

## In Defense of the Classics, Against New Racism

By Victor M. Kogan\*

*The wave of the struggle against “white privilege” and “systemic racism” did not pass the field of classics, the study of Ancient Greece and Rome. Critical Race Theory, broadly recognized in American colleges and universities, presents reality in two colors only. It overshadows and even substitutes any merit by the color – white is wrong, non-white is good. This approach is quite convenient for replacing professional knowledge with the loud noise of mind “decolonization,” disorients presumed beneficiaries and turns out to be new racism, in this case, aimed as discrimination against whites. The spark of its prominence in classics and humanities was given by Dan-el Padilla Peralta, who is a black, undocumented immigrant from the Dominican Republic. He has been supported by white people against the US immigration law all the way up to Princeton, Oxford, and Stanford, some of the best educational institutions, to master Greek and Latin and, finally, teach Classics at Princeton. At the pinnacle of that, he speaks against the historical foundation of this society, what he has understood to be a white man-dominated slaves-holding structure fraught with systemic racism. Positive Discrimination or Affirmative Action programs exist in the USA, India, Malaysia, Nigeria, and other countries as a broadly recognized way to correct historical injustice. Winners, who, in most visible cases, happen to be white, try to pay dues to the retrospective non-white victims of oppression. It is possible to apply Affirmative Action to history classes through acceptance and grading, but not to History itself. Slavery and the dominance of men, which nullify the value of classics in the eyes of fighters against “white supremacy,” were everywhere, while Democracy was in Athens and Rome only. So, to promote truth and our dignity, Classics must stay.*

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### The Tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT)

In our country “People of color lead shorter lives, receive worse medical care, complete fewer years of school, and occupy more menial jobs than do whites,” (Delgado and Stefancic 2017, p. 13) but lamentable not only that. There is a racial gap in many aspects of life - rates of infant and maternal mortality, longevity, level of schooling and educational achievements, menial and professional job, unemployment, abortion, marriages, divorce, single motherhood, median family income, people living below the poverty line, health, alcoholism, drug dependency, HIV/AIDS, and healthcare. In all these cases, Blacks perform worse than Whites. The gap persists despite the society-wide historical improvement brought on by the Civil Rights movement and along with Affirmative Action. Blacks’ life improvement occurs in the background and context of Whites’ life improvement. So, the life of Blacks,

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despite the meaningful improvement, might be seen and felt as getting worse. Paradoxically, CRT comes as a reaction to this relative deprivation.

“Critical Race Theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law” (Delgado and Jean Stefancic 2017, pp. 3, 13). According to CRT, “racism is the usual way society does business, the common, *everyday experience* of most people of color in this country, the norm. The system of “white-over-color ascendancy” serves important purposes, both psychic and material, for the dominant group. Racism is difficult to address or cure because it is not acknowledged.” The color-blind or “formal” conception of equality covers and can remedy only the most blatant forms of discrimination, which stand out and attract our attention (Delgado and Stefancic 2017, p. 8).

Although in all indicators of a good life ‘Whites’ stand behind “Asians,” CRT considers the binary Black-white relationship as the paradigm central to racial analysis, (Delgado and Stefancic 2017, p. 169) the window onto ignored or alternative realities<sup>1</sup> (Delgado and Stefancic 2017, p. 46). “To see the world as binary and to choose the side of righteousness makes life much more meaningful, - Andrew Sullivan commented. - It banishes doubt and complexity. It makes us feel better to be part of a tribe and to have a simple enemy or ally who is clearly visible — just check the color of their skin, as every elite student is now trained to do” (Sullivan 2021).

The wisdom of street smart guys might help us here.

*What are you looking for?* The keys.

*Did you lose them here?* No.

*Why are you looking for them here?* It’s light here.

In that vein, why not denigrate Western Civilization?

## Polychromy in Antiquity<sup>2</sup>

“So what does it say to viewers today when museums display gleaming white statues? What does it say when the only people of color one is likely to see appear on a ceramic vessel? Sara Bond wrote. Intentional or not, museums present viewers with a false color binary (CRT tries to impose) of the ancient world?” - Sarah Bond asks. With rescoring their true polychrome, “we can come to better understand ourselves” (Bond 2017).

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<sup>1</sup>“Alternative facts” was a phrase used by U.S. Counselor to the President Kellyanne Conway during a *Meet the Press* interview on January 22, 2017, in which she defended White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer’s false statement about the attendance numbers of Donald Trump’s inauguration as President of the United States. When pressed during the interview with Chuck Todd to explain why Spicer would “utter a provable falsehood,” Conway stated that Spicer was giving “alternative facts.” Todd responded, “Look, alternative facts are not facts. They’re falsehoods.” (Taken from the Internet)

<sup>2</sup>Gods in Color: <https://buntegoetter.liebieghaus.de/en/>.

To the credit of Richard Delgado, and Jean Stefancic, they recognize that CRT may become “the New Civil Rights orthodoxy” and embed itself “in academic scholarship and teaching and that its precepts became commonplace, part of conventional wisdom” (Delgado and Stefancic 2017, p. 158).

The CRT is analyzed but rejected as “*overly radical, inconsistent with Enlightenment philosophy and a bad example to minority communities*” (Delgado and Stefancic 2017, p. 159).

The proponents of CRT commit to working toward social justice and reject liberalism with its support of colorblindness, equal opportunity, and meritocracy.

