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AFRICAN ATHENA?

V. Y. Mudimbe

I should like to return to the critical issue of the title Black Athena. I must admit that I did originally suggest it as a possible title, but on thinking it through I wanted to change it. However, my publisher insisted on retaining it, arguing: "Blacks no longer sell. Women no longer sell. But black women still sell."

—Martin Bernal, *Arethusa*

The publication of Martin Bernal's first two volumes on *Black Athena*, subtitled *The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, has been an event. Other volumes are yet to come and—unless Bernal undergoes a major psychological conversion—should confirm the thesis he has been so far expounding about two things: the origins of Greece and the interpretations of these origins.

Bernal's thesis is painstakingly based on the hypothesis of two conflicting models concerning Greek origins: the "Ancient Model" and its successor, the "Aryan Model." Under the former, "it was maintained that Greece has originally been inhabited by Pelasgian and other primitive tribes. These had been civilized by Egyptian and Phoenician

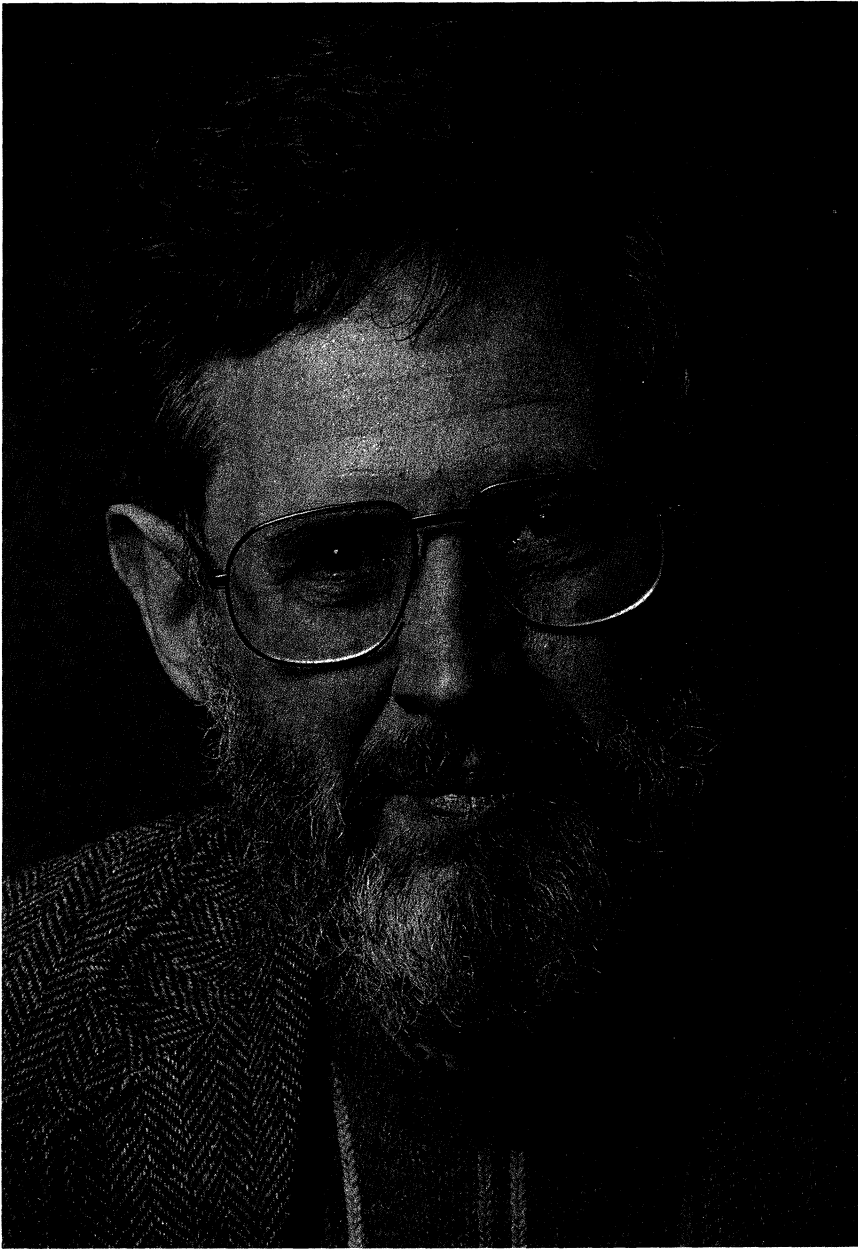
settlers who had ruled many parts of the country during the 'heroic age' " (vol. 2). In the Aryan Model, which was developed at the end of the eighteenth century in European scholarship, "Greek civilization was the result of culture mixture following a conquest from the north by Indo-European speaking Greeks of the earlier 'Pre-Hellenic' peoples" (vol. 2).

