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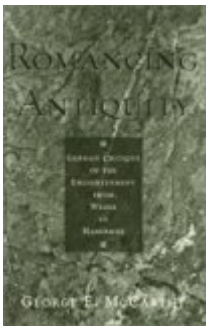
George McCarthy. *Romancing Antiquity: German Critique of the Enlightenment from Weber to Habermas.* Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997. xxvii + 379 pp. $116.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8476-8528-8.



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George McCarthy's latest work is ambitious and not entirely successful. Following up his 1990 work on Marx and the classical world, here McCarthy widens his scope to include not just the other two members of Germany's philosophical triumvirate, Nietzsche and Freud, but also Weber, Heidegger, Arendt, Marcuse, Gadamer, and, finally, Habermas. As in the earlier work, his aim is to show, first, that these thinkers are "steeped in the culture and philosophy of the ancients" [1] and, second, that "much of the social imagination and power of twentieth-century German thought lies in its borrowing from Greek philosophy, literature, and politics" (p. xiii).

The story, as McCarthy tells it, began in the eighteenth century, when Germans found in the Greeks "a vision and perspective from which to criticize and, many times, reject the modern values and social institutions" (p. xv). This *Griechensehnsucht* kept its firm hold on the German philosophical imagination even as literary neoclassicism waned, shaping first the turn to materialism and political economy, and later getting a shot of vitality from Nietzsche's Dionysian aesthetics. Through 1900, classical antiquity--from Epicurus (Marx) to Plato (Nietzsche--enabled "the critique of alienation, commodity fetishism, and economic exploitation, as well as the critique of decadence, moral leveling, and nihilism" (p. 37).

These critiques, which McCarthy understands as critiques of the Enlightenment in general, had a big future ahead of them, especially as they were taken up by German twentieth-century social thought. After a quick look at Weber, the real work of the book begins, with a lengthy examination of Heidegger's complicated relationship with the Greeks. Beginning with the recently discovered 1922 essay on Aristotle and phenomenology, McCarthy reads Heidegger's reinterpretation of Aristotle and the pre-Socratics as both a radicalization and a repudiation of Kantian subjectivism. "[T]he original insights of early Greek philosophy" hinged on understanding "truth...as an uncovering and unconcealing...of Being-there by means of human intentionality" (p. 90). Under Heidegger's etymological pressure, "the Greek world opens up and its hidden secrets rush forth," all in the service of recovering Being and *Dasein* from "the

modern productionist metaphysics and emphasis on technology, control, and human labor" (pp. 100, 112).

This is a short version of what was a complex and, for this reader anyway, faintly torturous exposition of Heidegger's long philosophical career, beginning with the Aristotle essay and ranging right through the early 1950s work on the pre-Socratics. After a rather unsatisfying analysis of Freud's "addiction" to the Greeks, McCarthy turns to three of Heidegger's most influential pupils: Marcuse, Arendt, and Gadamer. Whether by "recovering sensuality" (p. 133), by treating "politics as the arena of self-realization of human capabilities and rationality" (p. 179), or by fusing "Aristotelian ethics and Heideggerian ontology" in the service of hermeneutical understanding (p. 239), all three embrace, in various ways, Heidegger's Graecomania and seek thereby to overcome the iron cage of instrumental reason and domination. It is only with the turn to Habermas, however, that the logic of the book finally reveals itself.

Until this point, it is rather unclear why McCarthy felt warranted to select this particular group of thinkers, and to leave aside such critics of modern rationalism as Cassirer, Lukacs, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Rosenzweig, not to speak of their more nationalist contemporaries. In a way, the first 243 pages serve as prolegomena to Habermas and his "turn... away from the ancients... [and] return to the values of rationality grounded in the Enlightenment" (p. 243). In his use and criticism of McCarthy's cadre of thinkers, Habermas is the first to show that "Aristotelian rationality can no longer provide or justify the framework within which decisions about virtue, justice, and the good are decided" (p. 251). Though he, like Heidegger, seeks to overcome the rationalization of modern life, Habermas rejects a Greek-centered philosophy and turns to communicative rationality and discourse ethics, seeking to rehabilitate a Kantian Enlightenment as a kind of social critique. Although McCarthy sees this move as an "important turning point in contemporary German social theory," it is not clear, in the end, whether this attempt is one that McCarthy supports (p. 243).

This ambiguity highlights what is, in my view, a deep structural weakness in the work. From the outset, the author assures us that modern German social theory largely depended on "its borrowings from Greek philosophy" for its "imagination and power" (p. xiii). What he shows us, in the text, however, are more the borrowings themselves than the significance of these borrowings. It is one thing, in my view, to show that Freud transposed Oedipus, Electra, Thanatos and so on into his psychoanalytic theory, and quite another thing to say that "Freud's theory of the mind represents the modern form of Greek tragedy" (p. 146). To analyze Freud on the Greeks in depth would require not just showing what he borrowed, but how those borrowings fit into a overall economy of Freud's thought. By refusing to step back and put these thinkers into a broader context, McCarthy leaves the reader unsure of the ultimate importance of this strand of Graecophilia, either for him or for Germany. In the final analysis, it cannot consist solely in the critique of "Enlightenment"--a critique that has had many sources, from German Idealism to Renaissance philosophy of man to Jewish mysticism.

Given this, I can think of two alternative ways of addressing the very interesting question of Germany's relationship to antiquity. One would compare the functions of various antiquities--including in particular the turn to Jewish tradition by Rosenzweig, Buber and others--in order to isolate the philosophical and historical significance of Greece in German thought. The other, typified in my mind by Suzanne Marchand's excellent 1996 book, ***Down from Olympus: Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750-1970***, would examine the function of Greek antiquity across a spectrum of intellectual, cultural, and institutional contexts. In either case, a broader approach would give

backbone to those claims about the imagination and power of German social thought--claims that in McCarthy's study, ring somewhat hollow.

Note

[1]. George McCarthy, ***Marx and the Ancients: Classical Ethics, Social Justice, and Nineteenth-Century Political Economy*** (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990), 1.

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