

Introduction

Would you mind if I began this book with a little quiz? Which of these statements is most controversial?

- (a) Greek philosophy was stolen from the Egyptians.
- (b) Greek philosophy was borrowed from the Hebrews.
- (c) Greek philosophy was invented by the Greeks.

The answer is (c), even though it is the only one of these statements that is backed up by strong evidence. The Greeks were indeed the first ancient people to use philosophy; they were the first to use non-theological language to describe first causes. There is no question about that. Thirty years ago no one would have doubted it. But in the 1990s

I got into a lot of trouble for supporting this traditional view, perhaps precisely because it was the traditional view.

This is the story of how I came to find myself in a controversy for defending an obvious truth. You might be surprised that telling the truth should create a problem in an American university. In the last thirty years or so, however, I have found there to be a kind of moral or ethical confusion among academics, as if we have forgotten what universities are for, or what we were originally hired to do. Telling the truth, instead of being our first responsibility, had suddenly become less important than achieving social goals. These goals were to be reached not by means of the usual scholarly tools of reflection and reasoned persuasion. They were to be imposed by assertion and fiat. Teaching our students and ourselves how to evaluate ideas and evidence or learning how to add to the body of knowledge seemed to me, as I struggled with the events that are the subject of this book, to be no longer top priority.

When my troubles began, I was teaching classics at Wellesley College, as I had done for the previous thirty years. I was (or so I thought) a respected member of our faculty, and reasonably well known as an author and reviewer of books about the ancient Greek world. I became an academic because I loved school. I loved to read, especially about what happened in the past. But what I liked most of all was Latin, because through it I could understand the origin of so many English words, and the structure of grammar. Latin led me to ancient Greek, and that seemed even more exciting. Through it I felt that I was establishing a kind of contact with a past culture that had so much to teach me.

I studied Greek and Latin at Wellesley College, and then

went on to Radcliffe College (the women's college within Harvard) to get my Ph.D. I returned to Wellesley to teach part-time while I was still at graduate school, and stayed on when a full-time position became available. For me it was the fulfillment of a dream. The Wellesley campus is situated in a corner of a leafy suburb of Boston, on one side of a tranquil lake, in a beautifully landscaped park. The buildings look out over trees and woods, with the lake glistening in the distance. I can understand why in the late nineteenth century students wrote serenades to the lake. I have never been able to tear myself away.

Although the campus still looks much the same from the outside, and it remains, by choice, a college for women, over the fifty years that I have known it virtually everything else in it has changed, much of it for the better. The curriculum is richer and more diverse; the students now come from a wide variety of backgrounds and ethnicities, and not just from the suburbs of big cities like Boston or Chicago. The faculty, too, are now more diverse, with a much wider span of interests, and from many different graduate programs. But greater diversity brought a new set of challenges. Old assumptions are today often, some might say endlessly, questioned, but at the same time there is less common ground from which to derive constructive answers. Faculty in the early twentieth century had all grown up reading the same books and had some understanding of what their colleagues in other fields were doing, because in many ways there was less to know. But whole new fields of study exist today that were not even imagined in the 1950s, and instructors in all disciplines are more highly specialized. There are no common texts, and there is less mutual understanding among the disciplines.

Before the twentieth century the study of Greek and Latin had occupied a central place in the curriculum. Over the years increasing demands for relevance in education had gradually driven the study of classics into an honorable niche. For those of us who still cared about the field, our marginalization was at once a disadvantage and an opportunity. The role of a classics professor, as I saw it, was to explain to students why it still made sense to try to learn difficult ancient languages and to study ancient civilizations so different from the world in which we now live. I used my introductory course in Greek mythology to give them an elementary knowledge of Greek religion, with its tragic vision of human life and its acute awareness of the limits of human intelligence.

Mythology is one of the ancient Greeks' most influential legacies. So too, not coincidentally, is its antithesis—an empirical, logical, and abstract system of reasoning that we now call philosophical. Much of my research and writing has focused on the ways in which myth and empirical reasoning intersect in ancient Greek historical writing, and this is probably why, to me, it seemed only natural to want to find out why some people firmly believed that Greek philosophy was stolen from Egypt, even when it so obviously was not.