Bernal's project is ambitious. His first volume begins by distinguishing a *model* from a *paradigm*. A model is artificial and arbitrary, being "a reduced and simplified scheme of a complex reality"; according to this definition, one model might be more productive or more reliable than another "in its capacity to explain the features of the 'reality' confronted." By contrast, paradigms, for Bernal, are "generalized models or patterns of thought applied to many or all aspects of 'reality' as seen by an individual or community." They define the very limits of what is credible.

Bernal's central thesis involves the overthrow of the Aryan Model. He writes in volume 1:

Discussed in this essay

Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, vol. 1, The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785–1985, and vol. 2, The Archaeological and Documentary Evidence, Martin Bernal, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.



Martin Bernal

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schneider

If I am right in urging the overthrow of the Aryan Model and its replacement by the Revised Ancient one, it will be necessary not only to rethink the fundamental bases of "Western Civilization" but also to recognize the penetration of racism and "continental chauvinism" into all our historiography, or philosophy of writing history. The Ancient

Model had no major "internal" deficiencies, or weaknesses in explanatory power. It was overthrown for external reasons. For 18th- and 19th-century Romantics and racists it was simply intolerable for Greece, which was seen not merely as the epitome of Europe but also as its pure childhood, to have been the result of the mixture of native Europeans and

colonizing Africans and Semites. Therefore the Ancient Model had to be overthrown and replaced by something more acceptable.

Bernal would like to promote a “Revised Ancient Model” that holds that although not all ancient Egyptians resembled today’s West Africans, they were “essentially Africans”; and, he adds, “The fundamental reason I am convinced that the Revised Ancient Model will succeed in the relatively near future is simply that within liberal academic circles the political and intellectual underpinnings of the Aryan Model have (today) disappeared.”

Terminologically at least, the very opposition between Ancient and Aryan models may seem puzzling. As Denise McCoskey, a specialist in Greek philology, has observed, the contrast of “Ancient” versus “Aryan” is questionable; she points out:

Most obviously, the tactic implies both that all scholarship in the “Aryan” period was racist and that none of the ancient scholarship was. This very assumption, however, is undermined, though never satisfactorily addressed by Bernal, who is forced to concede at times both that ancient authors omitted mention of African/Phoenician influences and that earlier modern scholars criticized the tenets of the Aryan model during its formulation.

Bernal is admirably clear about his objective: to rediscover, if he can, a plausible “nature” of Athena by expounding a revised ancient model. The first volume tries to make the argument in ten chapters. They can be grouped around three main themes: the existence of the Ancient Model (chapters 1, 2, 3), the rise

and triumph of the Aryan Model (chapters 4, 5, 6, 7), and the competition of the two models, anti-Semitism and racism (chapters 8, 9, 10).

