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## Modernity as the Villain of the Piece

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I read this book (Greenberg and Hamilakis 2022) with enormous excitement and admiration. I also read it with a strong feeling of solidarity as I tried to imagine the resistance the authors must have faced from some of their fellow archaeologists in their respective countries. I feel honored to be given a chance to express my feelings, unprofessional as they are. Still, speaking as a person with zero expertise in the field of archaeology and, what is worse, as an unrepentant modernist, I also feel an obligation to do some conceptual quibbling from the sidelines, and that's what I'll do.

To begin with, I want to underline a point that is made in the book, but is not underlined there, perhaps out of disciplinary wariness or personal modesty. It's a point about archaeology's object of knowledge, the distant past, or (more precisely) about what allows archaeology to establish itself as a discipline based on that object: the prestige that is accorded to the distant past. As the book abundantly illustrates, the prestige of the distant past has been weaponized for nationalist and racist purposes. But the fact that the prestige of the distant past has been weaponized doesn't mean that the distant past doesn't deserve its prestige. It doesn't mean that archaeologists are wrong to benefit from that prestige. The question remains open of what value we do or don't want to ascribe to that distant past – whether we want to see it as a modern myth or a vestige of theological reverence that should be erased, or something quite different, like a chapter in Fredric Jameson's "single great collective story" (1981: 19). In the field of literature, the danger of presentism is matched, as I have argued, by a danger that is symmetrical although it usually goes unnamed: what might be thought of as *pastism*, the substituting of reverence for the past *as such* for explicit arguments about the value and values for us now of the old texts that we are asking our students and readers to appreciate. What is also missing when reverence for the past is hard-wired in is explicit discussion about the continuity or discontinuity between our time and theirs, a discussion that seems mandatory in the sense that even absolute discontinuity, today's default setting, cannot be taken for granted. In short, it seems to me that, for all our shared suspicion of origins, the question of the meaning the deep cultural heritage ought to have for us remains unanswered.

While awaiting an answer to that question, we might decide, pragmatically, to weaponize the symbolic capital of the distant past ourselves, but to point that weapon at different targets. That's what I tried to do, in a minor way, in the early 1990s, at the height of the Culture Wars, when a right-wing think tank in North Carolina invited me to defend what they saw as a turn away from teaching the Great Books. Journalists, and some scholars themselves, were pretending that Homer and Shakespeare were no longer being taught, that syllabi were filled with nothing but Chinua Achebe and Alice Walker. This was blatantly untrue, of course, but something did need to be said in defense of changes in the curriculum that were indeed happening. I told my hosts that the humanities' recent interest in the victims of colonialism and of lives lived in what was then called the Third World was just a continuation of ancient Greek cosmopolitanism, which queried the habit of according greater moral value to the lives of fellow citizens than to the lives of distant strangers. I wrote Diogenes's name on the blackboard. In Greek (Διογένης). I can't say it pacified my listeners, but it did at least give them pause.

If I understand *Archaeology, Nation, and Race* correctly, the book sees the exaggerated, even theological value ascribed to the distant past not as a genuine attribute of that past but as an invention of modernity. It ought to

be possible to admit this without presenting modernity as the villain of the piece, as I think the book tends to do. Modernity, for Raphael Greenberg and Yannis Hamilakis, wants to impose continuity on a history that is in fact radically discontinuous. Let me say two quick things about that scenario, if indeed I'm getting it right. One: modernity can also enjoy seeing itself as *discontinuous* with the distant past – think of someone like Steven Pinker, exemplary champion of modernity though not, I think, a nationalist. He is more enthusiastic about capitalism than about nationalism. The point is that modernity contains both, and much more besides. For that reason, modernity doesn't need continuity; it can happily embrace discontinuity (this is what the book acknowledges, I think, when it identifies modernity as a theory of temporal break). The contradiction is especially obvious if you think of the exemplary agent or representative of modernity as capitalism rather than as the nation-state.

My second quick point: can you really see modernity as the villain while also embracing Bruno Latour (1993), who says that we have never been modern?

