

Black Athena Writes Back: Martin Bernal Responds to His Critics.

By MARTIN BERNAL, edited by DAVID CHIONI MOORE.

Durham, N.C., and London: Duke University Press, 2001.

640 pp. \$84.95 (cloth); \$24.95 (paper).

Undoubtedly, Martin Bernal is an exceptional in the international world of contemporary historical writing. His historiographical enterprise is deservedly termed “epoch making.” The first two volumes of his monumental work—*Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization I: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece, 1785–1985*, (London: Free Association Books, 1987); and *II: The Archaeological and Documentary Evidence* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1991)—spawned an unprecedented quantity of responses in the media and in professional journals (some of which dedicated an entire issue to the subject), academic conferences, on-line deliberation, studies, debates, and so forth.¹ The responders came from myriad academic disciplines: classicists, archeologists and Egyptologists, specialists in the history of science, the intellectual history of nineteenth-century Europe, African American studies, and others. These are broad fields of knowledge, and distant from one another, indicating the wide scope of Bernal’s inquiry and his unique knowledge and erudition. As if this were not enough, instead of conceding to his critics Bernal’s *Black Athena* indeed “never sleeps” but rebuffs almost every point of criticism. *Black Athena Writes Back* is only the first volume of Bernal’s counterattack (*Debating Black Athena* is set to appear), and reflects underlying power struggles within academia. It should be noted to Bernal’s credit that his responses are mainly pertinent.

This book is intended for readers familiar with at least some of the criticism, primarily that in the book edited by Lefkowitz and Rogers (see note 1), while others will have trouble following the complicated discourse. Needless to say, not many readers are equipped with knowledge of the relevant topics sufficient to assess the merits and validity of the claims and counterclaims. In any event, the book provides fascinating and informative reading, whether as a study of historical evidences and their interpretation, a methodological study, or an intellectual and cultural event.

¹ I will cite only three examples, which contain broad and detailed bibliographies: Mary R. Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers (eds.), *Black Athena Revisited* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Jacques Berlinerblau, *Heresy in the University: The Black Athena Controversy and the Responsibilities of American Intellectuals* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1999); and Yaacov Shavit, *History in Black: African-Americans in Search of an Ancient Past* (London: Frank Cass, 2000).

Precisely what it was in *Black Athena* that provoked such a deluge of reactions is an issue in itself. Surely it was not only the challenge posed to the paradigm prevailing, in Bernal's opinion, in the study of the ancient Near East and particularly the study of Greek history. According to this paradigm, Greek culture—the alma mater of Western culture—was patently a product of that unique development known as the “Greek miracle” or an offspring of Indo-European culture. Were these the underlying reasons, we could have expected the debate to remain within the boundaries of academia. Rather, the principal source of the outburst of opinion is that Bernal's monumental books joined the inundation of books attacking Eurocentrism, that is, the approach portraying the history of mankind from a European point of view, assuming a sense of superiority on one hand and ignoring the role of non-European civilizations in the development of human culture—even refuting this role—on the other hand. In this respect Bernal's book resembles Edward Said's *Orientalism*,² which also aroused great response and generated many offshoots. The fundamental difference between the two is that Said is concerned with the link between the image of the “Orient” in Western culture and European (British and French) imperialism. Said addresses the influence this image has on attitudes toward living cultures and on Middle Eastern politics of the last two centuries. Bernal, on the other hand, focuses on attitudes toward dead cultures—although some of their cultural legacy remains active—and the link between these attitudes and the racial and anti-Semitic ideologies in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe.

Criticism of Bernal's work necessitates knowledge commensurate with his own, yet one would be hard pressed to find a candidate able to meet this requirement in all areas of research. As a result, each responder chose an aspect of Bernal's multifarious work to critique in accordance with his or her respective specialty and training. Conversely, there were also reactions dealing with Bernal's historical worldview and the fundamental methodological issues raised in the book, such as the value assigned to mythical stories and legends relating to events from centuries-long distances, and the manner in which archeological findings confirm or refute the factual kernel present (or lacking) in these stories. A record of the criticism as brief as this one can only make a minute contribution to the Bernalian corpus. Therefore, I have chosen to focus only on several fundamental issues.

² Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York and London: Vintage Books, 1987; orig. Random House, 1987).