In three concise opening chapters, Bernal wants to show both the existence and consequences of the Ancient Model by taking a historical perspective on two difficult issues. The first concerns the Pelasgoi or proto-Greeks. Citing Herodotus, Bernal claims the Pelasgoi would have been “colonized and to some extent culturally assimilated by the Egyptian invasions.” Bernal defines them as “Indo-European speaking peoples” but overlooks the problem created by Herodotus’ statement that the Pelasgoi were a “non-Greek-speaking-populace.” In any case, Bernal, adducing startling evidence, insists that they were taught by Egyptians how to worship the gods. They would have mixed with the Hellenes some time during the second millennium B.C. The second issue concerns the Ionians, who were living on the Anatolian shore and whom Herodotus did not distinguish from the Pelasgoi. The two issues combine to show the fact of cultural colonization by Egyptians and Middle Easterners. Indeed, Bernal focuses on the civilizing roles of such foreigners as Danaos (from Egypt) and Kadmos (from Sidon), and in a close analysis of Aeschylus’ *Suppliants* makes a powerful case for the thesis of an Ancient Model. He also refers to ancient witnesses. There is, first and foremost, Herodotus, who “derived Greek customs from the East in general and Egypt in particular.” Herodotus wrote,

I will never admit that the similar ceremonies performed in Greece and Egypt are the result

of mere coincidence—had that been so, our rites would have been more Greek in character and less recent in origin. Nor will I allow that the Egyptians ever took over from Greece either this custom or any other.

The nationalism of Thucydides, who rejects all civilizing marks from foreigners such as Danaos, Kadmos, or Kekrops, serves as indirect evidence of the reality of the Ancient Model. Isocrates confirms it, too. Plato, his rival, who spent some time around 390 B.C. studying in Egypt, was profoundly marked by the Egyptian culture. (Bernal quotes Marx's observation that "Plato's *Republic*, insofar as division of labor is treated in it, as the formative principle of the state, is merely an Athenian idealization of the Egyptian system of castes.") Aristotle, for his part, was fascinated by Egypt and the power of her priests, the inventors of *mathēmatikai technai*, mathematical arts.

There is more. The Christian factors would bear witness *a contrario* to the Ancient Model's power. Two historical episodes serve Bernal as metaphors of the upheaval:

In 390 AD the temple of Serapis and the adjacent great library of Alexandria were destroyed by a Christian mob; twenty-five years later the brilliant and beautiful philosopher and mathematician Hypatia was gruesomely murdered in the same city by a gang of monks instigated by St. Cyril. These two acts mark the end of Egypto-paganism and the beginning of the Christian Dark Ages."

Yet the Egyptian effect would continue to be acknowledged until the eighteenth century. The Renaissance was fond of Egypt, Bernal notes, and

thought that it "was the original and creative source and Greece the later transmitter of some part of the Egyptian and Oriental wisdom, and the veracity of the Ancient Model was not at issue." In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, hermeticism, Rosicrucianism, and freemasonry marked the triumph of the Ancient Model. One of the most significant examples was a Roman Catholic priest, the German Jesuit Athanasius Kircher, an ironic reversal of St. Cyril. An astrologist, kabbalist, and hermeticist, Kircher was convinced that the ancient Egyptian culture was both a *prisca theologiae* and a *prisca sapientiae* and contained both the announcement of Jesus (in Hermes Trismegistos) and of Christianity in a philosophy that made Greek rationality possible. Napoleon's 1798 expedition to Egypt monopolizes and, at the same time, challenges this heritage. The reasons that justified the expedition also help explain how the Ancient Model had to be challenged. As Bernal writes:

There is . . . no doubt that [Napoleon] was deeply involved in Masonic affairs, that there were many members of the craft in the higher ranks of his army, and that Masonry "flourished exceedingly" under his rule.

In many ways the elaborate surveys, maps and drawings, and the stealing of objects and cultural monuments to embellish France, was an early example of the standard pattern of studying and objectifying through scientific enquiry that became a hallmark of European imperialism. . . .

On the other hand, there were still many traces of the older attitude towards Egypt, and among the scientific members of the

Expedition there was the belief that, in Egypt, they could learn essential facts about the world and their own culture and not just exotica to complete Western knowledge—and domination—of Africa and Asia.

In fact, the expedition symbolizes the end of the Ancient Model and, according to Bernal's analysis, the onset of the Aryan Model.