In modern societies, meritocracy means the power of people distinguished by their talents and skills regardless of class, race, gender, or ethnicity. This is a historically progressive social arrangement because, more than any other social arrangement, it opens to people at the bottom of society a path to social success based on their abilities and efforts. According to its vision of the society as a system that works against people of color to benefit white people, Critical Race Theory, broadly recognized in American colleges and universities, overshadows and even substitutes any merit, blamed as “mechanical scales,” (Delgado and Stefancic 2017, pp. 104, 179) with the right color – the further from white, the better.

“The classical past has never been co-opted by only one political tendency: Classics have probably legitimated as many revolutions as they legitimated conservative dictatorships,” - as Mary Beard, a professor of Classics at Cambridge, writes. - “Classics are, of course, about us as much as about Greeks and Romans” (Beard 2013, p. 7).

From one side of the academic spectrum, our discipline was built to exclude, Rebecca Futo Kennedy wrote “It continues to be used to craft and promote exclusions. I look around this room today and I see a sea of whiteness, just like we see at every conference and still too often in our classrooms.” We have to truly “embrace a “classics for all” mentality and way of acting, and understanding that “classics” don’t have to be an *ex uno unum*--it is and should be an *e pluribus unum*” (Futo Kennedy 2017).

From another side of the academic spectrum, Roger Kimball wrote, “There has never in history been a society more open to other cultures than our own; nor has any tradition been more committed to self-criticism than the Western tradition: the figure of Socrates endlessly inviting self-scrutiny and rational explanation is a definitive image of the Western spirit. Moreover, “Western” science is not exclusively Western: it is science plain and simple—yes, it is “universal” science — which, though invented and developed in the West, is as true for the inhabitants of the Nile Valley as it is for the denizens of New York” (Kimball 1991, p. 8). The wave of the struggle against “white privilege” and “systemic racism” has not excluded the field of classics, the study of Ancient Greece and Rome. “Although the faculty members and departments are obligated to operate as market actors procuring resources in a hypercompetitive environment” (Shullenberger 2021), and students are mostly imbued with utilitarian goals, either their own or those transferred from their parents who are paying tuition bills (Beye 1998), the wind of cultural wars (Adler 2016, pp. 19, 23, 123–124, 127–130, 133,162) did not disappear

from the sails of the *Black Athena* controversy, presented and symbolized by this collocation. When you hear someone – be the student, a colleague, or an amateur -- say that they are interested in classics because of “the Greek miracle” or because Classics is “the foundation of western civilization” and “culture,” Donna Zuckerberg, the Editor-in-Chief of *Eidolon*, recommends, “Challenge that viewpoint respectfully but forcefully. Engage them on their assumed definition of “foundation,” “Western,” “civilization” and “culture.” Point out that such ideas are a slippery slope to white supremacy. Seek better reasons for studying Classics” (Zuckerberg 2016).

From another side of the academic spectrum: “We are now seeing efforts to ban classics of Western and American literature and remove some famous texts, declared racist or sexist, celebrated on social media. But canceling Homer for whom loyalty, responsibility, courage, and “clear head” are life-saving qualities is not virtue-signaling. It is broadcasting ignorance” (Hanson 2021). Even in the Soviet Union, where a connection with people was the “party line,” similar to our political correctness, it was an official cultural motto, although not always followed in practice: “It is necessary to raise common readers to the level of great writers, not to lower great writers to the level of common readers” and this is an allegoric rule for setting standards in education and beyond, so the label of “elite” as well as “overprized” can work as an attraction.<sup>3</sup>

### The Points of Retreat

In 1988, Stanford University’s faculty senate voted to replace the University’s Western Culture sequence with *Culture, Ideas, and Values* (CIV). It was “a slight improvement on the original course in Western culture because they retain enough of the core readings so that the educational purpose of the original is not lost, and at the same time, they enrich course work with reading outside the European tradition” (Searle 1992, p. 106) but had the significant symbolic meaning.

By 1990, the national debates over political correctness (PC) commenced with a *New York Times* article by Richard Bernstein, “The Rising Hegemony of Politically Correct” published on October 28, 1990. And the “political purpose (*political, not academic!*) *Black Athena* is, of course, to lessen European cultural arrogance” (Bernal 1987, p. 73). So, the presence of Critical Race Theory in the study of Classics is no surprise.<sup>4</sup> It has sharpened one of several issues, which, in light of America’s historic burden, its original sin, is the topic of lasting interest – race, slavery, and consequences.

W.E.B. Du Bois’ idea of the “Talented Tenth” refers to the one in ten Black men who have cultivated the ability to become leaders of the Black community by acquiring a college education, writing books, and becoming directly involved in social change (Battle and Wright 2002, pp. 654–672, Jucan 2012, pp. 27–44). Du

<sup>3</sup>I remember a student’s explanation for self-selective enrollment to some of my classes: “Nobody wants to look not smart enough.”

<sup>4</sup>Society of Classics’ Annual Gathering: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/03/04/new-video-shows-exactly-what-was-said-during-heated-discussion-annual-gathering>.

Bois strongly believed that the Black community needed a classical education to reach their full potential, rather than just the industrial education. He saw classical education as the pathway to bettering the Black community. “The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. - W.E.B. Du Bois wrote. - The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races.” He supported the idea that the object of all true education is not to make men carpenters; it is to make carpenters men.<sup>5</sup>

One of the Talented Tenth, Dan-el Padilla Peralta is a black, undocumented immigrant from the Dominican Republic, whose mother brought him to New York and had decided to take the adversities of life without English and papers (Padilla Peralta 2015).

