



trained Relations? Mediations between Classical Studies and Cultural Studies

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Abstract: Classical Studies and Cultural Studies are often regarded as incompatible endeavours. This does not have to be so, however; instead, the two fields of inquiry have much to offer each other. The writer discusses the prospects of dialogue between the two by looking at the thematic issue of *Parallax* (Issue 29, December 2003), which is devoted to this question. Such dialogue would help both Classical Studies and Cultural Studies to interrogate the politics of their production of their own cultural objects as well as their disciplinary investment in the past and the present.

Keywords: Classical Studies | Cultural Studies | humanities | social sciences

¿Relaciones tensas? Mediaciones entre estudios clásicos y estudios culturales.

Resumen: Estudios clásicos y estudios culturales a menudo son considerados emprendimientos incompatibles. Sin embargo, no deberían presentarse de este modo: ambos campos de análisis tienen mucho que ofrecerse mutuamente. El autor plantea las perspectivas de diálogo entre ambas disciplinas a partir de la temática de un número de *Parallax* (Nº 29, diciembre de 2003), que está dedicado a este interrogante. Un diálogo de tal naturaleza iría en auxilio tanto de los estudios clásicos como de los estudios culturales con el fin de revisar la política de producción de sus objetos culturales propios, como asimismo sus emprendimientos disciplinares en el pasado y en el futuro.

Palabras clave: estudios clásicos | estudios culturales | humanidades | ciencias sociales

Classical Studies and Cultural Studies are probably very often regarded as incompatible endeavours in many respects. And in any case there has not been much contact between the two. This is not to say that Classical Studies would have escaped any influence from the cultural turn in the humanities and social sciences. For instance the profile of *Circe* shows that this is not the case. But the fact remains that mediation and dialogue between the two fields of inquiry remains scarce.

The thematic issue "Declassifying Hellenism" of the Cultural Studies journal *Parallax* (Issue 29, December 2003), guest-edited by Karen Bassi & Peter Euben, is a called-for effort to both map the relationship between these two research orientations and initiate dialogue between them. The issue includes ten articles addressing issues connected with Classical studies and Classical Greece. The writers are all either Hellenists or political theorists. What unites them is an interest in the perspectives and approaches suggested by Cultural Studies, and a multidisciplinary desire to cross the barriers between Classical Studies and Cultural Studies.

Cultural Studies, many of the writers argue, suffers from what they call 'presentism' –that is, a difficulty in theorizing and dealing with continuity between past and present. Victoria Wohl, in her article "Time on Trial", notes that this difficulty shows in the overwhelming focus in Cultural Studies on such typical objects of study as pop culture, American culture, the media, postmodern cultural developments. Pre-nineteenth-century topics are very rare. But, she adds, presentism also shows in methodology. Suspicious of both the teleological narratives of traditional history and the atemporality of structuralism, Cultural Studies seeks to capture a moment in time, which often entails taking that moment out of time, cutting it off from its past and future. This fragmentation of time and thereby experience into a series of perpetual presents risks reducing history's potential alterity and turning it into a mere point of contrast for defining the present. (p. 98.)

All this, Wohl suggests, is epitomized by Cultural Studies' tense relationship with Classical Studies. Classical antiquity has thereby come to appear as inherently antithetical to Cultural Studies's concerns. But if the Cultural Studies scholar is in danger of succumbing into presentism, Classicists often dream of a past uncontaminated by the present, and thus risks becoming mere antiquarianism, Wohl claims (pp. 98-99). To this one might add that these two positions, in their

extreme forms at least, involve a degree of arrogance: Cultural Studies in its desire to adopt a position beyond and above disciplines, and Classical Studies, especially older times, in its readiness to turn down contemporary ideas by retorting: 'What else is new, Plato already said that'. This answer, namely, rests on a simplifying, non-contextual notion of 'sameness'.

The issues dealt with in the articles of the thematic issue range from tragedy, travelling, and race, to questions of materiality and time, and metatheoretical discussions. However, I seem to detect three major topics that go through the articles: the importance of mobility in fifth-century Athens; the question of difference, notably racial difference; and the importance of certain genres in their own period.

Theoria

Two of the articles address the question of mobility in Classical Athens. Their starting-point is the idea that temporally and culturally distant societies are easily regarded as steadily rooted in one place while the reality is often very different. Recent developments, especially in Cultural Studies and anthropology, have challenged both the localism and the aestheticism of assumptions about culture, suggesting instead that we look at culture in terms of travel relations –the ways that people leave home and return. This provides us with a different perspective on life in Classical Greece than the implicated meanings conveyed by the 'imagery of roots'.

