BOOK REVIEW

"BLACK ATHENA-The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilisation - Volume I: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985" by Martin Bernal, London:Vintage, 1991, pp.575.

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Half a century after the Second World War–the most horrible catastrophe of human history–research is more and more directed towards the lessons to be derived from it. They aim to welcome the twenty-first century with a more objective and scientific world view. At the top of the self-criticism list is racism, the main instigator of the 1939-1945 war. Symptoms of its revival necessitated a special interest in the subject. Thus researchers concentrated their efforts on how and in what conditions such a movement became a dominating conception.

The work of a British professor, Martin Bernal, Black Athena, is an important corner-stone in this field. Instead of swimming with the tide of later occurrences he tries to discover the roots of racism. It is well known how difficult it is to question and reverse well implanted thesis. They virtually become religious dogmas and their refusal is looked upon as an apostasy. To overcome this prejudice Bernal starts his text with a quotation from Thomas Kuhn: "Almost always the men who achieve these fundamental in-ventions of a new paradigm have either been very young or very new to the field whose paradigm they change." Indeed he uses his advantage. As a scholar of Chinese history he mastered twentieth century relations with the West, and then developed an interest in Vietnam and Japan. Thus he excelled in the field of comparative history and cultures. When in the seventies world interest focused more on the Middle East, he included Semitic and Phoenician languages as well as Egyptian and East African cultures in his field of study.

As an outsider it was easier for him to notice that in this field, as a critic pointed out, "The dominating scholarly views of the past are moulded and repeatedly modified by the changing political envi-ronment in which scholars pass their lives." So he undertook a study in the sociology of knowledge. By reconsidering the roots of the actual misrepresen-tations of the facts, he concluded that it was the "racist, Europo-centric conception of historio-graphy which is into the very heart of the problem. The hard core being the Aryan conception, well implemented in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, which pleaded that Hellenism owes everything to Indo-Europeans, thus excluding Sumerians, Phoeni-cians, Egyptians, Ethiopians, Sem-ites, Anatolians.

He develops two conceptions of the Greek history:

The ANCIENT MODEL was the conventional view among Greeks in the Classical and Hellenistic ages. According to it, Greek culture arose as a result of colonisation, around 1500 BC, by Egyptians and Phoenicians, who had civilised the native inhabitants. Furthermore, Greeks had continued to borrow heavily from Near Eastern cultures. His qualification of Athena as 'black' is the outcome of this approach, the African-Semitic roots of the culture.

The ARYAN MODEL started with the Hellenophily of the mid-eighteenth century. Formulated first by a German professor, Otfried Müller, at Göttingen in the 1820s, in its earlier or 'broad' form, it denied the truth of the Egyptian settlements and questioned those of the Phoenicians. The 'extreme' Aryan Model, which flourished during the twin peaks of antisemitism in the 1890's and again in the 1920's and 1930's, denied even the Phoenician cultural influence. This is the racist white Athena.

Bernal does not attempt to disqualify totally the Aryan model but tries to prove that it is less plausible than the revised Ancient Model which provides, in his opinion, a more objective framework for future research. Thus, the omission by the proponents of the Aryan model of the Mesopotamian influence as the first civilisation in the area, and the existence of Egypt as the greatest existing civilisation in the east Mediterranean during the millennia in which Greece was formed, can be avoided. He is aware that the revival of the Ancient Model adds no extra unknown or unknowable factors and summarises his aim as "to open up new areas of research to women and men with better qualifications than I have; the political purpose of Black Athena is, of course, to lessen European cultural arrogance."

The research is composed of three volumes: I) The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985; II) Greece, European or Levantine; III) Solving the Riddle of the Sphinx and other Studies in Egypto-Greek Mythology. A large spectrum of sources, from language to myth-ology, from historical facts to archaeology have been used.