He is “obviously brilliant and once found liberation in the classics,” the way so many others did, - wrote Andrew Sullivan. - He becomes “a prodigy in classical scholarship” (Sullivan 2021).

Dan-el Padilla Peralta has been supported by white people against US immigration law all the way up to Princeton, Oxford, and Stanford, some of the best educational institutions, to master Greek and Latin and, finally, teach Classics at Princeton, and, at the pinnacle of that, speak against the historical foundation of this society, what he has understood is a white man-dominated slaveholding structure fraught with systemic racism (Poser 2021).

In the Dominican Republic, where Padilla Peralta came from, the racial hostility toward Haiti, whose population is black, can be traced back to Haiti’s invasion and occupation of the Dominican Republic from 1822 to 1844. During this time, Haiti replaced Dominican institutions with transplants of its institutions and Haitian customs into the Republic and imposing Haitian Creole instead of the Dominican Spanish language (Metz 1990, p. 10). Thus, black is associated with Haitian invasion and oppression.

### **Not All Slaves Were Black**

The very fact that certain Africans were called slaves reflected the fact that *white* people, who were enslaved centuries before, were slaves. The word, not only in English but in other European languages and Arabic, was derived from the name Slaves (Sowell 2009, pp. 306–309).

“In ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece, there were considerable conceptual overlaps between foreigner and servitude, and even greater one between women and slave. The later association is epitomized by the Sumerian ideogram for “slave,” which combines the element for “women” with that for “mountain,” the symbol of foreign lands for living in flat Mesopotamia. The Chinese character for “slave” merely contains the radical for “women” with a phonetic sign to indicate its pronunciation” (Bernal 1995, p. 988).

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<sup>5</sup>W.E.B. Du Bois, The Talented Tenth: <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp/document/thetalented-tenth/>.

When in a counterpunch to anti-black historical aberrations, Marcus Garvey (Martin 1983) spoke about the Greeks stealing from Africa, “he was not creating a new historiography; he was creating a new mythology.” For black Americans, the African origin of Greece is a myth of self-identification and self-ennoblement, the kind of “noble lie” that is, to use Bernal’s term, the fabrication; but such fabrications may build confidence, and encourage marginalized groups to quit the margin and participate in the common culture. “In that sense, they may be useful and even ‘noble.’ And even if helps black people to gain confidence, it will teach them, and any other people who believe the myth, that facts can be manufactured or misreported to serve a political purpose (*what we see now in the work of “cancel culture”*)<sup>6</sup> that origins are the only measure of value; that difference is glory or danger, when in fact it is a common, challenging fact of life, that the true knowledge of customs, language and literature is unimportant for understanding the nature of culture. However, the cultural legacy of Greece belongs to all as the legacy of other cultures and their contributions belong to each other, and all of us” (Lefkowitz 1992, p. 36).

It is well-known that Aristotle’s *Politic* relates slavery to human inferiority. However, just following his endorsement of “natural” slavery, Aristotle agrees that war captives who became slaves are not necessarily natural slaves, and so should not be enslaved (Thornton 2000, p. 77).

According to Victor Davis Hanson and John Heath, Greeks saw slavery as the accident of life that anyone can be a victim of (Beye 1998). In the ancient world slavery was not predicated on color or purported racial inferiority, as it should be according to Critical Race Theory, but on an accident of life. Heraclitus says that war “makes some slaves, others free.” The same disaster could be brought on by a siege or pirate attack. It was a horrible institution, but with some flexibility, so Diogenes could say, pointing to a Corinthian buyer: “Sell me to him, he needs a master” (Hanson and Heath 2001, p. 114).

Ex-slaves in Petronius’s *Satyricon* assume that slavery is bad and unlucky but often a temporary start, which can be circumvented by more cunning, so slaves can outwit their witless masters and end up with cash, status – *and slaves of their own*, as some American blacks had (Kroger 1985). Having been open to the vagaries of life, a Greek could not be bothered that his slave was a better man than he is, something unacceptable for an American plantation owner with a pseudo-genetic creed (Hanson and Heath 2001, p. 114).

“In Greece, the gulf between master and slave was not so great as to close off any possibility of empathy” (Thornton 2000, p. 63). A slave tutor was more than just an attendant; he also had responsibility *for shaping his charge’s character* (Thornton 2000, p. 64).

Examples abound in Greek history of the mass liberation of slaves. “We hear frequently of slaves given freedom for fighting alongside their masters, made citizens in times of population decline, armed by cagey insurrectionists, and manumitted upon the death of their master. Slavery in the Classical world was clearly a mutable and debated enterprise, with the distinction between bound and

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<sup>6</sup><https://countercurrents.org/2020/09/case-against-cancel-culture/>.

free often blurred in a way unknown in the American South (Hanson and Heath 2001, p. 113).

Greek slaves could be bankers or even professors; they could be chained and die in mines, but the true evil of slavery in the ancient world was more often the reality of non-existence in the political community life, “a forfeiture more *bitter to any Greek or Roman adult* male than it is conceivable to us” (Hanson and Heath 2001, p. 112).

