FORUM: WHAT REMAINS OF CLASSICS?

In our often-declared global, post-modern societies with the frequent claim of being "post-structuralist," "post-colonial," and "post-imperial," among others, it has become common to challenge seemingly familiar truths, institutions, concepts, and the like. Naturally, this has not excluded Ancient Studies, and Classics in particular. But how and to what extent does, and should, this affect the epistemological and heuristic core of our discipline(s)? How can we bridge the gap between the emic views of, and the necessary etic approach to, past societies without violating both the study object and the long-established scientific principles of our field? Is a debate about what makes Classics, Ancient Studies, and all Humanities part of academic studies desirable, necessary, or inevitable?

Obviously, there is not one definite answer to all these questions. Yet opinions abound and should be expressed, noticed, and responded to (see, e.g., Conolly 2022). Thus, we print here a reworked English version of an originally German-published review (*Klio* 102/2, 2020, 711–717) by Uwe Walter (University of Bielefeld), who has critically assessed a mind-challenging approach to studying the "reality" of ancient Greece, particularly the Athenian democracy, by Greg Anderson. We do so in the hope and belief to trigger, and provoke, thoughts on that important topic. And we, of course, welcome any further thoughts and responses that we would publish in one of our next fora!

Review of Anderson, G. 2018. *The Realness of Things Past. Ancient Greece and Ontological History.* New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press; XVIII, 318 pages; 3 maps; ISBN 978-0-19-088664-6; £ 55.00.

Greg Anderson lectures at Ohio State University and is the author of several acclaimed studies of Greek history, including the monograph *The Athenian Experiment* (2003) next to a number of theoretically ambitious essays, e.g., "The Personality of the Greek State" (2009). The book under review is explicitly aimed at a broad, non-specialist, cross-disciplinary readership (p. XIII), and its aspiration is far from being modest: A(nderson) proposes nothing less than "a fundamental change in the rules of historical engagement, a paradigm shift that would be very roughly equivalent to the quantum revolution in modern physics" (ibid.). He thus seeks to lay a foundation for rendering historical accounts ethically less questionable, philosophically more robust, and historically more significant (ibid.). Under the banner of Dipesh Chakrabarty's crusade, he sets out

doi: 10.16758/j.cnki.1004-9371.2022.04.017

from "the powerful postcolonial challenge to conventional historicism" in order to liberate historical research from the shackles of an inevitably teleological modernism. In particular, he seeks to dispose of the "post-Enlightenment standards of truth and realness upon all non-modern experiences, western and non-western alike" and instead to grasp each pre-modern lifeworld "on its own ontological terms, in its own metaphysical environment" (p. 2). Athens certainly presents a plausible example for such an approach. The course of the argument is briefly outlined in the "Introduction" (pp. 4–6), while a notice summarizing the individual chapters can be found in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (Roblee 2019).

A. surveys the alleged scholarly aberrations concerning classical Athens (Chapters 1–3). Yet, although the author is familiar with the subject through his own work, any informed reader soon notices that this is merely an attack on bogeymen which hardly represent current research. As early as 1985, Jochen Bleicken concisely and explicitly demonstrated that the political order of the Athenians was not some deficient predecessor of modern liberal democracy; notions about human rights or an immanent urge to improve the system were not an issue to the ancients. His studies of institutions and practices let Athens appear as the product of a specific historical development that followed its own particular rules.[1] A. obviously is as unaware of this book as he is of almost any other non-English speaking research. Such he even deliberately omits – allegedly out of consideration for anglophone-only readers (p. XIV). As if anyone would put down the book if they learned that some good ideas were formulated in French, German, or Italian! Here already A. is offending his readers. Bleicken's standard work aside: nowadays under the influence of anthropological methodology it is common to dissociate ancient affairs, and many ancient historians have at least theoretical reservations about speaking of "state," "society," "economy," or "religion." In light of the current state of debate, A.'s question as to why no one considered that Athenian democracy "might have been categorically different from our own political arrangements" (25) could well be understood as a satire if it would not appear so rude in the context of this entirely pretentious book.