Carol Dougherty, in her article "Towards an Itinerary of Culture in Fifth-Century Athens", strongly questions the familiar notion of Athens as the cultural centre of classical Greece, suggesting that the notion removes all traces of agency and downplays the "complexity and messiness" (typical Cultural Studies catchwords) of cultural production and cross-cultural interaction. Instead, she sketches an image of Athens as "something of a hub of a network of travel that Spans the Greek world" (p. 8). She in fact claims that the cultural revolution for which fifth-century Athens is famous for was constituted by travelling! In short, in the interesting project the article is coming from, she is trying to sketch a new framework for looking at fifth-century culture –one which points out the importance of mobility and travel. In the article, Dougherty analyses mobility in Athens from two perspectives: from the point of view of those who came to Athens to visit or stay there as metics, and from that of the Athenians who themselves went

on the road. In this, she evokes the extremely interesting notion '*theoria*', which is about moving out, about travelling to see and experience something new.

Roxanne L. Euben, in her article "The Comparative Politics of Travel", discusses more extensively this very concept of '*theoria*'. The association between travel and experience, Euben notes, is itself both age-old and commonplace. But the association is made explicit in the Greek practice of *theoria*, etymological precursor of the English word theory. With reference to Herodotus and Plato's *Laws*, Euben points out an often unacknowledged connection between the Greek practice of '*Theoria*' and the attainment of knowledge in general and political wisdom in particular.

In this context, 'travel' at once signifies a literal movement across lands and cultures, and an epistemological and imaginative journey in terms of which a traveller comes to understand his or her own. What this means is that theory is not only embedded in actual practices and experiences, but that theorizing is an inherently comparative enterprise, an often transformative mediation between knowledges and practices both familiar and unfamiliar.

Euben adds a word of warning, however. The word travel covers such a range of widely different forms and practices of mobility –from involuntary exile to voluntary recreational travelling– that its analytical force is reduced by that. Secondly, the term can be criticised for implicitly foregrounding some kinds of mobility instead of others, and thereby overvalorising mobility. And moreover, one should pay attention to the way travel has become implicated in imperialist ventures.

That is not all. Euben notes that nomadism and the close association between travel and wisdom is not limited to the Western world. Recuperating the Greek practice of *theoria* brings into sharp relief similar practices between the West and Islam, cultural constellations increasingly portrayed as hermetically sealed and fundamentally antagonistic civilizations. Euben's point is that Europeans and Muslims alike have long compared and understood themselves in terms of a shifting panoply of others and, second, that travel in search of wisdom, curiosity about what is strange, the capacity for critical distance and the domestication of otherness latent in all comparisons with the unfamiliar are not the monopoly of the West. In short, Euben's article pluralizes the locations, genres and cultures in which theorising may be said to occur.

Difference and multiplicity

Difference is perhaps the most cherished word of Cultural Studies scholars. And through the articles, this perspective is applied on classical Greece. More specifically, as many as three articles (those by Susan Lape, Vanita Seth, and Phiroze Vasunia) address the question of racial difference. Their starting-point is the oft-noted fact that race was absent in Ancient and Medieval representations of human diversity, and that the modern notion of race only crystallised during the 19th century. In the Classical world(s), difference was conceived primarily in cultural rather than racial terms. The three writers subscribe this tenet, but provide us with some interesting ramifications.

In her article "Racializing Democracy" Susan Lape argues that in classical Athens citizens and non-citizens were distinguished on the basis of a "race ideology". Although it differs in important ways from modern varieties of racism, its study can nevertheless, Lape claims, illuminate conditions that give rise to racism, offering an important reminder that it can flourish in the absence of scientific rationalisations.

According to Lape, race ideology was not linked to the concept of race as a distinctive human type but rather to democratic citizen status. However, she does see "kind of racialism" in Greek accounts of other peoples and itself (p. 55). And in such cases, it was wedded to ideas of biological inheritance. Lape ends up suggesting that the decline of Athens as an independent democracy and military power was owed in part to the resiliency of the city's race ideology. That the fantasy of racial purity proved more compelling to the Athenians than the need to meet the very real Macedonian military threat, Lape claims, testifies to the effects of race ideologies on the very groups they seem to benefit.