To the Greeks, the advent of chattel slavery in the city-state delineated the rights of citizens (*another hot topic today, undocumented Padilla Peralta’s trauma*), and highlighted the divide between slave and free in a way unknown to the serfdom and palace culture of the Near East and Egypt. A free Greek could now be defined by what he was not. In no other language of the time was there the word for freedom, or the more concrete “free citizen.”

According to Bruce Thornton, we see in Aristotle the consequences of making slavery an object of rational analysis. Once that happened, it could become an object of criticism as well (Thornton 2000, p. 78). Nowhere else in the ancient world can one find slaves and slavery discussed in a “Greek” critical way. “There the debate began, and once the Greeks made slavery an object of free thought, analysis, and discussion, the possibility of challenging the institution itself opened up (Thornton 2000, p. 82). Aristotle would add that we Americans have *outlawed slavery only to treat millions of free men* as little more than slaves (Hanson and Heath 2001, p. 115).

Greek inheritance has meaning and influence regardless of color, but some people are mostly interested in the color of Socrates and Cleopatra. “How do you read Aristotle and conclude that the most salient quality of his genius was that he was “white”? (Sullivan 2021). According to M. Bernal, St. Clair Drake attributes anti-black colorism to the rise of the Persian Empire and rigid dualism of Zoroastrianism, with its perpetual battle between good and evil symbolized by light and dark, or white and black, respectively (Drake 1987). There is evidence of Africans being seen in both Hellenistic Greece and Rome as bringers of misfortune. This attitude was even more intense in early Christianity, as reflected by Jerome’s Latin translation of the bride’s line in Song of Songs, in which the Hebrew and Greek texts render “I am black and beautiful” as “I am black **but** beautiful” (Bernal 1995, p. 998).

The students who believed that Socrates and Cleopatra were blacks assumed “we had deliberately tried to deny the truth, that we had used (or misused) history as yet another means of enforcing European political domination” (Lefkowitz 1992, p. 30).

Some Afro-centrists deride ancient Greeks as Affirmative Action kids of the West; (Sullivan 1990, pp. 19–21) others added fuel to the fire with claims that M. Lefkowitz thinks is easily refuted: that Europeans are “ice” people, cold, calculating, and destructive, and Africans are “sun” people, warm, natural, and peaceful (Lefkowitz 1994, p. 107).

Anyway, in the semantics of popular culture, whiteness is often associated with innocence and goodness. Brides wear white on their wedding day to signify purity. “Snow White” is a universal fairy tale of virtue and just reward. In contrast,

darkness and blackness often carry connotations of evil and menace. Whiteness is normative; it sets standards in dozens of situations (Delgado and Stefancic 2017, pp. 85–86).

Accordingly, white Americans have devalued black skin color. Blackness, in general, has been associated with discouragement, despair, depression, coldness, the unknown, the haunting shadow, and the nightmare. This negative blackness concept, probably originating from the associations with day and night.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Offensive Game of Colorism**

American Blacks long ago adopted this negative blackness concept. For several reasons, they identified with the white ego ideal. Thus, for decades within the American black culture, the owners of black skin resigned themselves to the fact that they were “negative,” inferior, and less attractive (Anderson and Cromwell 1977, pp. 76–88).

This was true even within the Negro Ivy League, Historically Black Colleges and Universities. With the onset of the Black Power Movement, students embraced blackness (Gasman and Abiola 2016, pp. 39–45).

As Joel Williamson shows, light men are having difficulty marrying as they choose because light women seem to be calculating the advantages to their future children of marrying darker (Williamson 1995, p. 191). Although Parish’s study is now about 75 years old, (Parrish 1946, pp. 13–20) similar attitudes about skin color prevail among today’s Black youth. Many believe that light skin is feminine and dark skin is masculine, and very light-skinned boys and very dark-skinned girls often suffer from being at odds with this cultural stereotype (Russel-Cole et al. 1992, p. 66).

Yet a light-skinned wife is not always an asset for a successful Black man, especially if he is in the public eye. When the dark-skinned Marion Barry first campaigned for mayor of Washington, D.C., as a militant advocate of Black causes, some Blacks accused him of hypocrisy, since he had, after all, married a light-skinned woman. Afraid that his wife, Effi, was becoming a political liability, Barry bought her a sunlamp and told her to try to make herself darker. When that failed, he sent her to the Hilton Head Beach Resort in South Carolina to work on a suntan (Russel-Cole et al. 1992, p. 108).

Traditionally, the color complex involved light-skinned Blacks’ rejection of Blacks who were darker. Increasingly, however, the color complex shows up in the form of dark-skinned African Americans spurning their lighter-skinned brothers and sisters for not being Black enough (Russel-Cole et al. 2013, pp. 195–199, Gasman and Abiola 2016, p. 42).

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<sup>7</sup>So, “liberation” from the natural darkness of night may come from migration to places of white nights where this phenomenon occurs, including Russia, Finland, Greenland, Iceland, Norway, Canada and Alaska. Many of these destinations celebrate the summer solstice in their own way but St. Petersburg honors the entire white night period with its own festival. See Salisbury Vanita. “Top 8 Summer solstice celebrations around the World.” June 18, 2020. *Lonely Planet*.



Attitudes about skin color among African Americans occasionally erupt in this manner in the workplace. Feelings of resentment toward those who are lighter or prejudice against those who are darker are common sources of job-related color harassment (Wilder 2018, pp. 1978–1987).