Bernal's argument for the Ancient Model is complex and dense, more historical than philological in character. Skillfully, it brings together disparate but concordant witnesses for its central thesis. But sometimes it overlooks delicate issues concerning the credibility of the texts used.

A good example is the use made of Herodotus' testimony. Bernal gives little weight to the accusation made against him by Plutarch's *De Herodoti Malignitate* that he magnified the barbarians. We know that Herodotus probably visited Egypt after 460 B.C. and that his histories on the Greco-Persian war respond to a popular expectation, that is, offer a knowledge acceptable to and accepted by a popular milieu. At the beginning of his reports, Herodotus cautions the reader: "For my own part, I will not say that this or that story is true." And in his introduction to his "ethnography" of Egypt he states: "So have [Egyptians] made all their customs and laws of a kind contrary for the most part to those of all other men." To be sure, he claims to distinguish *muthoi* (that is, legends) from facts, distinguishing what he has seen from what he was told. But, as a matter of technique, he also adds the *prosthekas* or stories that, although related to the topic,

are there to please a popular audience. In book 4, describing the geography and the people living west of Lake Tritonian, he depicts a museum of monstrosity with its dog-headed men, headless people who have their eyes in their breasts, humans who have no names, those who do not dream, and so forth. What is the credibility of such a naive narrator?

As against Plutarch, who called him a "master of lies," one may choose to believe Strabo who describes Herodotus as a simple recorder, one who *katagrapasai*, writes down everything, even foolish and stupid stories. Herodotus, for his part has warned us: "I know not what the truth may be, but I tell the tale as it was told to me." In the course of an ostensible defense of Herodotus, his compatriot, Dionysius of Halicarnassus actually indicts him by demonstrating that (1) Herodotus was mainly concerned by the choice of topics that could please the public (contrary to Thucydides, who dared to describe a war as it happened); (2) he knew how to sell his stories by beginning with a nationalist position—the barbarians are wrong and guilty—and end with the humiliation of these foreigners (contrary to Thucydides' unpopular but scientifically more exacting perspective, which initiates the analysis with the description of Greek decadence and ends up by picturing the deadly opposition between Lacedaemonians and Athenians); and (3) he was concerned with a popular interest: who is right, who is wrong, and a priori knew that he had to demonstrate that barbarians were wrong. (By contrast, Thucydides follows a chronological order in his analysis of the Peloponnesian war in order to

produce a *ktema es aei*, a lesson from what happened.) I am thus afraid that Bernal is not sufficiently critical of Herodotus' pronouncements.

The question of credibility is linked to the very practice of history and its philosophy. Thucydides and Polybius were convinced that history and its study should have a practical purpose, a position shared by Aristotle. This conception of a factual and didactic history was not that of Herodotus and is certainly not that of Isocrates and his disciples. In first-century Rome, apart from such exceptions as Polybius, history does not correspond to the demands of a Thucydides. It wants to please and generally focuses on exciting, exotic, and dramatic events, often inventing them. So that from Herodotus' practice in the fifth century to Thucydides' objective of rendering a clear and factual account to, say, Diodorus Siculus' first-century narratives, the writing of history is submitted to shifting "philosophies," and these manipulate the facts that we get from ancient texts.

Although my critique does not seriously weaken Bernal's argument about the Ancient Model, it indicates, at least, that a more careful job of *critique historique* of the texts consulted might be useful. And I am not even referring here to present-day exigencies of history, but simply to the critical awareness realized already by such ancients as Thucydides and Polybius. Polybius, in his *Histories*, sketches out some explicit historiographic requirements: *polypragmosyne* or a sound commitment to personal enquiry, *empeiria* or a concrete empirical experience, and *emphasis* or the process of

transmitting a given knowledge to the reader.