There is something strange about the way modernity is discussed here. It's treated as a real phenomenon, not (in Latourian fashion) as a mere ideological illusion. But its reality is presented as if it were composed exclusively of bad things. The one modification that's offered to Latour's famous "we have never been modern" dictum is that Latour "erases historically situated processes such a colonization, capitalist commodification, and racialization, with their specific ontological and epistemic grounding on progress, hierarchy, and civilization" (Greenberg and Hamilakis 2022: 87). Let me pause on this sentence. Here the only processes that are associated with modernity, the only processes that Latour forgets, are extremely undesirable ones: colonization, capitalist commodification and racialization. Those undesirable processes are grounded on other undesirable things, also uniquely modern: progress, hierarchy and civilization. This is not accurate history. It is highly moralized history. Or if you prefer, it is undialectical history. Is it plausible that nothing good has come out of modernity at all, only colonization, commodification and racialization? Is it plausible that any historical period can be properly associated only with bad things? What about, to take a pertinent example, the sensibility exemplified by Hamilakis and Greenberg? Surely they would not want to claim that their perspective on archaeology would have been possible at any point in the past. Surely they would admit, if only under duress, that there are positive aspects of modernity that fed into their own scholarly and political perspective, indeed made it possible. This is not a personal point: the same question could have been asked (I'm sorry we no longer have the chance to do so) of the recently departed Latour or David Graeber. To me, the idea that modernity has given us only colonization, commodification, and racialization seems no more plausible than it would be to suggest that there was no colonization or ethnic cleansing in classical antiquity, propositions that I'm sure the authors would properly and indignantly reject.

Can we have another, more serious think about the terms progress, hierarchy, and civilization? Among other things, these terms don't fit well together. However skeptical we may be about progress, are we ready to deny that modern democracy achieved some measure of progress, and did so, indeed, precisely by colliding head-on with "hierarchy," the signature blood-based hierarchy of feudal and pre-feudal society? The fact that, under conditions imposed by capitalism, democracy has created new hierarchies of its own, a fact that cannot be doubted, does not erase the real differences that the achievement of formal political rights has made in, say, the life chances of women and people of color. Everyone knows this, but it remains more acceptable than it should be to speak as if these aspects of modernity were merely complacent ideological fantasies.

In much the same contrarian spirit, I also object to the mainly unarticulated skepticism that surrounds references to the concept of civilization. Everyone quotes Walter Benjamin's endlessly useful line: "There is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (Benjamin 2007 [1940]: 256). Not everyone chooses to notice that that line does not try to dispense with the concept of civilization entirely (nor the fact that – I thank my erudite friend Christian Thorne for the reminder – Benjamin's reference in the original German is to "Kultur," not to "Zivilisation," a difference about which more might be said). The fact that there is barbarism within civilization doesn't mean that there is no such thing as being civilized. One mark of being civilized is to recognize that, as C. P. Cavafy (1975 [1904]) said in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, "Those people were a kind of solution." The inhabitants of the city were afraid of a threat that they had themselves constructed, and that had served their purposes – including the purpose of hiding the city's truth from itself. The barbarian was a construct. To recognize that the barbarian is a construct, as educated common sense in the modern period tends to recognize, is one way of being civilized. If that's what educated common sense teaches, then to that extent civilization is real, and it is a verifiable aspect of modernity. As is democracy, however imperfect and imperiled. If that were not true,

we would be forced to hold that the passionate democratic values that clearly inspire this book come from some other planet. Ditto for the abolition of slavery, equal rights for women, consciousness of what Edward Said called Orientalism (1978), and the rest of the litany of what, to me, are quite real accomplishments – accomplishments without which the writing of a superb and necessary book like this one would have been inconceivable.

I understand that in some ways a critical view of modernity is a convenient premise for the discipline of archaeology, even when that discipline is working in its most self-critical mode, as it is here. Still, a less one-sided view of modernity would have certain advantages. For one thing, it would allow for the possibility of a *non-nationalist* appropriation of the distant past, an argument that (say) might serve present purposes without subordinating itself to the instrumentality of nationalism, as in the Greek and Israeli cases examined here. One obvious example would be *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, by Graeber and David Wengrow (2021), a book that renews our sense of the open-endedness of history and yet cannot be accused of flattering the origins of anyone's modern nation-state.