Tensions between Blacks about skin color and features may also be fueled by the tendency of Whites to hire and promote light-skinned Blacks over those who are darker (Russel-Cole et al. 1992, p. 125).

The color complex even includes attitudes about hair texture, nose shape, and eye color, and leads Blacks to discriminate against each other (Hunter 2007, pp. 237–254). “Because the color complex has long been considered unmentionable, it has been called the “last taboo” among African Americans” (Russel-Cole et al. 1992, p. 2). In the 20 years since the first edition of *“The Color Complex”* in 1992, things have not improved. Instead, “skin-color prejudice has gone viral and appears to be infecting ever-greater numbers of people around the world” (Russel-Cole et al. 2013, p. 246). But playing with color symbolism is fraught with irony; not all blacks are “white,” and some whites are still “black.”

In March 1938, U.S. President F. D. Roosevelt convened a 32-nation conference at Evian, France, to discuss the resettlement of German and Austrian Jewish refugees to other lands. At that time, Nazi Germany was still agreeing to let Jews emigrate if they transferred their assets to the German government. The assembled nations endorsed the idea of resettlement but given the xenophobia and moods of the Depression-era in effect, no nation was expected to take more than a few thousand refugees. However, only the Dominican Republic, led by Rafael Trujillo, expressed a willingness to accept between 50,000 and 100,000 Jews. Historians believe Trujillo hoped that, after his brutal massacre of 25,000 Haitians in 1937, accepting Jewish refugees might repair his image internationally. Though himself a mulatto, Trujillo strongly believed in white superiority, and became a “blancophile.” Trujillo’s middle name was Leónidas, after the Spartan king who martyred himself with 300 of his soldiers at Thermopylae, and who has become an icon of the far right. “Playing the race card” reminds of the Nazi’s glorification of Sparta. After 1933, German scholars who identified themselves with the new Nazi regime defined Sparta as a quasi-Nationalistic institution (Rebenich 2002, p. 334).

However, Trujillo granted visas to a thousand Jews in hope that young European Jews who were to live in Sosúa, a special community established for them, would marry Dominican women and produce light-skinned offspring (Levy n.d.).

An incident involving his daughter Flor de Oro also was a factor in Trujillo’s decision. She attended school in France between 1930 and 1932 and was snubbed by her French classmates, except for a Jewish girl who befriended her (Metz 1990, p. 17).

So, the Dominican Republic was the only country that agreed to accept Jewish immigrants. “Had the originally projected 100,000 refugees settled in Sosua, its story may have been different,” but it happened only to a handful, while 99,000 were annihilated in the Holocaust (Metz 1990, p. 22).

Padilla, it seems to A. Sullivan, was able “to resolve some of the huge challenges of modernity and his own psyche and background by surrendering his

mind and soul to a purely racial, and thereby tribal, analysis of the world.” Andrew Sullivan, like many others, “prefers another form of liberation — out of race and identity and into learning, out of one’s own identity and into others’, out of the present and into the past, another world entirely, waiting to be explored and understood” (Sullivan 2021).

### More Persons from the Tenth

According to Dan-El Padilla Peralta, “That scholarly merit can, even in the minds and hearts of supporters and well-wishers, be decoupled from the fact of my Afro-Latinity is why the rage will continue to burn brightly. If this discipline is to cherish the minds of scholars of color, it must begin by cherishing their bodies — and all the legacies of racism past and present that are seared into their flesh.”<sup>8</sup>

The quality of studies and writing are excluded from Padilla’s equation, probably in exchange for the color of skin. Last summer the University of Chicago’s English department explained that its Ph.D. program would be accepting only applicants interested in working in and with Black studies because “English as a discipline has a long history of providing an aesthetic rationalization for colonization, exploitation, extraction, and anti-Blackness” (Shullenberger 2021). But this is the only fair basis for publication; is it not? Is omitting such a “trifle” as quality not self-explanatory?<sup>9</sup>

While writing as a correspondent for the “Washington Post” in Africa, Keith Richburg, unlike Dan-el Padilla, asks, “Are you black first, or journalist first? (*Or scholar first?*) Are you supposed to report and write accurately, and critically, about what you see and hear? Or are you supposed to be pushing some kind of black agenda, protecting black American leaders from tough scrutiny, treating black people and black issues differently? ... Was I not called a dictator, just because he happened to be black? ... Pan Africanism, as I see it ... prescribes a kind of code of political correctness in dealing with Africa (*and black Americans*), an attitude that says black America should bury its head in the sand to all that is wrong in Africa (*and good in America*) and play up the worn-out demons of colonialism, slavery and western exploitation of minerals (*or the new demon of systemic racism*), or otherwise is said to be playing into the old ‘white conspiracy’” (Richburg 2000, p. 125).

Unlike Dan-el Padilla Peralta, Ward Connerly believed that his skin color should not be a factor in a public policy debate. “It should not be relevant,” he said (Ambinder 1998). Connerly’s ethnic heritage is a mix of Irish, black, French, and Choctaw Indian, but he identifies himself as black “because blackness is an experience and others have forced that experience upon me” (Connerly 2001, pp. 24–26).

He attended American River Junior College and then Sacramento State College, graduating with a BA in political science in 1962. A year later, he

<sup>8</sup><https://medium.com/@danelpadillaperalta/some-thoughts-on-AIS-SCS-2019>.

