

Richard ARMSTRONG

Spanking and Occentricity: Some Psychological Consequences of the “Greek Ideal” in the Construction of Westernness

In the post-9/11 world, we have seen a vivid resurgence of Westernness as a monolithic concept that has forced us to revisit the question of Greece’s relation to the Near East as well as Western European culture. This paper is an attempt to map out a position of inquiry that takes into account some of the lessons learned from the debates that raged in the 1980s and 1990s concerning the construction of “Westernness.” These debates featured attempts to dismantle the Western monolith by reference to new monoliths or global theories, namely “Orientalism” (made famous by Edward Said) and the Aryanist conspiracy outlined by Martin Bernal. I argue in particular that it is time to retool our approach to the matter of Westernness *vis-à-vis* the Greeks on a smaller scale, using some psychological concepts that will better aid us in understanding our investment in the question of “occentricity” to begin with.

My specific query is how ancient Greece (or rather, a very thin selection from the vaster array of Hellenic culture in antiquity) has been enlisted as an “ideal” in the formation of an essential notion of Westernness, and what the psychological consequences are for such an idealization not only for real Greeks (ancient and modern), but also for the Western Europeans and Americans who cling to such notions. Idealization is commonly seen in psychology as a basic pattern of self-making for human beings, but its psychological features are more problematic than is typically assumed; for the positing of an “ego ideal” is not without pain. First and foremost, an ideal based on a type (“the Greek” described to us by Winckelmann and other philhellenic enthusiasts) becomes a cudgel with which to beat real instances of the class (i.e., real Greeks, ancient or modern, who fail to fulfill our stereotyped expectations). This can lead to a deeply ambivalent “splitting,” where the attitude toward the subject (Greeks) becomes almost bipolar, positing a grand but inaccessible type (“the Greek”) towards which one harbors great sentimental attachment, but targeting those unfit to represent the type as degenerates. I illustrate this in the ancient context with reference to Cicero’s *Pro Flacco*, where there is a clear deployment of common Roman prejudices against “Asiatic Greeks” while the Greeks associated with the classical age (Athenians, Spartans, even Massiliotes) are upheld as beacons of civilization. The consequences of this splitting have been lived historically by the Greeks, who have often run afoul of the very “Greek ideal” that is supposed to uplift them and earn them respect.

More intriguingly, the positing of the Greek ideal has great consequences for the non-Greek Westerner. As Freud observed, when one measures oneself against an ideal, an inherent tension develops that can lead to an intense self-criticism bordering on unhealthy “moral masochism”—i.e., a siding with the ideal against one’s own ego, turning a fierce self-directed aggression into a perverse form of self-satisfaction. The modern Western deployment of the Greek since at least the Enlightenment has been a triangular affair: namely, an attempt for moderns to create a space and a genealogy for secular culture against the authority of the Christian church; hence, the idealization of ancient Greece often reveals a peculiar Christian self-hatred, or a fervid criticism of Western culture for being unnatural, mired in “Gothic” or medieval sensibilities that lack “the Greeks” close affinity with nature, and/or a failure to submit to the compelling authority of natural reason. The elective affinity of modern secular culture in the West with “the Greeks” is therefore an act of *decentering*, a deliberate attempt to distance the Western Self from the former sources of authority in Judeo-Christian culture. While this is an obvious inroad for anti-Semitism (as Bernal has rightly argued), it is also an inroad for intense anti-clericalism and Christian self-hatred. I propose, in other words, to deepen our study of hellenolatry to include an unexplored path: the way it leads not just to the demonization of others (the ancient Near East, modern Greeks, Jews, etc.), but to a peculiar form of self-victimization of Northern Europeans.