The second theme of Bernal's book concerns the negation of the Ancient Model and the promotion of the Aryan Model. Chapter 6 relates this reconversion to the German "Hellenomania" as represented by Friedrich August Wolf, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Hegel, Marx, A. H. L. Hereen, and Barthold Niebuhr. They directly or indirectly participated in the preparation of "a full-out attack on the Ancient Model." According to Bernal, it is thus in the nineteenth century that the Ancient Model collapses. The Orient became the "childhood" of humankind and Greece a "miracle." It seems ironic that it is Karl Marx, the internationalist, who would, among other, mostly forgotten, scholars, deny the Egyptian impact on Greece. A systematic attack on the Ancient Model came from the French scholar Petit-Radel and the German Karl Otfried Müller:

Niebuhr had made it legitimate to reject ancient sources, and had introduced the French and Indian models of northern conquest in Antiquity. Müller had removed the Ancient Model from Greece. More powerful than either of these, however, had been the work of linguists in relating Greek to Sanskrit, and making it clear that Greek was an Indo-European language. Some historical explanation of this relationship was necessary, and the model of northern conquests from Central Asia fitted well. Thus a clear distinction has to be made between the fall of the Ancient Model, which can be explained only in externalist terms—that is, through social and political pressures—and the rise of the Aryan one, which had a considerable internalist

component—that is to say, developments within scholarship itself played an important role in the evolution of the new model.

There is a background to this revolution, Bernal informs us: romantic linguistics, the interest in the birth of Indo-European and the rise of India, particularly the love affair with Sanskrit.

The linguistic relationship meant that Indian language and culture could now be seen as both exotic and familiar, if not ancestral. . . . This tie—and the knowledge, through the Indian tradition, that the Brahmins were the descendants of “Aryan” conquerors who had come from the highlands of Central Asia—fitted wonderfully with the German Romantic belief that mankind and the Caucasians had originated in the mountains of Central Asia.

To Bernal, this was just one consequence of the hostility to Egypt exemplified by the marriage of Christianity and Greece against the “pagan” Egypt, and illustrated by the contrast between Erasmus, who was not alone in claiming an Egyptian origin for European philosophy, and Luther, who opposed Rome with a “Greek Testament.” Then there is the idea of “progress” that Europe identifies with herself and the rise of the idea of race that will lead ultimately to de Gobineau’s systematic exposition of the “inequality of the races.” It followed that Europe, and thus Greece, could not have been influenced by Egypt.

This brings us directly to the third theme of Bernal’s book: anti-Semitism and racism. This orientation, according to Bernal, “grew up after 1650 and . . . was greatly intensified by the increased

colonization of North America, with its twin policies of extermination of the Native Americans and enslavement of Africans.” To be sure, the concepts of “racial inferiority” and “slavish disposition” were not really new. Aristotle used them. They were simply reconceptualized in a new context. Philosophers such as Locke, Hume, Kant, and Hegel contributed to their justification. Intersecting with romanticism, racism could be seen, Bernal notes, as one of the “forces behind the overthrow of the Ancient Model.” The quest devoted to authentic roots largely accounted, between 1740 and 1880, for the birth of “Indo-European” philology, “the love affair with Sanskrit,” and Friedrich Schlegel’s “romantic linguistics.” In the 1920s and 1930s, the Semitic influence would be progressively rejected and a new interpretation of Aryanism would impose itself, as exemplified by classical scholars such as Gordon Childe, John Myres, and S. A. Cook, for whom, Bernal says, the Semites were simply “middlemen, copying foreign models . . . reshaping what they adopt . . . and stamping themselves on what they send out.”

Although I essentially agree with Bernal’s analysis of the role of racism (along with such factors as Christianity, the myth of progress, and romanticism) in the overthrow of the Ancient Model, I distinguish what we could call “race thinking” from “racism.” The distinction is a major one and might have some important consequences for Bernal’s account of the hostility to Egypt in the eighteenth century. (And here I put aside the difficult question of the Greeks’ understanding of races, particularly Aristotle’s and its exploitation by Christian

theologians until the beginning of the eighteenth century.)

Bernal's focus on Germany tends to eclipse the development of race thinking in France in the eighteenth century, where in many ways it played a more prominent role. Moreover, the French trajectory allows us both to differentiate race thinking from the creation of an ideology or "science" of racism that we see in Gobineau, even as it demonstrates the continuities between the two.