<sup>9</sup>Dan-el Padilla - The Haunted House of Classics: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqBJI71H1t0>.

married, similar to Dan-el, a white classmate. Connerly ran his own consulting and public housing development company for more than two decades and became a millionaire. In 1993, he was appointed by the governor to the University of California Board of Regents, where he served until March 2005 (Bearak 1997, p. 1).

According to CRT, Affirmative Action is the policy that strives to increase minority enrollment, activity, and membership, often intending to diversify a certain environment such as a school or workplace (Delgado and Stefancic 2017, p. 167).

Unlike Dan-el Padilla Peralta, Ward Connerly opposes affirmative action out of what he calls a “passion for fairness.” He believes race-based remedies only prolong America’s racial divisions and inequities. In his memoir, *Creating Equal*, Connerly says race is “a scar” in America that he first saw as a toddler in the segregated South. He yearns for race consciousness to dissolve in America’s melting pot, but without the government turning up the heat.

“My fight against race preferences has sharpened my appreciation for the principles that are at the core of the American experiment,” Connerly writes in his memoir. “I feel more fully a citizen now – more part of this nation – than ever before in my life” (Connerly 2000, p. 365).

When your society forces you to check the box and decides whether you win or lose in the competitions of life based on the box that you check, your freedom is diminished. And so it was that, as a regent, I discovered that the University of California was really using different standards to admit people. We were classifying them on the basis of whether they’re African-American, or Chicano, or Latino, or American-Indian, or Asian, or white. We’re making people fill out these silly little boxes and saying if you fill out this one these are the number of points that you get, if you fill out this one these are the number of points that you get (Connerly 2000, pp. 24–26).

### **From Thermopylae to the Legal Insurrection**

On January 6, Padilla Peralta turned on the television minutes after the windows of the Capitol were broken. In the crowd, he saw a man in a Greek helmet with TRUMP 2020 painted in white. He saw flags embroidered with the phrase that Leonidas is said to have uttered when the Persian king ordered him to lay down his arms: *Molon Labe*, the laconism for “Come and take them,” which has become a slogan of American gun rights activists. A week after the riot, Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, a newly elected Republican from Georgia who has liked posts on social media that call for killing Democrats, wore a mask stitched with the phrase when she voted against impeachment on the House floor (Poser 2021).

However, the words of Leonidas, as it is expected from the laconic words, open to other things.

The battle at Thermopylae is a contentious point in the study of Classics. It is a well-known and widely publicized fact that the current political movement - white nationalists - glorifies King Leonidas and his Spartan men. This connects the

current cultural struggle with Sparta, one of two prominent ancient city-states, while Classics heritage is usually associated with another one, Athens. This is the essential point of perception and interpreting history as having roots from two main political arrangements – democracy, represented by Athens, and a totalitarian state, represented by Sparta. “The sole business of the Spartan citizen was war, to which he was trained from birth” (Russell 1961, p. 95).

Speaking about Spartans, we remember the sad words of M.I. Finley: “They knew how to die like heroes; they never learned to live like men.”<sup>10</sup> But “it cannot be denied that, for a long period, the Spartans were successful in their main purpose, the creation of a race of invincible warriors. The battle of Thermopylae (480 B.C.), though technically a defeat, is perhaps the best example of their valor” (Russell 1961, p. 98). Let us not forget that the idea of patriotism, played out at Thermopylae, cannot be overshadowed by any Racist interpretation of Greece’s past. “Some may even argue that we should only teach and discuss with the general public aspects of the ancient world that will not offend anyone - wrote Rebecca Futo Kennedy. - But when that goal of inoffensive appeal runs against the goal of scholarly honesty, we do our field no favors” (Futo Kennedy 2017).

The epitaph, attributed to the poet Simonides, in very modest terms, glorifies the battle at Thermopylae, fought in 480 B.C. “Foreigner, go tell the Lacedaemonians that we lie here obedient to their commands” (Russell 1961, p. 99). Even in the former German Democratic Republic, “which normally was more interested in the slave system than the military history of Greece and Rome, Leonidas was not entirely forgotten” (Rebenich 2002, p. 335).

Thermopylae is the symbol of the West’s heroic self-defense. (“The most valiant are sometimes the most unfortunate,” - wrote Michel de Montaigne.- “Thus there are triumphant defeats that rival victories.”) And the Persian invasion is the symbol of a formidable threat to the tiny West by the huge East. (“If the issue of that day had been different, the Britons and the Saxons might still have been wandering in the woods,” - wrote J.S. Mill.) In addition to that, as Ernle Bradford rightly stresses, Thermopylae brought to Greeks a sense of unity, something that we need, too.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>On 28 March 1952, Rutgers University Professor Moses Finley appeared before the United States Senate Subcommittee on Internal Security and invoked the Fifth Amendment regarding his association with Communism. On 12 December 1952, Rutgers’s Board of Trustees resolution declared, “It shall be cause for immediate dismissal of any member of faculty or staff” to fail to cooperate with government inquiries. On 31 December 1952, Rutgers dismissed Finley. (See Osborn 2017). Moses Finley wrote about Sparta the following: “During the Peloponnese war, Sparta sent a round of proclamations asking helots to choose from among their ranks those who have distinguished themselves against the enemy, so they could be rewarded with their freedom. Two thousand were selected, and Spartans then secretly murdered them all” (Finley 1962, p. 173). Moses Finley lost his job and county for the state which treated its citizens as Sparta had treated helots.

