written “when the extermination camps were working full blast.”<sup>153</sup> In his review of Königs’s book, Jürgen Deininger dismisses as “irresponsible” every connection between Vogt’s projects of “racial science” and the Nazi genocide of what they considered “Untermenschen.”<sup>154</sup> I wonder whether Prof. Deininger would have been as adamant about scholarly responsibility had he read Arnaldo Momigliano’s similar remarks about Helmut Berve: “[...] in consequence of the activities of the party to which Berve belonged, my father, my mother, two uncles and three cousins (one of whom with a little daughter of a few years) were murdered in the gas chambers at Auschwitz.”<sup>155</sup>

Already in 1959, at a time when Deininger was still busy thanking his “venerated teacher” J. Vogt,<sup>156</sup> Momigliano had rightly emphasized that we need to understand “how so many gifted scholars adhered to a religion which had its greatest sanctuaries at Dachau and Auschwitz.”<sup>157</sup> Deininger’s

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Literatur,” 297-345, 319 “stämmische Eigenart [...] rassische Differenzierung.” Of course, I am not implying that all of the contributors were Nazis or racists; careful analysis of every single article and its author’s thought and intentions is needed. Modern assessments of the volume and its contributions differ, cf. Christ [1982-3] 3.163; Christ [1990] 92-5; Schönwälder [1992] 215-6; Wolf [1996] 190-1.

<sup>152</sup> Vogt [1943] 7-8: “ist dieser folgenschwere Konflikt durch das Blutserbe der Völker bestimmt gewesen, durch die Tatsache also, daß dem wesentlich nordisch geprägten Rom die Welt Karthagos gegenüberstand, deren Fremdheit sich aus der rassischen Struktur des Puniertums ergibt? [...] Der moderne Forscher [...] versucht, einzelne Züge dieser Volkscharaktere mit dieser oder jener Komponente in der rassischen Struktur der Völker in Verbindung zu bringen.”

<sup>153</sup> Königs [1995] 222: “[...] in diesem Jahr liefen die Todesmaschinen in den Konzentrationslagern auf Hochtouren.”

<sup>154</sup> Deininger [1997] 347: “[...] mit einer derartigen Insinuation eines irgendwie bewußten Zusammenhangs zwischen der Publikation des Karthago-Bandes und den Vernichtungslagern [sind] die Grenzen des in einer wissenschaftlichen Arbeit Verantwortbaren wohl überschritten.” Nippel [1998] is less adverse, but still skeptical of this connection. Against, see the thoughtful comments of Christ [1995].

<sup>155</sup> Momigliano [1965] 839: “[...] in conseguenza dell’attività del partito a cui il Berve apparteneva, mio padre, mia madre, due zii e tre giovani primi cugini (una dei quali con una figliuola di pochi anni) furono uccisi nelle camere a gas di Auschwitz [...]”

<sup>156</sup> Deininger [1965] V: “Der erste Dank gebührt an dieser Stelle meinem verehrten Lehrer Professor Dr. Joseph Vogt [...]” Vogt was Deininger’s dissertation supervisor, or “Doktorvater.” We can only speculate on who took the absurd decision to have a student of Vogt review Königs’s book.

<sup>157</sup> See below, n. 163.

refusal even to consider this connection is merely begging the question. It becomes more and more difficult to accept the myth repeated a hundred times after the war that most Germans “knew nothing” about what was going on in the extermination camps in the East, and we have to face the fact that these projects of “racial science” coincided with and reinforced the convictions of those determined to destroy “inferior races.” Like Deininger, many students of the generations born during or shortly after World War II experienced their professors such as Vogt as masterly scholars and venerated teachers, not as propagandists for the Nazis. Yet younger scholars are indubitably right to emphasize that we have to abstract from personal relationships and that the analysis of this dark chapter of German intellectual history has to be carried on.

