

Review of Mary Lefkowitz, *Not Out of Africa*, NY: Basic books, 1995

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Martin Bernal's 1987 and 1991 volumes collectively entitled *Black Athena* brought to national prominence a controversy previously unnoticed by the mainstream academy, that of the allegedly "stolen legacy" of historic African culture. The controversy centers around two main theses. First of all, classical Egyptian civilization was populated not by what we would today call Arabs, but by what we would today call blacks. Second of all, all of classical Greek learning, especially philosophy and geometry, was literally stolen from (as opposed to merely influenced by) the (black) Egyptians. It turns out that there is no evidence for either of these two claims, and considerable evidence against them. But, as Mary Lefkowitz's new book explains, that's besides the point.

Lefkowitz wrote an article for *The New Republic* in 1992 debunking the "stolen legacy" theory, and was immediately, to her great surprise and dismay, branded a racist. She thought that by pointing out the historical evidence, and explaining how research in history is done, that the theory would be seen as unsupportable and dismissed. For example, one of the often-repeated claims is that Aristotle plagiarized his entire philosophy from books he plundered from the Library of Alexandria during one of Alexander's conquests. Lefkowitz pointed out that, even leaving aside the question of whether Aristotle ever went to Egypt, or anywhere with Alexander (he didn't), the Library of Alexandria, indeed the city of Alexandria, was not even built until after Aristotle's death.

But rather than causing the theory to be dismissed, Lefkowitz's article fanned the flames of controversy, and she was denounced by Afrocentrist academics. She found out that many more students than she had previously imagined were being taught the "stolen legacy" theory. So she set to work on two books, one a scholarly, point-by-point rebuttal to the claims in *Black Athena*, and the other *Not Out of Africa*, a book intended to serve a similar purpose for a non-specialist readership. This latter function is critical, because it is not so much professional philosophers and classicists who are swayed by the "stolen legacy" theory, but college freshmen, op-ed writers, and political activists.

*Not Out of Africa* presents a thorough survey of the controversy, including its origins in factually mistaken Masonic literature and the writings of racial separatists. Lefkowitz documents how she has been demonized by the Afrocentrist movement, and how reasonable inquiry has been discouraged by the hot rhetoric attaching to the charge of racism. Perhaps more importantly, she makes an eloquent plea for objectivity and reason in history.

Are there, can there be, multiple, diverse "truths"? If there are, which "truth" should win?... Diverse "truths" are possible only if "truth" is taken to mean something like "point of view." But even then not every point of view...can be equally valid... The notion of diversity does not extend to truth. (p.162)

Many philosophers, upon hearing about the controversy, respond by saying, "well, I really don't care what color Socrates was, I'm just interested in the *theory*." This response may be motivated by a desire to avoid being branded a racist, to avoid the entire touchy

controversy. But, as Lefkowitz points out, this response is unsatisfactory, because it promotes the idea that any theory can be an equally plausible alternative to any theory. This attitude undermines such useful tools as reason, history, and scientific method. So her objection is on two levels: not only is the theory false, and in ways that are easily demonstrable, but that the theory is even tolerated as an "alternative interpretation" threatens to undermine the entire project of historical research. It undermines the very notions of truth, reason, objectivity.

Lefkowitz is eloquent and forceful about these points without seeming shrill. The book does not read like a jeremiad, but rather as an earnest plea for a return to honest inquiry and respect for the truth. "Appealing mythologies about the past bring satisfaction in the short run, but in the end they damage the very cause they are intended to promote," she writes, referring to the idea that black self-esteem can be raised if they are taught the "stolen legacy" theory. "The events of this century have shown that it is dangerous to allow propaganda to usurp historical truth. Even if [a group's cause] is noble, by substituting myth for history they open the way for other groups to invent their own histories." (p.155-6)

Lefkowitz further notes that emphasis on fake African history prevents students from learning real African history, which would be a beneficial study. So in addition to creating a generation of students who have no understanding of scientific method, logic, and historical method, the movement is creating a generation of students who know mostly falsehoods about both Greece *and* Africa. Is all of this really necessary for black empowerment?

Lefkowitz concludes with some ruminations on the tenure system and the purpose of academic freedom. She points out that academic freedom cannot protect outright incompetence. No university should tolerate a mathematician who teaches that the value of pi is 3, or a geographer who teaches that the earth is flat. This is fairly straightforward, but in some humanities courses it is harder to set rigorous standards for what would count as incompetence. One philosopher might think that anyone who subscribes to, say, utilitarianism (or Marxism) must be incompetent, but clearly this is the sort of thing that academic freedom is supposed to protect. Where is the line drawn between these clear cases? Lefkowitz does not offer a cure-all. But the problem with the "stolen legacy" theory is not just that it is false, but that it is always taught in an atmosphere of contempt for the very practices of historical research and logic. So while reasonable people may disagree over whether, for instance, Plato abandoned or merely modified the theory of Forms in the late dialogues, or even over whether we can really know which ones were late, Lefkowitz shows that the *Black Athena* controversy is so devoid of a reasonable basis that it is unjustifiable. Nevertheless, she recommends a cautious approach, and does not make any intemperate proposals about purges. But she urges university administrators to ask themselves whether it really serves the best interests of the students to offer courses in flat-earth theory, or the stolen legacy theory, even if someone is ready to teach them. "...[D]eans and curriculum committees also have [the authority to]...request an explanation of why instructors choose to ignore and/or suppress evidence." (p.175) Academic freedom does not exist to protect deceit and irresponsibility.

Lefkowitz has written a timely and important book, which is clear and well-argued. It is at the same time calmly rational and urgently plaintive. It is essential reading for all philosophers, classicists, and historians, as well as for all those who are concerned about decaying standards of critical thinking skills. Socrates says in the *Gorgias* that the truth is never refuted, but if the very concept of truth is banished from the academy, it won't matter.