The clogging of continuous epistemological confusion is most obvious in Chapter 4 "Historicism and its Consequences:" By "historicism" the author obviously refers to the western-modern variant of a teleological ideology of history as famously criticized by Karl Popper. Here, this is claimed to portray Athenian *demokratia* as a proto-liberal "democracy" and therefore to be troubled with all kinds of aporia (e.g., dating the beginnings, deficits, internal inconsistencies, non-synchronicity). But despite all the finery, trappings, and aspirations, A.'s alternative approach boils down to nothing more than an

[1] Bleicken 1994.

immature postmodern version of Ranke's dictum according to which "every epoch is immediate to God:"[2] he demands to both heed and retrieve "the heterogenous truths and rationalities" of pre-modern worlds and "the past's myriad non-European ways of being human" (pp. 45–46). If we actually were to take this attempt seriously, then any organization of matters following the concept of a perceiving subject would be prohibited. There would be nothing left to do but to reproduce the self-descriptions of bygone agents and simply write out the sources. Terms for institutions and systems of order would not admit any attempt of translation whatsoever, since this would risk their contamination with modern ideas. Accordingly, the history of Athenian *demokratia* would consist of Theseus and the tyrannicides of 514 BC, while on the other hand both Cleisthenes and the *demos*' resistance against Isagoras and the Spartans would classify as modern myths, as also would the reforms of Ephialtes. One wonders how we ought to consider, according to the author, the elaborate sequence of different constitutions in the Pseudo-Aristotelian *Athênaiôn Politeia* ... . Throughout the remainder of the book, the ignorance of, for instance, Kant's and Droysen's fundamental epistemological discoveries turns out to be rooted not so much in naïveté but actually in targeted aggression, only superficially concealed by a simple sleight of hand: for "our" episteme is understood as a mere manifestation of power relations (i.e., the arrogant presumption of a "genuinely scientific, panoptic knowledge of the past, a knowledge superior to any possessed by all those people who actually lived that past;" p. 54) and hence demands to be overcome. This simply ignores the basic fact that without such an episteme, that is, without decoding concepts and perspectives, we would not be able to perceive anything at all. We would drown under an infinite abundance of external aspects of phenomena and be left disoriented amidst the contradictions between ancient self-descriptions. Besides, word should have gotten around that we can think only with our own head and not with that of the ancient Athenians, who simply are dead and gone. It would, on a sidenote, be interesting to know how A. would classify Aristotle and his formation of concepts and categories – as a victim or as a perpetrator?

More recent systems of research such as an anthropologically inspired cultural history, discourse history, and the "material turn" (Chapter 5) also fall into disgrace, since they all ultimately cling to the dichotomy between the emic view of the agents and a reality preexisting at least in principle. And not even newer ideas brought forth by an ontological anthropology seem to offer a way out of the *cul-de-sac*, as the author illustrates by use of a bold example: he believes that we are stuck as long as we assume the existence of an Athenian economy – which the Athenians had no concept of – while on the other hand we consider the

[2] English trans. of Ranke: 1981, 160.

goddess Athena to be a mere content of consciousness – although for the Athenians she formed an essential part of their real world (p. 58). Consequently, it is argued, there is no way but "to suspend our own modern standards of truth and realness" (p. 60). One cannot help but wonder: would this mean that A. would erect altars again and offer bloody sacrifices to the gods in order to regain the lifeworld of the ancient Greeks?

The second part of the book (Chapters 6–9) tries to make plausible the intended "ontological turn," whereby A. understands as "ontological" the specific "accounts of what it deems to be the real world" (p. 71) peculiar to each community. He demonstrates this through various examples ranging from "multinaturalist worlds" in Amazonia to cosmic ecology in Ming China and the medieval *corpus mysticum*. These are contrasted with what is portrayed as "our" dominating modern, utterly new concept of being human, based on a dichotomy of nature and culture, and contaminated by materialism, anthropocentrism, secularism, and individualism. Unable to make sense of other kinds of lifeworlds, this episteme of ours allegedly cultivates "a kind of retrospective political violence, a historicist imperialism that would forcefully impose the realities of our liberal capitalist present upon peoples who can no longer speak for themselves" (p. 102).[3] But the presumed universal validity of this modern ontology, so it is claimed, has long proven fragile, since quantum physics – in particular Heisenberg's so-called uncertainty principle (1927) – has shaken the certitude of the Newtonian world view and the Cartesian distinction between subject and object. Unfortunately, A. omits the long-lasting controversial debates on the Copenhagen interpretation within physics itself. In the field of Social Sciences, so the argument continues, Marx, Foucault, and postcolonial theory have demonstrated that supposedly scientific statements about social issues are generally driven by interests and entangled in power structures, and that this also holds true for earlier and thus completely unfamiliar formations. Hence, A. demands to take as a guideline the "diverse life-stories of multiple humanities, each one pursuing whatever life meant in its own self-sustaining metaphysical conjuncture, in its own particular world" (p. 117). In the sense of self-criticism, this is not only supposed to be ethically and philosophically imperative, but also to yield more sound historical knowledge. Concluding the section, the author tries to refute obvious objections against the new "ontological history" by means of a clever question-and-answer game (pp. 120–125).

[3] This is, in fact, a new dimension. Current identity politics are known to constantly produce victims who then permanently feel offended and thus require protection. But A. goes one step further in this respect: he does not merely speak on behalf of living people who feel uncomfortable in an allegedly hostile environment and therefore no longer need to deal with arguments. Here, actually the Athenians, deceased for some 2,500 years, are declared poor victims who have to be saved from modern historians with their probes and scalpels.