The shift of the European mind from a passive-looking always to the Orient or Levant for inspiration-to a self-confident and creative one, progressed gradually with the Renaissance and Refor-mation. The Europocentric conception needed a world view, independent from past predis-positions. The Aryan Model is the outcome of such a requirement. It is based, according to Bernal, on four paradigms: defence of Christianity, the idea of linear progress (later is better), racism from linguistic to physical, and romanticism which replaced enlightenment. In spite of existing contradictions among them, these paradigms helped the development of the Aryan Model, thus transforming the philhellenism to Hellenomanis, says Bernal. The starting point is the Ottoman defeat in the suburbs of Vienna in 1683:

"The Turkish threat from Europe was removed, which consolidated the self-confidence of Europeans. With this security the leaders or the enlightenment now felt free to show a preference for non-European cultures in their reaction against feudalism and traditional Christianity. By far the most favoured were Egypt and China, which were seen as very similar to each other, if not directly linked. These two civilisations were not seen merely as anti-European utopias-like Turkey, Persia and the land of Hurons-which could be imbued some vague general mobility and used to satirise and criticise Europe."

But the image of a 'progressive continent' necessitated, instead of far away models, its own one:

"The racism based on skin colour was (already) developed in late 17th century England, along-side the increasing importance of the American colonies, with their twin policies of extermination of the Native Americans and enslavement of African Blacks. This racism pervaded the thought of Locke, Hume and other English thinkers (...) Under this influence and the formation of a cultural bridge between Britain and Germany through the University of Göttingen (..) it is not surprising that the first 'academic' work on human racial classification-which naturally put whites, or to use his new term 'Caucasians' at the head of the hierarchy-was written in the 1770s by J.B. Blumenbach, a professor at Göttingen."

This is how-independent of the Greeks themselves-the concept of the 'divine Greek' was formed by the second half of the eighteenth century. Paradigms of race and progress and their corollaries of racial purity and the notion that the only beneficial conquests were those of master races over subject ones, could of course not tolerate the Ancient Model. "A race was believed to change its form as it passed through different ages, but always to retain an immutable individual essence." Furthermore, the Greek heritage provided the proponents of the Aryan Model with the necessary justification: "The classical writer most often appealed to to justify slavery was Aristotle, who had agreed at length in its favour.' On the basis of the conversion of Philhellenism to Hellenomania lies those contradic-tions which could not be overcome by simple logic.

"The philhellenes were more concerned with the Classical Greeks than with their heroic, but superstitious, Christian and dirty 'descendants' whom some tried to explain away as 'Byzantinized Slavs'. Philhellenes sought the pure essence of Greece before it had been tainted by Oriental Corruption (...). The period from 1800 to 1850 in general was one of intense activity to find anatomical bases for the racial differences which every cultivated European 'knew' existed (...). Greece benefited from racism, immediately and in every way; and it was rapidly seen as the 'childhood' of the dynamic' 'European race' (...). This war completed the already powerful image of Greece as the epitome of Europe (...). Throughout Western Europe the Greek War of Independence was seen as a struggle between European youthful vigour and Asiatic and African decadence, corruption and cruelty. Turanians of Turks were placed between the Chinese and the Egyptians in the hierarchy of races; in the 19th century rule by this race was seen as bound to fail in the end, and could certainly never result in any advance of civilisation. By the end of the century this principle was being applied systematically throughout history."

Empowered by such success, the paradigm of races–that they are intrinsically unequal in physical and mental endowment–was applied to all human studies, especially to history. It was conceived by the Aryans as the biographies of races and the rights and triumph of strong and vital peoples over weak and feeble ones. "It was now considered undesir-able, if not disastrous for races to mix. To be creative, a civilisation needed to be racially pure." This general conception was brought to the apex by Hitler and the Nazis and to such a degree as to self-authorise their massacre of 'inferior' races. While contributing to the elimination of racist thinking and rationalising the historical ap-proach, Bernal is confident that in the twenty-first century, the aim will be attained, quick in some cases, slow in some others:

"The attack on the Extreme Aryan Model is likely to succeed relatively quickly. The battle to restore the Ancient Model and the position of Egyptians (and necessarily all others who were affected from such a mentality) on the other hand, will take rather longer."