What we find in eighteenth-century France is a curious paradigm opposing a "race of aristocrats" to a "nation of citizens." It is an opposition promoted by aristocrats who have obvious reasons to oppose the democratic movements. Thus, when the Count de Boulainvilliers invoked the eternal right of conquest of Franks, who came from Germany and colonized the romanized and decadent Gallics, he was expounding race thinking of just this sort. On the eve of the French revolution, Count Dubuat-Nançay was proposing an international "society of noblemen" and arguing that the real origin of French civilization and culture was German. The Count de Montlosier in the late 1780s opposed the Gallics (whom he called a mixture of races risen from slavery) so contemptuously that the revolutionary Abbé Sièyes, in his 1789 *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers-Etat*, suggested sending him and his followers back to their "original German forests."

It is to this tradition that Arthur de Gobineau, also a count, belongs, and his work marks the transition from race thinking to racism. His *Essai sur l'Inégalité des Races* was published in 1853. It incorporates the belief that two different "races" live in France, the Gallic (for-

merly Roman slaves) and the descendants of a German aristocracy. Starting from this premise, he elaborates his main theses: that there is a connection between degeneration of race and the decay of civilization and that, in all mixture of races, the lower becomes dominant, so that the race of "princes" or "Aryans" is biologically in danger. And it is the special distinction of the *Essai* that it claims to ground racism scientifically.

In sum, we can see that there is a history of race thinking that can be distinguished from the "scientific" racism represented by de Gobineau in the mid-nineteenth century. And this incredible history takes place in France, even while, under Frederick II, Prussian noblemen are fighting the rise of their local bourgeoisie. None of this is to suggest that race thinking was at all marginal to German political culture at the time: far from it. In the eighteenth century, German romanticism effloresces, and with it, such concepts as "original roots," "family ties," "innate personality," and "purity of descent." But, as Hannah Arendt has noted, in German history, race thinking comes largely from outside this nobility, and it does not, at this time, have a role commensurate to its role in France. Which is why I suggest that Bernal's emphasis on the lineage of racism in German may distort the larger picture.

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Bernal's second volume provides the foundation for the thesis of the first volume by bringing to bear "archaeological and documentary evidence" in a manner that does justice to the cause of his "Revised Ancient Model." Bernal argues,

and convincingly, that the “Mediterranean space” was an open one and so promotes a diffusionist thesis against the isolationist one promulgated by the Aryan Model. As proof, he first dwells on the interconnections between mythological narratives of Egypt and those of Boiotia (with cross-cultural correspondences between Semelē and Alkemēnē, Zeus and Am(m)on, Athena Itōnia and Athena Alalkomena, Poseidon and Seth; and the shared narrative of the origin of Herakles). Second, he elaborates on Egypt’s influence on Boiotia and the Peloponnese in the third millennium B.C. and the relationship that can be established between Crete and Egypt during the Egyptian Middle Kingdom, from 2100 to 1730 B.C. Third, he adduces the meager archaeological and documentary traces of Sesōstris’ campaigns and his son’s expeditions to Africa and Asia (as referred to by the *Mit Rahina* inscription). Indeed, Bernal seems seduced by the “idea of a ‘civilized’ African marching in triumph not only across Southwest Asia but also through regions of a ‘barbaric’ Europe.” He is more convincing in demonstrating that some Hyksos, who conquered Crete and possibly Thera, were Semitic speakers (others were Indo-Aryan or Indo-Iranian speakers). And he is absolutely luminous in detailing the economic and cultural contacts between Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Aegean from the fifteenth century B.C. on. In his account, a *Pax Aegyptiaca* dominated the Eastern Mediterranean during Tuthmōsis III’s reign, that is after 1470 B.C.

The formative period of Greek culture must be pushed back . . . to the 18th and 17th centuries BC, in Hyksos times—the age portrayed in the Thera murals. It is most likely

that it was in this period that the amalgam of local Indo-European with Egyptian and Levantine influences that we call Greek civilization was first and lastingly formed.