Thus armed, A. returns to ancient Athens for the third and longest part of the book (Chapters 10–16). Among other things, he seeks to make plausible the "agency" – a catchword that, of course, cannot go unmentioned – and "immediate material realness of gods in Athenian experience" (p. 131) along with the earth of Attica "as a kind of living person or agency" (p. 140) or as "generative agency" in the life process of the polis ecology (p. 141). Even a reviewer as critical of the whole outline as the late Peter J. Rhodes concedes that these chapters are quite illuminating for understanding Athenian society "on (some) of its own terms."[4] There certainly is some truth in this; and yet, it is revealing to consider two of A.'s main concepts together. First, and tirelessly repeated in the second main part, is his furor against any dualistic world construction in the spirit of Descartes. Add to this his formula of a "more comprehensive, more inclusive Athenian 'way of life', one that obliged all members of the polis to help reproduce a cosmic ecology of gods, land, and people" (p. 158), and then all of a sudden one thing becomes clear: someone here is cultivating a neo-romantic and neo-vitalistic holism, gathering the many different ontologies and epistemologies under a bright sky painted in beautiful colors. Already the wording betrays him. Thus, any distinction between "sacred" and "secular" is presumed meaningless, for "the world of Athens *was innocent* [emphasis by the reviewer] of any such man-made cosmological contradictions" (p. 138). Elsewhere, it is claimed that the Athenians required no biopolitical control in the Foucauldian sense. After all, they were "already fully formed Athenians, already managing their lives individually and collectively in time-honored, ecologically productive ways" who steadily reproduced "a primordial social body of social bodies" (p. 175). And the Dionysian festivities are taken to have been all about "fusion and integration of all the different elements – gods, mortals, and nature" (p. 220).

For all his efforts, it remains unclear how A.'s account of Athens as a "poliadic person" (p. 143) is supposed to aid the ancient historians' day-to-day work of explaining historical events and intellectual achievements. Emphasizing the omnipresence of gods and divine powers in Athenian life, after all, is not new. The author offers a concise compilation of the results of some of the relevant scholarship (pp. 150–152). Thereby, he rightly emphasizes the findings on the importance of women and their "life-sustaining ritual responsibilities" (p. 155). But then again, the notion that to the Athenians "gods shaped and determined the conditions of all material existence" (p. 150) is at least debatable. A. then even goes as far as to claim that the supernatural beings were "the ultimate 'governors' of the polis" (p. 152). Here his overly vague conceptual instruments become fully apparent – as do the indistinct, not to say: blind, political categories of his pan-

[4] Rhodes 2019.

ritualism. For a polity "Governed by Gods" (thus the title of Chapter 11) would be nothing but a theocracy. And ancient Athens, if anything, was the antithesis of such.

Chapters 12 to 14 deal with well-known topics: the *oikos*, the various *oikos*-overarching associations, and the *demos*, together identified as "the three different types of human agency that were responsible for managing life in Attica" (p. 159). The author rightly underlines the integration of women into the *oikos* and their fundamental importance for its functioning. He goes on by criticizing the binary scheme that emphasizes male dominance and ultimately rests on a modern concept of individuality: "Far from being continually 'dominated' by any male-controlled 'political' or 'public' realm, they were continually expected and encouraged to exercise forms of responsibility, authority, control, discretion and initiative in the management of almost all matters of everyday well-being, even if nature had also seen fit to design 'partners' for them who could act on their behalf in certain specific locations, like assemblies, law courts, and battlefields" (p. 171). But A. is not as daring to postulate complementarity and harmony in what today is such a delicate field, which is why he instantly backpedals (p. 170): he does not want to propose the idea that Athenian and Greek attitudes regarding gender relations might deserve recognition in today's modernity for one single moment! Here, as in many other instances, the question arises why we both as scholars and as a society should be interested in ancient Athens at all if terms like "democracy," "citizenship," and "civic rights" make no sense whatsoever in that context, because all relations, distinctions, and tensions were mashed in one and the same social primordial cosmic soup.