Of course, for those born after the war, it is difficult to judge the reasons and motives by which people in a given historical situation were driven, as Albrecht Dihle’s thoughtful review of Wegeler’s study points out.<sup>158</sup> Though Dihle’s remarks are certainly true, we must be careful not to draw the conclusion that any judgment should be avoided.<sup>159</sup> It is sometimes necessary to emphasize that even people whose conscience was good and who were convinced that they had the best moral reasons for their behavior, in effect helped the barbarian ideology of the Nazis. Moreover, we have to acknowledge that our discipline (very much like the entire society in Germany) failed in the years immediately after the war, when it would have been easier to pass this judgment.<sup>160</sup> Dihle’s argument that there just were more important things to do sounds defensive.<sup>161</sup> Bernal’s volumes are full of unjustified generalizations and hence invite classicists in Germany to close the ranks and come to the rescue of their discipline’s honor. Yet such an automatic collective reaction would certainly be wrong, and it will ultimately disserve classical studies—if we classicists fail to set to this task, we will warrant the suspicion that we still endorse the racist views of our predecessors, and outsiders are certain to ask embarrassing questions. Instead of accusing those who pursue such questions of “befouling their own nest” (“Nestbeschmutzer”), we should accept the challenge of *Black Athena* by filling the gaps and doing more research about the history of our field. We

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<sup>158</sup> Dihle [1997] 234: “Das Urteil des nachgeborenen Historikers jedoch ist in diesem Punkt auf die Auswertung stets unvollkommener und interpretationsbedürftiger Zeugnisse angewiesen.” Cf. Malitz [1998] 519.

<sup>159</sup> A similar point has been made by Maier [1981].

<sup>160</sup> See Wolf [1996] 15-20; Bichler [1989], Christ [1996] 186-7. On the German way (and failure) of dealing with the Nazi past in the decade following the end of World War II, see now the brilliant study of Frei [1996].

<sup>161</sup> Dihle [1997] 240-1.

have to face the unsavory past of our discipline and its involvement with “racial science,” colonialism, Eurocentrism and all sorts of political ideologies. Marchand/Grafton rightly remind us that we “need to explain the discipline’s silences on questions of burning contemporary interest, as well as the official pronouncements of men like Helmut Berve, Richard Harder, and Fritz Schachermeyr.”<sup>162</sup> As Momigliano emphasized, it is important to study the texts of Nazi historians in order to understand why intellectuals succumbed to this ideology.<sup>163</sup>

However, I would argue that it is even more important to explore the hidden influences of these forces than to uncover the concrete wrongdoings of individuals. To what extent did the widespread belief in the superiority of the “Caucasian race” or the conviction that there is some special affinity between Greek and German language and thought influence intellectuals who were far from being racists or chauvinists? It is in this regard that Lefkowitz indeed underestimates the complexity of the issues involved, as Haley rightly argues.<sup>164</sup> When Lefkowitz says “that it is possible to misinterpret the facts, either through ignorance or malice,” or when she asks “Had our teachers deceived us, and their teachers deceived them?,”<sup>165</sup> she focuses on just two ways of error. Yet we have to ask ourselves if some prejudices are not so deeply implanted in our minds that it will be extremely difficult to get rid of them.

I will provide a personal example. In 1996, the first volume of a new encyclopedia of the classical world appeared in Germany; this project will in time supplant the *Kleine Pauly*, though on a much larger scale. In the Preface to the whole project, the editors, Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider, define early Greece as a “civilization on the border of late Oriental civilizations.”<sup>166</sup> When I read these words, I intuitively felt that they were somehow inappropriate because there was some fundamental difference between Greek civilization and the adjacent civilizations of the Near East (and from conversations with classicist friends, I know that I am not alone in

<sup>162</sup> Marchand/Grafton [1997] 31.

<sup>163</sup> Momigliano [1959] 707-8: “È in verità opportuno che [...] gli storici nazisti siano conosciuti in tutte le loro fasi di pieno nazismo, pre-nazismo e post-nazismo. Il nazismo è un fenomeno che va studiato sui documenti originali perché solo essi possono aiutarci a comprendere come intellettuali di non poca abilità abbiano aderito a una religione, che ebbe i suoi maggiori santuari a Dachau e Auschwitz.”