Evaluating his own project, and particularly the second volume, Bernal makes two points I would like to emphasize. First, he writes that “the greatest single outrage in this volume . . . is the elaborate effort to resuscitate the northern campaigns of the 12th Dynasty pharaoh Sesōstris”—a “black pharaoh” whose “far-reaching conquests were believed until the late 18th century.” Concerning Egypt’s influence, he adds: “The only controversial aspect of my work . . . is to take the Egyptian claims of knowledge of, activities in, and suzerainty over the Aegean more literally and seriously than has been customary.”

In promoting this Revised Ancient Model, Martin Bernal consciously situates himself—and this is the second point I want to emphasize—in a recent intellectual tradition. As he tells us, the “Extreme Aryan Model”—which made “the history of Greece and its relations to Egypt and the Levant conform to the world-view of the 19th century and, specifically to its systematic racism”—has, since the late 1960s, been under heavy attack, largely by Jews and Semitists. The important role of Canaanites and Phoenicians in the formation of Ancient Greece is now being increasingly acknowledged (vol. 1). On the other hand, politically, he claims to situate himself “in the spectrum of Black scholarship” along with J. Carruthers, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Ali Mazrui.

Black “Afrocentric” scholars have, in general, reproached Bernal for playing down the contribution of the late Cheik

Anta Diop, a Senegalese nuclear physicist and Egyptologist. Diop is only mentioned in one paragraph of volume 1, as someone who “wrote prolifically on what he saw as the integral relationship between black Africa and Egypt and in the course of this generally assumed the Ancient Model of Greek history.” Indeed, the differences between their projects are basic. Bernal’s project considers diffusionist patterns from Egypt toward the north, the west, and the east as represented by his maps 1, 2, 3 (vol. 2). Diop, in his controverted publications, was more concerned with the interactions between the south and the north. This difference in perspective might account for the fact that Bernal fails to exploit other potential allies, such as Sir James Frazer and other anthropologists or Egyptologists—including E. A. Wallis Budge, Charles G. Seligman, Henri Frankfort—who were baffled by the “‘astonishing similarities’ in material and spiritual culture between Egypt and some of our African contemporaries” (as B. Ray has noted in *Myth, Ritual and Kingship in Buganda*). Insofar as ancient Greece and its multicultural experience are concerned, Bernal missed other “allies”: Engelbert Mveng, a French-educated Jesuit priest from Cameroon and author of *Les sources grecques de l’histoire africaine* and the elegant book by the French scholar Alain Bourgeois on *La Grèce antique devant la Négritude* published by Présence Africaine in 1973.

Bernal’s enterprise illustrates how a scholarly endeavor is also a political one, something he explicitly recognizes. In his response to criticisms from some

classicists, he candidly confessed in the 1989 special fall issue of *Arethusa* that his enterprise was made possible by “the recession of antisemitism” and adds:

If a Black were to say what I am now putting in my books, their reception would be very different. They would be assumed to be one-sided and partisan, pushing a Black nationalist line, and therefore dismissed.

My ideas are still so outrageous that I am convinced that if I as their proposer did not have all the cards stacked in my favor, I would not have enjoyed even a first hearing. However, being not only white, male, middle-aged, and middle-class but also British in America, has given me a tone of universality and authority that is completely spurious. But it’s there! So, I must thank my lucky stars, rather than any talent that I may possess for having got this far, even if this is as far as I go.

I have noted my disagreements with Bernal’s readings, interpretations, and method. I should also note that, although I understand the political significance of his project and its usefulness, I am worried by the fact that it might, and very probably will, be manipulated by both the most sophisticated and the least critical of his constituencies for reasons that have nothing to do with science and the search of truth. That said, we have to recognize that, whether we like it or do not, Bernal’s enterprise—his attack on the Aryan Model and his promotion of a new paradigm—will profoundly mark the next century’s perception of the origins of Greek civilization and the role of ancient Egypt.