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Johann Chapoutot, Greeks, Romans, Germans. How the nazis usurped Europe's classical past

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Johann Chapoutot, *Greeks, Romans, Germans. How the Nazis Usurped Europe's Classical Past*, Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016; 505 pp.; £25 pbk; ISBN 9780520292970

The reception history of antiquity has been a burgeoning field of history for some time. The wealth of ideas from ancient Greece and Rome has proven versatile to statesmen, thinkers and artists for the past two millennia, so that historians have adopted a wide chronological perspective to observe the individuals, peoples and countries that defined themselves as heirs of that antiquity. This is most visible, perhaps, in the many self-styled attempts at *renovatio imperii*—the restoration of the (Roman) Empire. Cherry-picking from the legacies of the classical past enabled the creation of narratives of renaissance, progress, and ideology. Cherry-pickers *par excellence*, so argues the French historian and Germanist Johann Chapoutot, were the Nazis. Hitler himself in *Mein Kampf* considered the purpose of history to be to serve the origin myth of Aryan supremacy and *Volksgemeinschaft*—a racial concept that unites Greeks, Romans and Germans. In *Greeks, Romans, Germans*, originally *Le national-socialisme et l'Antiquité* (2008), Chapoutot brings together the cultural, ideological and historical threads between the Third Reich and the ancient past, as they were woven by Nazi thinkers.

Apparent from the outset is the wide array of sources with which he supports his central argument: Nazism's appropriation of the classical past lied at the very heart of its ideology. Chapoutot aptly draws from the many exponents of that ideology—the writings of Nazi theorists, propaganda texts, schoolbooks, art and architecture (fiction goes largely unmentioned)—to show how the Reich did not just deploy the discursive potential of antiquity in service of its own goals, but (retro)actively reshaped it. In three parts he dissects the Nazis' annexation, imitation, and 'reliving' of antiquity to support this hypothesis.

In these three parts, Chapoutot traces how the Nazis became 'pillagers of history' (p. 15) in order to lay claim to the world. Rather than constructing a direct lineage to prove that the Germans were rightful heirs to ancient Greece and Rome, Nazi discourse turned the tables on linear racial histories, such as Hegel's notion of a civilization 'wave' that rolled from East to West, by claiming that Greeks and Romans (and the cultural elites of ancient China and Egypt) had their roots in Nordic

Europe, the ‘womb of civilisations’, a term taken from Tacitus’ *De origine et situ germanorum*. This inversion of history helped pave the way for racial purity in 1930s Germany.

Chapoutot’s is a bold claim. In Germany the Nazi reception of antiquity has been a historical *topos* for several decades; Volker Losemann’s *Nationalsozialismus und Antike*, on the shifts in Ancient History curricula in German schools, for example, dates from 1977. There are very few nods to this expansive corpus of German historiography in the endnotes (there is no bibliography). For example, Anuschka Albertz’s well-researched *Exemplarisches Heldentum* (2006), on the roots of the German fascination with the Spartans and the mythical defeat at Thermopylae, goes unmentioned.

Such lacunae are problematic, especially when viewed in tandem with the book’s impression of a unique and coherent Nazi discourse, partly a consequence of the sometimes rash treatment of its sources. One should be careful, for example, to place Mommsen’s *Römische Geschichte* on the same level as propaganda tracts of Nazi demagogues (p. 304). Chapoutot convinces when he shows the relative ease with which the classical past can be forced into Nazism’s ideological corset and the seductive power of a tidy historical narrative, though it would have been interesting to go into more depth about the reception of this reception history. He mentions in the conclusion how the usurpation of antiquity was given a ‘warm and welcoming reception’ by Germans (p. 395), but a closer analysis of the challenges to this narrative would do much to nuance this apparent tidiness. In a similar vein, a systematic linking up of this antiquity narrative to the other aspects of Nazi ideology—like the occult, or scientific racism—would have better contextualised the book’s subject.

Nazism’s understanding of history as a linear, teleological process, so maintains Chapoutot, enables an interpretation of antiquity not only as a justification for its territorial claims, but also as a model to be emulated and as a prophetic warning. Teleology sometimes bleeds into the author’s enthusiasm, as when he asserts that Hitler and Speer’s plans to build a neoclassical Germania were fuelled mainly by an eschatological desire to see it as the future ruins of a new Rome (p. 390). This is hyperbolic even when framed within Nazism’s preoccupation with myth and millennial legacy. More importantly, it is unnecessary and weakens Chapoutot’s central argument, which is sufficiently supported by the sources he deploys with narrative skill.

Because despite its methodological limits this is an ambitious, important book for any scholar working on Nazi ideology, precisely because of its synthetic power. Chapoutot makes his point elegantly across a wide cultural landscape, moving swiftly between subjects and types of sources. However, one cannot help but feel this elegance came at the cost of analytical rigour.

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