

MARTIN BERNAL



Martin Bernal died on June 9 in Ithaca NY – Martin Bernal obituary – The Guardian

He was controversial, unnecessarily. His basic idea was that Classicists in the nineteenth century distorted the history of Greek antiquity by denying the rich and intense connections among the people and cultures of the eastern Mediterranean, favoring instead an account that made the Greeks the sole inventors of European civilization.

Here is a review I wrote in 1992 for *History Today* of the first two volumes that presented this case:

Greeks and Gifts – Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization (Two volumes) by Martin Bernal

History Today 42 (June 1992): 56.

Volume I: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985. Free Association Books, 1991.

Volume II: The Archaeological and Documentary Evidence. Free Association Books, 1991.

Consider Bernal's argument, which has now reached its second volume. Ancient Greece owed much to the east, to Egypt and Phoenicia in particular. Bernal proposes conquest, political domination and colonisation of Greece by oriental powers in the second millennium BC. Ancient Greece developed under direct and considerable

influence from the east. Bernal argues that Egypt was black. Phoenicians were Semitic. If Ancient Greece is conceived as the fount of European culture, then European civilisation is black and Semitic in origin. What is more, Bernal claims that the Ancient Greeks knew of their origins. Nineteenth-century scholarship denied Afroasiatic and Semitic roots to Greek culture because of racism and anti-Semitism. Histories which oppose Bernal's 'Revised Ancient Model' of the diffusion of civilisation from the east are complicit in this racism and anti-Semitism. Given that this is presented with energy and verve, documented in tremendous detail, it is no wonder that Black Athena has attracted attention.

The two volumes so far are impressive compendia, covering themes from several disciplines. The first sets out Bernal's project and focuses upon historiography, on the construction, from 1785, of an Ancient Greece seen as cultural zenith, pure and seminal, independent of eastern imperial neighbours, European. Rather than evaluating this model of a European Greece (with origins in northern Aryan invaders of the second millennium and an Indo-European

language group), and contrasting it with a model of an Afroasiatic Greece, in Volume Two Bernal provides 'thick description' of his version of history.

Similarities in material culture, in myth and legend, etymologies of Greek divinities, artefacts and place names, and references in ancient records and authors are marshalled to document what Bernal claims to be overwhelming eastern influence upon Greece, indeed at times political domination and colonisation.

Contact and influence from the Near East have long been recognised, but Bernal polemically divides opinion into 'ultra-Europeanists' who argue for the purely independent genesis of Greece, those who suppose invasion from the north, and those like himself. The lines are drawn firmly because Bernal sees himself as precipitating a 'paradigm shift' from the old models of Ancient History to that of Afroasiatic origins.

Just what sort of history is Bernal writing? His topic is innovation and acculturation. But only two aspects of this topic of social change are admitted-indigenous, or diffused stimuli to change. Hence the polarisation of models. To explain Ancient Greek culture, it is claimed, involves finding the sources or antecedents of

its components. For Bernal, most lie in the east, so he calls himself a 'modified diffusionist'.

This sounds very dated. Bernal recognises that he is harking back to ideas more fashionable in the first decades of this century and dismisses newer thinking as transient. But, to me, what Bernal has conspicuously missed is the now considerable work and reflection in archaeology and anthropology upon the character of social and historical change, and upon the uses and meanings of material culture.

Bernal's history seems very familiar: advanced states conquering and civilising others; trading empires; imperialism; colonies; a 'Pax Aegytiaca'; international cultures; spheres of political influence. The Bronze Age second-millennium Mediterranean sounds very like nineteenth-century Europe.

Bernal argues that this is the way it was. I say that it is more a function of his diffusionism. Is this history not centred upon European experiences in a way that Bernal castigates? Diffusionist ideas imply a research strategy of tracing similarities, searching for origins. Without an origin any cultural element is

meaningless. This implies that Egypt, for example, had a set of authentic Egyptian cultural traits to transmit. Diffusionism implies the existence of definable 'cultures': Egyptian, Semitic, and Greek.

On the one hand then, Bernal argues for cultural mixes, against notions of the purity of the Greek. But his mixing is of elements which have to be culturally tagged and isolated. Diffusionism requires 'peoples' possessing culture which influences and is influenced by culture belonging to others; it assumes the categories (of race and culture) which Bernal seems to wish to deny.

Anthropology is challenging this proprietary idea of culture which is authentic and originary. In anthropological archaeology there is considerable evidence that material culture is not simply transmitted from superior to subordinate culture, or otherwise invented in a creative act; material culture is a resource used in all sorts of social strategies. Nor is social change in any way as simple as Bernal's conquest, invasion and 'influence'.

For Bernal, source materials are transparent; they tell

of similarity and this means contact. But sources need interpretation; our present understanding of them needs to be related to their political and social context. Bernal does not do this.

Just because peasants in Crete come across things from a very different society does not mean they pack up and start building palaces. What did the articles mean to the Cretans? How did they relate to the experience and working of Cretan society? To understand innovation and acculturation we need to consider the social context of production and distribution of the things which appear in the archaeological record. Bernal's history sounds so familiar in its resort to modern experience of social change because he does not consider such contexts and meanings of the appearance and use of material culture, now the topic of much archaeological work.

So I find problems with Bernal's model of culture contact and social change. These are problems which I think undercut his admirable interdisciplinary project of challenging notions of cultural identity, and bringing past and present together in attacking the racism and anti-Semitism of entrenched 'authorities'.