<sup>164</sup> Haley [1993] 39 n. 10.

<sup>165</sup> Lefkowitz [1996] 4-5.

<sup>166</sup> Cancik/Schneider [1996] VI: “Das (klassische) Altertum ist hier konzipiert als Epoche des Kulturzeitraumes ‘Méditerranée,’ die frühgriechische als spätorientalische Randkultur [...]”

this feeling). I still wonder whether this reaction is due to some kind of understanding or merely to prejudices and ideologies that I have internalized. Furthermore, we should ask ourselves whether “the notion that Germans were somehow constitutionally better equipped to understand the Greeks,”<sup>167</sup> which originated in the 18th century and was often exploited during the Third Reich,<sup>168</sup> does not still influence our work without our being aware of it.

I would suggest that we pursue such questions. To do so, however, would also require a reappraisal of the history of scholarship. Although most scholars today would agree that it is more than a slightly frivolous pastime “to be pursued on Sundays when one is tired of the real historical work and does not have enough energy to read the books, only to browse through them,”<sup>169</sup> it is still in danger of turning into learned gossip about the private lives of our predecessors or psychological biography (or worse still, hagiography).<sup>170</sup> It may be important to publish a famous scholar’s postcards to his mother-in-law, yet we have to see the history of classical scholarship as part of a general *histoire des mentalités* or intellectual history. Only then can we begin to understand where our own unconscious presuppositions originate and attempt to achieve a less biased view.

I am aware that it is easier to make such lofty demands than to pursue these goals. All sorts of political, departmental, personal and practical reasons speak against it. However, much is at stake. In Europe, the importance and the place of classics has been disputed in the last twenty years, to an extent of which many American colleagues are unaware. The enormous response to *Black Athena* demonstrates that the civilizations of the ancient world still arouse interest far beyond the circles of academics and professionals in the field, that they still constitute a heritage which many people aspire to. This entails a huge responsibility for those who profess this discipline. The admonitions of Molly Myerowitz Levine are worth quoting here.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Norton [1996] 406. Norton quotes remarks by Martin Heidegger made in 1966 that still uphold this view.

<sup>168</sup> I give a few randomly chosen examples: “Leitsätze des deutschen Altphilologen-Verbandes zur Neugestaltung des humanistischen Bildungsgedankens auf dem Gymnasium,” *Neue Jahrbücher für Wissenschaft und Jugendbildung* 9 (1933) 570-2, Berve [1934] 269, Drexler [1939] 5, Oppermann [1939] 165, Herter [1941] 13. Cf. Momigliano [1968] 45. This entailed the view that, e.g., Semitic people would not be able to reach an understanding of “Nordic” civilizations, see Christ [1990] 168-71.

<sup>169</sup> Momigliano [1959] 708: “[...] prendere la storia della storiografia come un passatempo domenicale, per quando si è stanco del vero lavoro storico e non si ha energia sufficiente per leggere i libri, ma solo per sfogliarli.”

<sup>170</sup> See the remarks of Henrichs [1995] 424-5.

<sup>171</sup> Levine [1992b] 217-8.

The distortions are usually more often the result of good intentions than they are of deliberate self-serving. But if something needs fixing all the good will in the world cannot substitute for the lack of a proper tool. We classicists, of all people, should recognize the enormous labor entailed in putting together bits and pieces of evidence about long gone events in far away places often in languages no one can read, or without words at all, in an attempt to create some reasonable picture of the past. Instead of decrying the distortions, or dismissing them as “popular” and thus undeserving of our attention, we should put our collective shoulder to the wheel, using our training where and when and how it needs to be used.

We classicists have a moral obligation to respond to the challenge of *Black Athena*, and as I have tried to show, this moral obligation is particularly urgent in Germany. We cannot afford to ignore it.

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