My point of departure is that Bernal, who set out to attack an integral and central chapter of the Western historiographical tradition and upset its foundation, is revealed as a loyal advocate of several of the main elements in this very tradition. To begin with, Bernal's description of the tradition follows conventional line of "history of ideas," that is, selecting a group of writers (historians, scholars, etc.) and considering them to be representative of the collective historical perceptions of the society at large. Clearly, it is impossible to deny the importance of such writers—deemed by Bernal as the epitome of European racism—but one can introduce another group of writers who hold different, more positive views concerning ancient Egypt, even in the "dark" nineteenth century, and thus change the picture. In addition, not every opinion casting the culture of Pharaonic Egypt in a negative light was a product of, or affected by, racism, and not all who saw the culture of Classical Greece as the begetter of Europe (not everyone did) attached importance to the Greeks' "racial origins." And particularly, European culture is more than just a selective corpus of historical and philosophical writings concerning the ancient "East," yet Bernal does not address the abundant manifestations of the West's fascination with Ancient Egypt, nor does he juxtapose this fascination against that with Mesopotamian culture (peaking with the school of pan-Babylonianism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). He fails to mention the impact archeological discoveries in the ancient Near East had on biblical studies, or the theories (advanced by the deists and philosophers of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment) regarding the debt owed by Greece and the Old Testament to Egyptian religion and culture.³

Bernal is also a proponent of a venerable European tradition seeing "Greece" as the main axis of Western civilization. He therefore reverts to the opinion, dating from the Hellenistic period, that "Greek culture," from the age of Mycenaean civilization up to the classical period, owes a large part of its cultural assets to Pharaonic Egypt. Failure to locate "Greece" at the epicenter would surely eliminate any motivation to seek out its roots. Bernal introduces several amendments to this tradition, which he terms "the ancient model," since in his opinion its racial viewpoint caused the West to deviate from it beginning in the late eighteenth century. However, he also broadens and deep-

³ See a short description of this subject in Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation. The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977), pp. 72–82.

ens this tradition by showing additional elements of "Greek culture," primarily Greek language, as having been borrowed from Egypt.

Thus Bernal continues the European intellectual tradition of searching for ancient routes and the primordial source of a culture, and of the origins of "ancient wisdom." He does so particularly in order to prove the existence of a great cultural debt owed by the receiving (or absorbing) culture (namely, Greek culture, and through its legacy Western culture as a whole) to the contributing culture. Bernal does not believe that the search for origins is an obsession (characterizing European culture), but rather a search for historical truth and a modification of the perception of ancient historical past with implications reaching far beyond the accurate historical portrayal of the link between Egypt and Greece and the dependence of the latter upon the culture of the former.

In light of the above, I believe it is proper to distinguish between detailed, meticulous analysis of the various proofs cited by Bernal in support of his notion of dependence (an analysis that has been the subject of numerous articles) and the general conclusions reached therefrom. Even if we assume that the picture of the ancient past presented by Bernal is indeed well founded, the requisite question would pertain to the implications of this radically diffusionist conception of history of culture. The answer is that from its birth, the fledgling Greek culture received many cultural components (or traits) from the rich and enduring culture of Egypt, and that this influence was not only transmitted by various cultural agents but was a by-product of Egyptian rule (or imperialism!) in the Aegean. From the historical perspective, however, it is not less—and perhaps even more—important to ask which elements of Egyptian culture were adapted by Greek culture and which were rejected. And even more importantly, what caused "Greek culture," in spite of its dependence, to become so much more than the sum of its (in Bernal's view) borrowed components and develop into a unique and singular culture, entirely different (even according to Greek and Egyptian traditions) from that of Egypt? As is well known, the Greeks of the classical period were already aware of their debt to the "East," but at the same time emphasized their singularity, and since that the Hellenistic-Roman period, the central motif of historical tradition was the tenet that cultural debt to a source does not detract in any way from the generality of what is called the debtor culture.

Thus, it appears that the scientific and ideological obsession with the search for the primordial and original source has clouded the distinction between cultural transmission and acculturation. Due to a dearth of resources *inter alia*, Bernal does not describe the nature of

the mechanisms of influence and receipt, nor the manner in which Egyptian cultural components underwent acculturation and internalization, becoming an inseparable part of Greek culture, which in turn was completely unlike its hypothetical source culture.

Bernal's book is a resumption, historically and intellectually stimulating, of the search for origins and the detailed and reasoned discussion of many components of these "origins." For those recognizing that the history of culture is invariably the history of transmission and debt, and that even "race" cannot raise impenetrable walls between different, even alien cultures, Bernal provides further evidence, some more convincing and some less, supporting this awareness. At the same time, if we are to consider Bernal's books as a study of global history, viewing various cultures as organs of a single, large cultural polysystem, then the lack of discussion of the intercultural transmission of elements and of the unique nature of each cultural system—even cultural systems maintaining considerable links with others—constitutes a glaring lacuna impairing the capacity of Bernal's work to reconstruct an important case in the universal history of culture. Bernal targeted the theory that views various cultures (Western culture in our case) as individual, even autarchic, cultures, because he believed that this theory was romantic, nationalistic, and even racist. In my opinion, the paradox, or irony, lies in the fact that the weapons employed in the battle to uphold a universalistic world view are, on one hand, indefatigable admiration of the achievements of one unique culture (that of Egypt, which incidentally was not autarchic), and on the other hand, the depiction of another individual culture (that of "Greece") as an almost totally dependent culture, lacking the basic immanent vitality needed for cultural innovations and progress.

In short, what we have here is an intriguing global perception of ancient history that can rightly (and paradoxically) be defined as "inverted Eurocentrism."

YAACOV SHAVIT
Tel-Aviv University