

POSTCLASSICISMS? – A  
ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION AT  
STANFORD



# What future Classics?

What's the point of Classics and Classical Studies?

What is the object(ive) of such a disciplinary field?

What is the value in and of studying Greek and Roman antiquity?

At Stanford we have started a series of conversations around these questions under the title

## Reframing Classics

Our focus today – *Postclassicisms* – a book from a group of academics calling themselves the Postclassicism Collective – “a global research network dedicated to redefining the study of classical antiquity” [Link].

[Link – *Postclassicisms Roundtable Discussion* | *Department of Classics* Stanford]

## Concepts can be good – but make sure your theory and methodology are up to handling them!

Basically the book (published 2019) runs through a list of concepts taken to be at the core of current debate in the humanities. Value, time, and responsibility offer broad orientation. Agency, discipline, god, human, knowing, materiality, situatedness, untimeliness, and world are discussed to demonstrate that the study of Graeco-Roman antiquity is a great place to find insights into these concepts.

I do find this format attractive. It raises matters of wide interest. The academics in the collective are up on actor network theory (it's not only people that have agency), new materialism (texts are not just words, but take material form), situatedness (context matters), time (studying the past is more than discovering what happened), and a whole lot more. The discussions are quite nuanced, subtle even, and certainly display some erudition. I am not doing them justice here. One reason is that I don't see the point of doing so, as I will explain.

I might take up an implicit invitation to engage with the discussions. I could make a case, for example, that their concept of disciplinarity actually takes little note of the field of the sociology of knowledge, of science studies, and draws no implications for how to pursue research and teaching Classics. Even though they quote with approval Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway, they don't seem to fully

appreciate the force of the argument that what might qualify as knowledge is the subject and object of modes of (academic) production in which they, as authors, are embroiled. The same kind of argument could be made about the other concepts – they are not well grounded in theory.

But I don't want to get into such a discussion, largely because I cannot see the value in doing so. The discussions of concepts tabled in the book are, for me, parasitic, deriving their energy from outside the field of Classical Studies. This is why I find the grounding in theory weak. The line of argument runs repeatedly as follows: here is a key concept; it goes with a modish "ism" (posthumanism, new materialism et al) and/or big names (Foucault, Lévi-Strauss et al); it can be applied to antiquity; it is pertinent to contemporary classical scholarship.

So what? What difference does this make to Classics as a disciplinary field? After all, here is a book that reads just like any other academic book, written by smart academics who like reading and writing about concepts such as agency and materiality, as well as Winckelmann and Nietzsche. I guess the point of the book is that we should now write about Pindar with a view to agency and materiality and the rest (this is one of their case studies). I guess this might be OK if you have or seek a tenured academic post at a research university. Perhaps we are being encouraged to center a Classics curriculum on the concepts the collective find appealing.

Does this redefine Classics, the objective claimed by the collective? Here the book offers nothing in the way of methodology, other than a mostly implicit assumption that Classics can bolt the old philological skills of textual criticism onto some concepts that have been largely unfamiliar to Classicists. There is no discussion at all of pragmatics, of praxis, of how actually to change the institutional working of a disciplinary field.



Daniel Silver – [Link] [Link] – we rework, revive, reinvent, remediate ancient monumental forms

## Becoming a classicist

Just who do they think they are? What kind of collective is this? I guess collective sounds better than a cabal, as Reviel Netz pointed out! Who are they representing? For whom are they speaking, if not just themselves? To whom? And on what grounds?

It is not difficult to find out who the members of the collective are – they are listed on their web site and are academics at top tier universities. There's nothing inherently bad about this, of course, though the book's call for comparative study as compensation for the lack of diversity is rather weak (if only they had explored the methodology! – [Link] [Link]).

Lack of diversity even in regard to subject matter. The book is narrowly focused on texts and literatures. There's little or no archaeology. The many variants of ancient history, economic, social, political, are absent. The range of concepts is also pointed – what about space and place, individuation and differentiation, identity and membership, class and ethnicity? OK – the authors had to choose; and yes, the choice is very telling.

The book notes the continuing popularity of Ancient Greece and Rome, even when Classics as a disciplinary field is posing the questions which have inspired a group of classicists to call themselves a collective and write this book. So who is their audience? We might ask – how accessible is the book? How easy is it to engage with its argument? The book offers a case for *curating* the classical past – not so much taking care *of* the past as caring *for* antiquity. So who cares for antiquity in the way manifested in the book? And if you think you do, you better have an angle on Wilamowitz!

Perhaps ironically, these are great questions! I am not criticizing the scholarship, only its exclusivity, and the disciplinary discourse, the pragmatics it assumes.

The questions of concept, theory, methodology, subject position, the discursive apparatuses in the production of knowledge are all about what it means to be a classicist, the situated subject position of “classicist”.

On this point, let me wind up with an observation and a question, the one that seemed to sum up, for me, the verdict of our round table.

## The voice remains the same

Recently I reviewed Mary Beard's sound argument that Classics should acknowledge that its object is not the ancient world of Greece and Rome, but *relationships* with that object, antiquity, fabricated in and through its study, and hence its valuation [Link] [Link]. This is the actuality of the past. I suggested that she didn't follow through the implications of this argument because the voice in her writing remains that of the authoritative gatekeeper, a somewhat patriarchal persona that pronounces judgement on what is within their sovereign disciplinary field. By voice I do not mean the voice of Mary Beard, but that of the subject position she adopts in a disciplinary field, Classics, that involves agency, the capacity to mobilize resources and apparatuses in producing writings, talks, narratives, accounts, TV programs, examination papers, an assemblage that gets labeled Classics.

Observation. I suggest the same is true of this book from this self-styled collective. The voice, its rhetorical disposition, standpoint, its assumed disciplinary apparatuses, agencies and resource allocations remain the same as ever in a disciplinary field that is indeed beginning to ask serious questions about how it needs to change. The voice excludes and deliberately intimidates.

**This is no post-classicism.**

## What is to be done?

Our round table left one hanging question, raised by several of us – What might be done to address these concerns we have about Classics?

Write a manifesto. Look to our pedagogy. Good answers – to start with.

This is a question of the cultural politics of Classics, of course. It is a question of how to bring about change, a question of change management.

## Change management

To suggest that we might look to management might sound like such a deflation of

the prospect of changing a whole way of dealing with antiquity. I am not talking about leaving it to the office of a dean! Far far from it. In academic management I have found the Peter Principle to be proven beyond doubt [Link]!

The postclassicist collective might have been well served when they looked to the work of Hannah Arendt. Her focus on action, a *vita activa* (contrast *vita contemplativa*), follows the old Marxian admonition that philosophers have so far only interpreted the world whereas the point is to change it. And yes, change may involve collective action. Thumbs up again for our academic postclassicist colleagues.

What might this actually involve?

I use the term change management to refer to a range of tools, techniques, tactics, strategies for effecting change in organizations, corporate and institutional bodies, communities. It was an interest in social innovation and change (classic concerns of archaeology) that has led me to explore change management in a number of collaborations over the last 20 years, and longer in the academy. And I am including here that robust concept of *praxis* – practice/action informed by reflection upon theory and method.

But I am going to leave hanging this question – What might we do?

I will explore possibilities in a later post about change management.

For the moment I mention my little book about Hadrian's Wall (heritage, performance, design) – [Link], and a substantial exploration of how archaeology actually works (it's not about concepts, theories and methods!) – [Link].



Mark Manders [\[Link\]](#) [\[Link\]](#) – we rework, revive, reinvent, remediate ancient monumental forms