One wonders whether the concept of race ideology is quite as analytical as the writer suggests. She seems to be both having the cake and eating it: both stating there is a crucial difference between Athenian race ideology and later racisms, and tracing the roots of racism in general to Classical thinking. But this does not diminish the importance of the writer's topic and approach.

Vanita Seth's focus, in her article "Difference with a Difference", is on such anatomical excesses so typical in the world of Antiquity and the Middle Ages as centaurs, men with tails or dog faces, races with only one eye. She complains that the recent literature on these 'wild men' elides that which makes the wild man such a pervasive figure in the classical and medieval world –namely, his role as a

protagonist, an active agent that disrupts the order of men in conscious and deliberate ways.

According to Seth, human subject was not privileged in either Classical or Medieval thinking. Instead, both gods and nature were attributed strong agency. This creates the paradoxical effect of permitting a bewildering array of human and semi-human forms while simultaneously foreclosing the possibility of modern constructions of difference.

Seth concludes that a space for race was made possible once nature in all its excess and volition became an object of study, and when man came to be seen as the locus of agency and the repository of meaning. For instance Blumenbach's well-known classification of races was the product of a radically different conception of the world than that familiar to the ancient Greeks and medieval Christians. No gods present, Nature was no longer an agent with volition and intent, but a mute and passive object for study and classification.

I would argue that Seth is perhaps overdoing the dominance of the scientific view of nature of man –after all, how do we explain, in this framework, the persistent tendencies to romanticize nature? If any power creates its counterpower (as Foucault has it), every ideology has its counter-ideologies. But then, one could well rephrase Seth's point as the statement that the configuration of the different notions of nature changed with the emergence of the scientific world view.

Phiroze Vasunia's article "Hellenism and Empire" discusses the consequences of Edward Said's book *Orientalism* for Hellenistic studies. The implications of the book, he claims, have not been well appreciated within the field, and the same goes for colonial and postcolonial studies more generally. In contrast, Roman studies has found it easier to engage with its own worldly involvement than Hellenic studies.

What makes postcolonial theory relevant for Hellenistic studies, too, according to Vasunia, is that European colonialism decisively changed the way in which Greek and Roman antiquity was conceptualized, understood, and taught in the 19th and 20th centuries. Until there are many more such analyses, Vasunia claims, Classical Studies will continue to reproduce itself without any real acceptance of its own recent past. The lesson we should take from Said's *Orientalism*, she suggests, is that how, what, and even why any one today thinks about ancient Greece is inseparable from two hundred years of European colonialism.

Genres in context

Two articles deal with the question of the nature of certain Classical genres. Jill Frank and S. Sara Monoson's article "Aristotle's Theramenes of Athens: A Poetic History" discusses Aristotle's treatment, in his *Constitution of Athens*, of the memory of Theramenes, a controversial Athenian politician prominent during periods of political upheaval at Athens in the later years of the Peloponnesian War.

The writers examine the light the case sheds on issues of universal or philosophical concern to Aristotle, including citizenship, constitutions, and the relation between the two. They argue that for Aristotle, Theramenes represents the living presence of alternative courses for Athens' future.

According to them, the entire project the story is part of should be understood as one that both reports singular events and illuminates the universal significance of those events. In other words, the writers deal with Aristotle's commentary as an instance of what they call 'poetic history', the remembering of exemplary actions and the forgetting of missteps in patterns of lived experiences to create a well-structured plot.

The interesting point here for me at least is the way future is dealt with as an integral aspect of discourse and interpretation. Or, in other terms, the way interpretation and teleology are intertwined in Aristotle's poetic history.

Michael Janover, in his article "Mythic Form and Political Reflection in Athenian Tragedy" outlines what he calls a "political-philosophical account of tragedy". He proposes that tragedy plays upon the weakness endemic to human power, in a sense parallel to that in which comedy can be seen to enact the surprising power of human weakness. By contrast to the myths recited in epic poems, tragedy introduced a mode of cultural representation that turned upon the raising of questions and the uncertainty of their solution rather than the telling of inherited stories with commemorative meanings. Myths crafted by Athenian tragedians are polysemous and deeply questioning rather than conservative of cosmic and social order.

Janover's suggestion is that tragedy illuminates human finitude by emphasizing the ambiguities of individual decisions and communal judgments. Tragic reflection figures, or prefigures, a kind of "philosophy that is not one" (p. 44). The Greek tragedies, however, revolve around speech and action in the external world of the polis, not the interior domain of the soul.

