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Eickhoff, Martijn

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Book Reviews



Helen Roche and Kyriakos Demetriou, ed.,

Brill's Companion to the Classics, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany (Leiden: Brill, 2017)

The cultural approach within fascism studies builds on a long tradition, which includes the seminal work of George L. Mosse, but only really started to flourish at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Since then historians have combined a focus on cultural phenomena in private and public life, with the question of how culture in general contributed to the inner functioning of fascist societies. Inspired by that approach in *Brill's Companion to the Classics, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* fourteen authors (in sixteen contributions) give an excellent introduction to the role and position of the classical tradition in Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany. The themes involved are diverse, without exception relevant, and include: 1) academic research fields, such as ancient history, philology, philosophy and classical archaeology; 2) media, such as cinema, exhibitions and architecture; 3) specific topics, such as education, Aryans or the comparison of fascism with national socialism. In her inspiring introduction Helen Roche stresses the importance of a balanced approach, combining doubt towards the postwar assumption that classicists were never true collaborators, with criticism of the one-sided view that the classical past under fascism and national socialism was always irredeemably linked-up with politics.

Being a companion, and as a result having the quality of a factual textbook, its readers are introduced to a diverse range of examples regarding the uses of the classical past in Italy and Germany during the first half of the twentieth century. The combination of these two countries is remarkably enough still quite novel, at least for those studying the appropriation of the classical past, and therefore much needed. Roche speculates in her introduction that the National Socialist German connection with ancient Greece and the Fascist Italian connection with ancient Rome had a rather similar yet exceptional

social function. She refers to the context of a long period of fractured national identity, caused by a 'belated' process of national unification. Thus she takes up the German *Sonderweg*-theorem and projects it also on the Italian case. This theorem is however much criticized as it implies the existence of a 'normal' road towards a modern democratic society from which Germany deviated. Roche's stance is therefore challenging. Yet, an answer to the question whether and, if so, why there existed a specific German and Italian (classical)-past-and-present-relation can only be given when the case studies in the companion are placed in a comparative European and global perspective, including in particular the colonized parts of the world. After all, Greece and Rome, were (and are) present in many parts of the world. James J. Fortuna, in his contribution on neoclassical form and the construction of power in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, illuminates this point. He discusses the statement of Albert Speer from the 1970s that his architecture produced during the Third Reich is not that different from the classical architecture in cities such as Washington, Moscow and London. Fortuna calls this assertion superficial and points at, next to basic structural differences, the unique ideological impulse behind Speer's work.

The classical past, so this companion brilliantly teaches its readers, was not only an ornamental, a rhetorical or aesthetic propaganda instrument, but an integral part of Fascist and National Socialist reality. The conceptual/theoretical tools used to study this reality, do however differ, which leads to a certain internal tension in the volume. Many authors make a difference between knowledge and ideology, between use and misuse, and speak of a spectrum of ideologization, whereas some others refer to a classical tradition that is communicated by discourses that consist of a diverting combination of power, knowledge and politics. Both approaches have their pros and cons, yet focussing too strongly upon ideology blocks our understanding of the role and position of the classical tradition in Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany. It turns the classics into an a-historic static entity or gift from the past that can be 'misappropriated' for ideological reasons. The statements of James I. Porter, in his contribution on philologists in exile, are telling in that respect. He concludes that philology was '*itself* forced into exile' while the 'lamp for illuminating earlier cultures was transformed into a hammer'. This approach negates that philology, like all other research fields, continued to exist in National Socialist Germany after it went through the process of *Gleichschaltung* and that it is at least worthwhile to study how. Yet, at the same time, Porter reminds us that focussing on culture, or the classical past as part of Fascist and National Socialist reality, should not imply we lose track of the violence inherent to fascism and National Socialism. A good example is given by Iain Boyd Whyte who, in his contribution on National Socialism, classicism and architecture notes

that the megalomaniac building program which was developed for Berlin, included the exploitation of those considered inferior by racist ideologues; Jewish homes were cleared whereas building materials were produced in concentration camps like Sachsenhausen, Neuengamme, Auschwitz, Mauthausen and Flossenburg.

This rich and much-needed companion not only stimulates discussion on a factual and theoretical level, but also inspires additional research. After all, during the first part of the twentieth century, the classics were part and parcel of European society as a whole. Including this context, leads to the realisation that during that era the political appropriation of the classical past was not an exclusive feature of Italian or German society. The circumstances in other European countries might have differed, but for the classics an a-political normality never existed.

Martijn Eickhoff

NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies (Amsterdam)

m.eickhoff@niod.knaw.nl