<sup>11</sup>“The last stand of King Leonidas and the Spartans was told as the golden story of my youth. Since then it would seem to have been downgraded, perhaps because their military outlook and stubborn courage had made them unattractive to a hedonistic society” (Bradford 1980, p. 14). Transcribed excerpts from Booker T. Washington’s Atlanta Exposition Speech, September 18, 1895, read, “As we have proved our loyalty to you in the past... In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.”

The same laconic expression - *Molon Labe*, the laconism for “Come and take them” - speaks not only for the right to bear arms; it speaks as much for the freedom of speech and press.

We all are politically engaged and divided but professional duty still stands and makes scholars different from the mob – at least, the existence of other points should be recognized, and answering its arguments is the issue of academic standing.

“This is a power play. ... What we’re seeing going on, on campuses and in the culture, more broadly, is an exercise of power to prevent open debate of ideas,” Jacobson said during the two-hour gathering hosted by the Legal Insurrection Foundation.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Ambivalence of the Past**

“This entwining of the white supremacist assumptions of the Enlightenment with ancient Greece and Rome means the classics are therefore fatally tainted. You can arrive at this deranged conclusion, it seems, in two contrived ways, - writes Andrew Sullivan. - One is to view the ancient world as some kind of founding proof of the superiority of the “white race,” whatever that means. Imperialists and fascists have always loved this theme; Mussolini was especially fond of it. The very word “fascism” comes from the Roman “fasces,” a bound bundle of logs that were used to signify the authority of the state. In the same *New York Times* piece, we are reminded that the “marchers in Charlottesville, Va., carried flags bearing a symbol of the Roman state; online reactionaries adopted classical pseudonyms; the white-supremacist website Stormfront displayed an image of the Parthenon alongside the tagline “Every month is white history month” (Sullivan 2021).

In his understandable moral outrage against white Americans, parading at Charlottesville, and rioting on Capitol Hill, Dan-el Padilla Peralta gives them the whole ancient world. And this is too much. To make Ancient Greece and Rome responsible for proto-Nazi and neo-Nazi activities is not true and not fair. From Damon Linker’s wide historical perspective, it would be similar to lessening the two millennia of Europe to the history of antisemitism, which sadly is its integral part. However, “the world in both the present and past cannot be reduced to any single account of its unfolding” – such approach “would be evidence of intellect in the grip of a kind of hysteria” (Linker 2021).

In 1981, when the renowned Israel Philharmonic Orchestra tried to play a piece from Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde* as an encore, a Holocaust survivor jumped onto the stage, opened his shirt, and showed scars inflicted in a Nazi concentration camp. The conductor, Zubin Mehta, stopped the performance (Brilliant 1981).

In an unsettling way, we now listen to Wagner through Hitler’s ears. Moshe Brilliant wrote, “I doubt that anyone would have been more confounded by this turn of events than Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism, who was deeply under Wagner’s spell. As Herzl once recalled, ‘I, too, believe that I heard such a

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<sup>12</sup>The Legal Insurrection Foundation: Discussion

fluttering of wings while I wrote that book. I worked on it every day to the point of utter exhaustion. My only recreation was listening to Wagner's music in the evening, particularly to "Tannhäuser," an opera which I attended as often as it was produced. Only on the evenings when there was no opera did I have any doubts as to the truth of my ideas.' The book in question was *The Jewish State* (Ross 2012).

Underscoring the close ties between Christianity and Judaism and calling the Holocaust denial "madness," Pope Francis told an interviewer that "inside every Christian is a Jew." In an interview published in Spain's *La Vanguardia* newspaper, the pope said dialogue between the two faiths can sometimes be a "hot potato."

"I believe that interreligious dialogue must investigate the Jewish roots of Christianity and the Christian flowering of Judaism," Francis said, "I understand it is a challenge, a hot potato, but it is possible to live as brothers." Francis' statement seems to go further than his predecessor, St. John Paul II, who made headlines in 1986 as the first pope to visit Rome's main synagogue and declared Jews to be the "elder brothers" of the Christian faith. "Every day, I pray with the Psalms of David. My prayer is Jewish, and then I have the Eucharist, which is Christian," the Argentine pontiff added (McKenna 2014).

So, our past is truly ambivalent and is the same as our present; the past is an integral part of it.

These are the words of an American journalist, who happened to be African American, working for the *Washington Post* amid a fratricidal war in decolonized Africa. "If that original ancestor hadn't been forced to make that horrific voyage, I would not have been standing there that day on the Rusumo Falls bridge (between Rwanda and Tanzania) a journalist – a mere spectator – watching the bodies glide past me like river logs. No, I might have instead been one of them – or have met some similarly anonymous fate in any one of the countless ongoing civil wars or tribal clashes on this brutal continent. And so I thank God my ancestor made that voyage. Does it sound shocking? Does it sound almost like a justification for the terrible crime of slavery? Does it sound like this black man has forgotten his African roots? Of course, it does, all that and more. ... I sympathize with Africa's pain. I recoil in the horror at the mindless waste of human life and human potential. I salute the gallantry and dignity of sheer perseverance of the Africans. But most of all, I feel secretly glad that my ancestor made it out – because, now, I am not one of them (Richburg 2000, p. 125).