Chapter 13 ("Living as One Liked") sketchily discusses the demes, phratries, and *phylai*, among others, in addition to social control through "gossip," self-help, and the court system. Some good observations and plausible conclusions drawn from the sources are to be found here. But again, A. does not waste any opportunity to present his view as something truly revolutionary: thus, the *demokratia* of the Athenians is portrayed as having been nothing near to "an ancient equivalent of a modern secular 'political system'" but an "all-inclusive 'way of life' that was pursued continually throughout the polis by all its members" (p. 191). Baffled by such a staggering discovery, one only wishes to delve into the Thucydidean *epitaphios* – where, of course, exactly the same is said. Chapter 14 is a note of caution against mistaking the Athenian *demos* – "a kind of ageless human superorganism, a unitary corporate self that had subsisted continuously in Attica since times immemorial" (p. 194) – for a modern state. Yet, such organistic imagery distracts from the central problem of how decisions were practically generated, especially when they concerned controversial issues. In all seriousness, A. contends that the *demos* did not "govern," but only decided

on all those issues that concerned Athens as a whole. No attention is paid to the concept of *governance* as a web of interlocking, complementary, or competitive regulative efforts by several groups of actors and institutions. Instead, the author offers bulky statements according to which the life principle of the *demos* was unity, not equality (p. 195 et al.). Chapter 15 deals with some aspects of Athenian "economy" which, as we learn, must not be called such. We are instructed quite in detail about the financing of festivals and sanctuaries, and the contribution of women, the "liturgical class," and slaves.

The sixteenth and final of the main chapters once again clearly reveals A.'s Athens as simply being a place of longing promising relief from modernity and all its impositions. It appears as "a world wholly unacquainted with distinct political, social, and economic fields […], where social being not individual being was primordial" (p. 233). Here, women played vital roles decreed by the gods to ensure the well-being and continuity of both the *oikos* and the polis (p. 234), and "humans were not alone" (ibid.). The main part of the chapter, however, is devoted to A.'s attempts to refute three obvious objections against his account. For were there not numerous transgressions in reality ("The mess of 'real life'")? – Indeed, but they were not as substantial as is implied by a tradition that tends to significantly overrepresent them. And were there not fundamental counter-concepts, especially in form of philosophical criticism of the *demokratia* and the likewise philosophical doubts concerning the existence, the nature, and the acts of the gods? – Certainly, but these were isolated voices from members of the elite. A. here spends considerable effort demonstrating that Thucydides' work, too, was by no means "modern" (pp. 243–246) but in fact quite compatible with the alleged conviction of the Athenians that divine beings were actually present and active in the tangible world. Finally, A. anticipates the objection that he would seem to neglect the historical changes between 480 and 320 BC. This is, indeed, relatively easy to refute by referring to numerous studies in cultural, social, and mental history on much longer periods. Cleverly, then, there is yet again a bogeyman waiting at the end.

In the epilogue ("New horizons of history and critique"), A. attempts an outlook beyond his reinterpretation of Athenian history and thereby is especially concerned with the relation between past and present. Only the examination of an ontologically fundamentally different formation, he claims, enables us "to come to terms with the sheer metaphysical anomalousness of our own modernity" (p. 252). Furthermore, he calls for a fundamental change in the whole western way of thinking, of producing and ordering knowledge. In a "genuinely post-disciplinary intellectual environment" (p. 253), he considers the distinction between historical science and anthropology untenable. Even more comprehensively, A.

requests a new Critical Theory, "something like a non-modern critique of the modern," which he expects to emerge from a "counter-knowledge of our modern conjuncture" (p. 254) in order to overcome the capitalistic logic and teleology.

In the end, one cannot help but be grateful for the author's utterly bare "agenda setting." Already the aims quoted at the beginning demonstrate what the entire book represents. It attempts to utilize postcolonial identity politics to eliminate all proven and indispensable academic, intellectual, and ethico-political standards from historical scholarship, namely the Classics. The outward form is sheer overwhelming with its ostentatious phrases about an ontologically renewed epistemology, supported by entire phalanges of authorities from the most diverse disciplines, and brought forth by a pounding redundancy of the premises and postulates. This meets with a readership that already leans heavily towards self-reflection and self-criticism, in very rare cases even self-hatred, and therefore might be all too eagerly receptive to such dubious attempts. It is, therefore, high time to wake up, ere ideologization globally begins to corrupt our discipline and our cause to an extent that it already has reached in the United States.

Bibliography

Anderson, G. 2003.
The Athenian Experiment. Building an Imagined Political Community in Ancient Attica, 508–490 B.C. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
——— 2009.
"The Personality of the Greek State." *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 129: 1–21.
Bleicken, J. [2]1994.
Die Athenische Demokratie. Paderborn et al.: Schoeningh.
Conolly, J. 2022.
"Let's Open our Eyes and Leap." *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 152/1: 15–23.
Ranke, L. von. 1981.
The Secret of World History. Selected Writings on the Art and Science of History. Ed. and trans. by R. Wines. New York: Fordham University Press.
Rhodes, P. J. 2019.
"Review of Anderson 2018." *Sehepunkte* 19/9, accessed under: http://www.sehepunkte.de/2019/09/32998.html (04.04.2021).
Roblee, M. 2019.
"Review of Anderson 2018." *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2019.10.03, accessed under: https://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2019/2019.10.03 (10.04.2021).