Perhaps I should have realized that it is one thing to investigate the origin and meaning of myths composed by people who have for centuries been dead and buried, but quite another to critique a contemporary myth that living people today take very seriously. Anyone who tries to teach science in the presence of Creationists will know what I mean.

Challenging a belief system was only part of the problem.

What I'd done, without quite realizing it, was to walk into an intellectual storm that had been raging for some time. The storm had been created (so to speak) by two different weather systems on American campuses, one intellectual and one primarily political. Each was powerful in its own right, but together they transformed themselves into a virtual blizzard. This superstorm changed the quality of discourse in the educational world. Over the past decade or so, it changed it so radically that it was at times hard even for an insider like myself to understand what was happening. Here the weather metaphor breaks down, because this intellectual turbulence was much more durable than a physical storm. It has continued unabated for almost a decade.

This intellectual storm was fueled by what has come to be known as postmodernism. Essentially postmodernism is a form of skepticism combined with self-consciousness. Its adherents believe that no historical narrative can be considered authoritative, because writers always have political motives, whether they are aware of them or not.¹ Postmodernists, in short, believe that there is no such thing as objectivity. Every claim is suspect, especially if it is generally accepted as true. The motives of every historian must therefore be scrutinized, except those of postmodernists themselves.

In its more moderate forms, postmodernism provided a useful corrective to an overconfidence that appeared to have caused the contributions of minorities and women to have been overlooked, especially in the field of American history.² But in its more extreme and antirealist forms, postmodernism seemed to support the idea that facts are really nothing more than opinions, that true objectivity is impossible, and that there is no such thing

as truth but only a majority opinion, or a dominating consensus, in any particular field of inquiry. At the height of the fad for postmodernism in the 1980s and early 1990s, the very foundations of knowledge seemed to be crumbling; new narratives, new histories needed to be written.

At some point this intellectual storm merged with a political one, in particular a new awareness of racism. Almost everyone in the United States has been affected in some way by racism. The terrible history of racism in this country has generated, and rightly so, deep feelings of guilt among almost all people who might have committed a racist act themselves, or whose parents or ancestors might have been involved in perpetuating a system that encouraged the despicable notion of racial inferiority.

Almost all academics, myself included, have been eager to do whatever they can to right the wrongs of the past in the educational world. Affirmative action and equal opportunity programs were a first step in the long process. University curriculums now regularly include courses that consider the cultures and contributions of different minority groups or investigate the roles minorities played or might have played in contexts where their presence had not previously been remarked. Some minority groups have been granted privileges not available to the majority.

At Wellesley, for example, the Black Task Force (which includes staff as well as faculty) has the right to appoint one of its members to serve on any college committee, a perquisite not granted to any other ethnic group. We have a department of Africana Studies, which in fact I helped to found, back in the days when it was called Black Studies. All faculty members in that department are of African descent. Although no other

student organizations are permitted to refuse to take members because of race, religion, or creed, the black student organization Ethos is permitted to limit its membership to students of African descent only.

In addition to these compensatory policies, academics marshaled postmodernism as yet another weapon in what they regarded as their fight against racism. Postmodernism's antirealist approaches have the distinct advantage of being open and available to anyone in virtually any discipline. Academics who adopt these approaches often contend that facts are usually nothing more than statements of a majority or conventional opinion. This belief leads them to conclude that virtually all accounts of the past need to be reexamined or completely recast, because they must be presumed to have been written by authors who were racists, however unwittingly.

One of the great appeals of this approach to history writing is how much it would seem to empower its practitioners. Academics who ordinarily spent their lives sitting on the sidelines observing the action could now play the role of judges, calling past scholars to account, even if their crimes had been committed long ago or until now escaped notice. In this way postmodernist academics became heady with the thought that historical narratives were now not just dusty archives of interest only to specialists, but powerful political tools that could be used to change the status quo, or to bring about needed social reforms.

That myths are now being taught as history has a lot to do with postmodernism. If a myth serves a useful social purpose, or uses the past as a means of righting wrongs in the present, many academics do not want to object to its presence in the curriculum.