## Conclusion

Ancient Greece and Rome are with us so much that everybody wants to cling to them. Away from the hot academic debates on whether ancient Greece received seeds of its culture from Egypt, Asian people, or somebody else, it is different from parents or grandparents more than similar to them. Regardless of origin, the "product" is completed as something of independent value. The Parthenon had been built for life before death, independently from the pyramid of Khufu, built for life after death; and the Acropolis is as independently great as Giza. And both are great human achievements in their own kind.

The wave of the struggle against “white privilege” and “systemic racism” did not pass the field of classics, the study of Ancient Greece and Rome. Critical Race Theory asserts that racism is a fundamental and integral part of our society and works against people of color to benefit white people (Delgado and Stefancic 2017, pp. 8-11).

Supporters of Critical Race Theory insist that their ideas and programs are irrefutable because disagreement and dissent are just proof of “white fragility,” unconscious biases, or internalized white supremacy. Straight, white, English-speaking, Christian males are members of the oppressor class. To them, equality is “mere non-discrimination” and provides “camouflage” for white supremacy, patriarchy, and oppression (Rufo 2021, Pluckrose and Lindsay 2020).

Ibram X. Kendi, Director of the Center for Anti-Racist Research, has proposed the creation of the Federal Department of Anti-Racism with the power to nullify, veto, or abolish any law at any level of government and curtail the speech if the political leader and others are deemed insufficiently “antiracist” (Kendi 2019).

In modern societies, meritocracy means power of people distinguished by their talents and skills regardless of class, race, gender, or ethnicity. This is a historically progressive social arrangement because, more than any other social arrangement, it opens to people at the bottom of society a path to social success based on their abilities and efforts. Critical Race Theory, broadly recognized in American colleges and universities, presents reality in two colors only. It overshadows and even substitutes any merit, blamed as “mechanical scales,” (Delgado and Stefancic 2017, pp. 104, 179) according to color – white is wrong, non-white is good. This is a blunt contradiction to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s, 1963 famous “I Have a Dream” speech: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.”

This simplistic two-color social structure for everything is enthusiastically supported by young romantics who have never lived in the Soviet Union or Communist China. This is a war against knowledge, which is not new; German, Austrian, and Chinese students burned books, Soviet officials declared genetics a pseudoscience, the Khmer Rouge killed doctors, teachers, and other people who could count to 20, and China’s Red Guard, or *Hóng Wèibīng*, committed nothing less than Cultural Revolution.

Regardless of the intentions of its shakers and movers, Critical Race Theory fails to distinguish truly important differences between individuals and groups. It pretends to help marginalized minorities but harms them by providing a false base for satisfaction. However, this approach is quite convenient for replacing professional knowledge with the loud noise of mind “decolonization,” proponents of which are strengthening in numbers. Critical Race Theory disorients presumed beneficiaries and turns out to be the new racism, in this case, aimed as discrimination against whites.

The spark of its prominence in classics and humanities was given by Dan-el Padilla Peralta, whose personal story (Padilla Peralta 2015) is charged with symbolism. He is a black, undocumented immigrant from the Dominican Republic whose mother brought him to New York and had decided to take the adversities of life without

English and papers, in the hope for a better life for her sons. He has been supported by white people against US immigration law all the way up to Princeton, Oxford, and Stanford, some of the best educational institutions, to master Greek and Latin and, finally, teach Classics at Princeton. At the pinnacle of this position, he speaks against the historical foundation of this society, what he has understood is a white man-dominated slaveholding structure fraught with systemic racism. Inside the “white structure of oppression,” after graduation from Princeton as a 2006 salutatorian, Padilla Peralta earned a master's degree from Oxford and a doctorate from Stanford, all while bypassing the US regulations on immigration, and with the unselfish help of many people. Unlike Ward Connerly or Keith Richburg, Dan-el Padilla Peralta believes that his skin color should be a factor in a public policy debate, making race a new definition of merit.

His personal life story and topic of work, and the aim of his intellectual and civic revolt – this is the intersection where the current cultural war conflagrations are. A Russian joke plays well here: In our family, only a computer has memory, and only dogs show gratitude.

In his book *Tenured Radicals*, Roger Kimball notes that the privileged beneficiaries of the spiritual and material achievements of our history, “out of perversity, ignorance, or malice, have chosen to turn their backs on the culture that nourished them and made them what they are.” It was published in 1990, 30 years ago; there are new people in old comfortable shoes.

Why is today's racism new? Because the official society moved from protecting historical victims, who presently are not victims anymore, to discriminating against historical winners, who are not winners anymore. From Critical Race Theory's perspective, Racism against Us, who were victims, is unfair, shameful, and harmful; racism against Them, who were oppressors, is just, praiseworthy and beneficial.

Positive Discrimination or Affirmative Action programs exist in the USA, India, Malaysia, Nigeria, and other countries as a broadly recognized way to correct historical injustice. Winners who, in most visible cases, happen to be white, try to pay dues to the retrospective non-white victims of oppression. They are set for a long and hard way: no shame, no conscience, nothing extra. It is possible to apply Affirmative Action to history classes through acceptance and grading, but not to History itself. Slavery and the dominance of men, which nullify the value of Classics in the eyes of fighters against “white supremacy,” were everywhere, while Democracy was in Athens and Rome only. So, to promote truth and our dignity, the Classics must stay.

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