What *The Dawn of Everything* could perhaps be accused of, at least in the eyes of some critics, is idealizing the pre-modern, indigenous cultures that preceded the modern nation-state. This is another danger to which a one-sided view of modernity leaves archaeology's self-critique vulnerable. How celebratory ought modern archaeology to be of "indigenous archaeologies practiced by ordinary people as well as scholars [...] long before the arrival of official, authorized archaeology" (Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 89)? It can sometimes seem as if taking any critical distance whatsoever from the ways antiquities were treated by "ordinary people" in the pre-modern period "would be to reproduce the colonial distinction between the 'West' (in its various forms) which possesses science and scholarship, and the 'rest' which possess custom, ethnological interest, and folklore" (Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 90) as well as "beliefs" about the supernatural power and agency of these antiquities (Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 91). Here, as in other arenas, it seems to me a mistake to assume that oppression confers on the oppressed a decisive epistemological advantage, and that the professional archaeologist is duty-bound to defer to it. The virtuous self-effacement of the modern archaeologist, under threat of seeming to further the work of colonialism, is not more edifying than the spectacle of colonialism itself.

One no doubt unintended effect of the recent generalization of the concept of colonialism, and the accompanying imperative to decolonize, an imperative that this book embraces, is the extension of colonialism to cover, or appear to cover, *all* nation-formation. As the authors are well aware, colonialism does not apply equally to Israel, where it is so glaring a fact that no sentient observer could fail to acknowledge it, and Greece, where it can indeed be applied (most flagrantly, to the 1919 invasion of Asia Minor). In the case of Greece, other and later instances would need some hard arguing, and would bring Greece closer to the case of the newly independent nations that resulted from twentieth-century anti-colonial struggles. Even there, speaking of colonialism is not a self-evident mistake: many of the indigenous peoples that have joined together as an international movement in the past decades would claim to have been colonized by people who had themselves been colonized. But recourse to the concept of colonialism hides an ambiguity that needs to be exposed. The intended object can be to restore a collectivity whose oppression has been neglected, as when (for example) the Vietnamese or Cambodians are accused of mistreating the indigenous population of the Cham or the Algerian Arabs are accused of mistreating the Berbers/Amazigh. But the emphasis can also fall not on the fact that the colonized (by the Europeans) were and are themselves colonizers (of their own indigenous peoples), but rather (again) on the Europeans as the source of all evil – that is, the way in which European powers inspired and controlled the archaeological project in Israel and Greece from above and outside, turning that project to their own purposes.

It is this second emphasis that seems to follow from Michael Herzfeld's (2002) concept of "crypto-colonization." I listened in recently to a zoom conference in London commemorating the "Great Catastrophe" in Smyrna in 1922, a hundred years ago. From one perspective, it's the anniversary of an atrocity in which thousands of Greek and Armenian Christians were killed and many tens of thousands more were expelled. From another perspective, it's the anniversary of the emergent Turkish republic, overthrowing the Ottoman Empire and kicking out the European armies that were trying to carve Turkey up. The speakers were Greek and Turkish historians. How did they manage to find common ground? They did find common ground, as against their respective nationalisms, but as I saw it they did so only by giving the lion's share of the agency to the European powers that were manipulating the fate of both their nations. That is, they found common ground by seeing themselves as colonized, or crypto-colonized – by rediscovering the not so hidden secret that they had both been pushed around by the European powers. There

is a certain convenience in the label. But as with modernity, it works only by concentrating all the villainy in one place. And it permits a certain evasion of national responsibility.

Both authors are careful to present their nations as colonizers as well as colonized, and as I've said in the Israeli case there is no possible quarrel with that. But I worry a bit that Herzfeld's term crypto-colonization undoes some of that good work. "Crypto" puts the emphasis on hidden or secret. I wonder whether it might be better to use something like "semi-colonialism," as I understand has been used in the case of China. That would take the emphasis off the hiddenness and put it more on the *partialness* and – I think this is in the spirit of the book – the fact that, as with China, the colonized also has to be seen as a colonizer. I don't know how far we want to go in this direction; I can imagine an extreme argument that *every* nation-state is a colonizing power, that there is no effective difference between imperial conquest and nation-formation. That would be a mistake, I think, if only because it would erase whatever critical power remains to the term colonialism and because it would erase a significant difference between nation-states and empires. Empires were forced by their defining dynamic to conquer other territories. The rough estimate is that Alexander the Great was responsible for something like 500,000 deaths, a higher proportion of the world's population in his day than was killed by the Nazis in theirs. That doesn't let the Nazis off the hook; it doesn't let modernity off the hook. But it does suggest that we need better meta-narratives linking the present to the distant past. I am very grateful to the authors for inspiring me to go in quest of such narratives. Their book is a major step in that direction.

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