For that reason, the book *I, Rigoberta Menchú* has had in recent years a great vogue on college campuses.³ The book is supposed to be the autobiography of an Indian woman in Guatemala. It has been studied in many classes as if it were a historical document. Largely on the basis of the book's account, its author, Rigoberta Menchú, received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992.

But in fact the narrative was constructed from audiotapes recorded by the book's editor, and Menchú could not have done all that she claims to have done in the book. Yet her story was, by and large, not questioned by many people. Why? Because it appealed to those who considered it an archetypal narrative of the fate of natives at the hands of colonialists. These enthusiasts preferred to honor the text as such without raising uncomfortable questions about its provenance, factuality, or authenticity. In a sense it was like the partially fictionalized autobiography *A Million Little Pieces* by James Frey, except that in Menchú's case some academics preferred the fiction.⁴

I learned about the power both of postmodernism and of compensatory politics in the early 1990s, after I discovered, to my surprise and dismay, that some members of the Wellesley faculty firmly believed in the theory that Greek culture had been stolen from Africa. In Wellesley's Africana Studies Department, Professor Anthony C. Martin had for many years been teaching his students that theory in his course called Africans in Antiquity. I had always assumed, or wanted to assume, that this course was about the early history of Africa. In practice, I now saw, the course paid special attention to the role of Africans "in Greece and Rome," even though the historical record leaves little doubt that there were few Africans in Greece or Rome and that their

cultural influence on these civilizations was negligible. Students were asked to read materials about ancient Egypt, the race of the ancient Egyptians, and *Stolen Legacy*, a book that taught that Greek philosophy and culture had been stolen from Africa—and in particular, literally stolen by Aristotle from the great library at Alexandria, in Egypt.⁵

If Martin's students were being told that this thesis was true, and believed it, then they might also be ready to believe that classical scholars like me who denied it were ignorant of the truth (or worse, were determined to conceal it). But, simply put, the notion is just plain wrong. Aristotle could not have stolen his ideas from the library at Alexandria, because it was built after his death. Nor is there any lack of historical certainty about the dates of the building of the library or of Aristotle's lifespan. These are facts that can be found in any decent reference work or reliable book on the ancient world (and are covered in much more detail in my book *Not Out of Africa*).⁶

But as I would soon discover, it was not historical reality that mattered to Tony Martin or his faction. What mattered to them was simply race. Egypt was a country in Africa, so many people of African descent believed that the ancient Egyptians were an African people. On the other hand, most people of European descent did not consider the question of the "race" of the Egyptians a topic of central interest, and this lack of concern about race was seen as yet another illustration of how historical writing was and is subject, always and inevitably, to prejudice and distortion.

If whites were the majority, and they wrote the histories, weren't those histories virtually predetermined to be racist? The suggestion was not implausible. Until relatively recently, most

classical scholars and ancient historians had been white men of European descent. These earlier scholars had failed to take much interest in the roles played by women in ancient societies. Similarly, Egyptologists at the time seem to have been less interested in ancient Egypt's connections with its African neighbors than in its relation to Near Eastern cultures and Greece.

It was certainly justifiable to call attention to these omissions, as many recent scholars have done, and to try to offer a more inclusive and multicultural account of ancient civilizations in the eastern Mediterranean. But what Tony Martin appeared to be teaching his students at Wellesley was that traditional historians of the ancient world were flatly lying. At this point it seemed to me that a response was required.

One of my African-American students advised me not to get involved, particularly in matters concerning Martin. "Don't get into it," she told me; "don't have anything to do with him! You'll just get in trouble." Before the student came to Wellesley her mother had warned her explicitly not to take any courses with Martin.

I certainly never relished the prospect of racial or political controversy. What I have enjoyed most throughout my life is trying to understand the ancient world as best I could from the evidence that is available. I have also tried to get my students to be able to enter that world in their turn. But now I saw that the past could not serve as a refuge. The politics of the present had intruded. I decided I had to speak up, my student's and my misgivings notwithstanding.

My colleagues had reason to wonder why I would choose to get involved in such a thorny issue. They reminded me that