According to Plato in his *Laws*, tragic reflection cannot contribute to moral inquiry because it is moored in the political world where linguistic skill and sophisticated eloquence, even glib self-assertion, take the place of dialogue and rhetoric. Janover admits this possibility but suggests this can be seen as a strength instead of a weakness. His political-philosophical approach, in brief, downplays the heroic aspect of tragedy and underlines what could be called the dialogical properties of the genre.

Questioning presuppositions

In his article "The Materiality of Classical Studies" James I. Porter suggests that the fascination with Classical Antiquity is partly a fascination with material remains. Classical studies in fact exist to legitimate this fascination. Far from being an outmoded pursuit, he points out, Classical Studies continues to be essential and vital. Modernity requires the study of antiquity for its self-definition.

Porter asks what the cultural work is that Classical Studies at any moment does in this cross-current of influences. One area ripe for critique is the presumed timeless *immateriality* of Classics. Classicism has therefore been torn between materialism and idealism. Namely, Porter suggests, even though the fascination of Classical Studies is material-based, there is an unwillingness in the field to admit this. Rendering the flesh transparent and finally unseen is a prerequisite of idealization. In other words, there has been an "as if" stance concerning materiality in Classical Studies.

Classical Studies performs, Porter claims, the work of historical remembrance for the modern world, ahistoricity being the form in which the present *experiences* its historicity. For Porter, Classical Studies is an active agent in the construction of modern ideologies. A critical Cultural Studies can undo some of this cultural work not least by highlighting the historical contingency of the tenets it rests on.

In a typical Cultural Studies vein, Porter suggests that Classical Studies is shaped both by a series of practices and by a series of resistances built into these very practices. According to Porter, there is what he calls a "cognitive dissonance" in the construction of Classical Studies between its uncertain privilege in a postmodern world and its historical form.

At the end of his article, Porter takes up two figures who were and still are disconcerting for many Classicists (pp. 70-72). One was Nietzsche, who focused on the 'inhuman' traits of the Greeks and on the 'terrible and wicked background' that

put their deeds in an eerie and alienating light. The other was Schliemann, who, at the same time with Nietzsche, was making his discoveries of Troy, which came to face with grievous accusations of fake and forgery. Nietzsche was considered threatening for Classical Studies because his picture of ancient Greece was devoid of its conventional and assuring features. Schliemann, in turn, was "an event—a disaster—waiting to happen" (p. 72). What was at stake was the significance of professionalism in the field. In brief, both projects were radically disorienting for the community of Classical scholars. Porter's point is that neither of the two, however, was actually trying to deny the classical ideal; the debates in fact tell us more of the institution of Classical Studies than of the two scholars.

Porter claims that Classical Studies needs to confront the facts of its own materialities again. Thematising the body is one way of going about this kind of critical study, but it is of limited, because thematic, value. What is really needed is an archaeology of attitudes to materialism. And more generally, Porter calls for the history of Classical Studies to be rewritten.

It is by means projects such as the *Parallax* thematic issue that such rewriting can be begun.

What strikes me as positive is that the articles of the thematic issue go straight to discussing their topic and materials without dwelling extensively on the Cultural Studies framework, although it clearly motivates the issue.

This framework itself is addressed most directly by Victoria Wohl, who addresses the question mentioned in the beginning of this review: that of pastism vs. presentism. She asks: can there be a Cultural Studies of the past? In any case, there should be, she replies. Namely, Cultural Studies constantly risks becoming blind to its own historical role in constructing the very present it studies.

The mutual antipathy between Cultural Studies and Classical Studies, according to Wohl, seems to stem largely from a struggle over the meaning and, especially, the temporality of culture, its location within time and its relation to its own past. Putting the two back in dialogue, then, might prove productive for both disciplines, allowing each to interrogate the politics of its production of its own cultural objects and its disciplinary investment in both the past and the present.

As I said above, 'difference' has become a catchword close to sounding a cliché. Still, it is an important perspective on culture, but one that is very hard to stick to consistently. That is actually where its significance lies. For instance, even in this thematic issue Classical Studies and Cultural Studies get treated in a

unifying way. Only one of the writers, Roxanne L. Euben, takes up the question explicitly, suggesting that the ideological underpinnings of much of Classical Studies will inevitably become more visible when the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of those who teach and study Classics in Europe and the USA become more diverse. To this one might add that Classical subjects are studied and taught all over the world as it is, in very different cultural contexts, which cannot but show in the approaches adopted.

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