Attacking Afrocentrism

A classics scholar sharply challenges the emerging theory that ancient Greece “stole” its best ideas from ancient Egypt.

SOCRATES, THAT QUINTESSENTIAL Athenian, was black. And the ancient Greeks stole most of their great intellectual discoveries, including philosophy and geometry, from their African origins, the Egyptians. Such eye-catching assertions, which beg the disputable question of whether the Egyptians actually were black, are being promoted by radical Afrocentrists in college classrooms across the U.S. today. The principal goal is to free the teaching of world history from its traditional Eurofocus. A secondary aim is to give minority students pride in the achievements of their ancestors. Up to a point these are unexceptionable goals, concedes Mary Lefkowitz, a professor of humanities at Wellesley. But in a fierce little polemic called Not Out of Africa (BasicBooks; 222 pages; $24), she argues that the Afrocentrists substitute pseudo history for the real thing. As she writes, “The ancient Egypt described by Afrocentrists is a fiction.”

The argument for Socrates’ African origins, for example, is based largely on posthumous portraits that show him having a snub nose and broad mouth. But this is hardly conclusive. Lefkowitz contends, since the Greeks also portrayed the Scythians of Russia as having these supposedly Negroid features. Moreover, if Socrates had been part African, that fact would surely have been satirized by his critics, like the comic playwright Aristophanes. The most substantive Afrocentrist charge against the Greeks—that they stole their best thoughts from Egypt—is not a new argument. As Lefkowitz notes, the Greek historian Herodotus thought the Egyptians believed souls could transmigrate from human to animal form; he apparently did not know that the Egyptians had no such faith, as their elaborate funerary rituals make clear.

Afrocentrists claim that Greek philosophy is based on an Egyptian “mystery system,” embodied in the secret initiation rites of certain ancient religious cults. Lefkowitz makes the ingenious but plausible argument that the little we know about those ceremonies comes not from historical sources but from an 18th century novel, Séhous, by the French Abbé Jean Terrasson (1670-1750). His fanciful speculations about old Egypt were incorporated into Masonic rituals. Thus the Afrocentrists’ purported knowledge of Egypt, Lefkowitz contends, can be traced back to the mystical lore of black Masonic lodges in the West Indies.

Lefkowitz’s book is an amplification of a controversial article she wrote for the New Republic in 1992, after learning that Afrocentric “myths” were being taught as fact on her own campus. Students called the author a racist for publicly challenging the assertions of an Afrocentrist guest lecturer. More shocking to her was the silence of colleagues who, though they shared her opinions of Afrocentrist teaching, refused to speak up lest they be judged politically incorrect.

The real problem with Afrocentrism, Lefkowitz concludes, is not that its “truths” about Greece and Egypt are false. More dangerous is the underlying attitude that all history is fiction, which can be manipulated at will for political ends. The enthronement of this view on campus, Lefkowitz warns, means the death of academic discourse as we know it. Sadly, that seems to be happening. Better for all if Not Out of Africa stirs an equally fierce—and fair—polemic from the other side.

—By John Elson

NOT P.C.: Lefkowitz claims new portrayals of ancient Egyptian culture actually derive from Masonic ritual
THE LAST WORD

INTELLECTUAL SEGREGATION

Afrocentrism's many myths constitute condescension toward African-Americans

BY GEORGE F. WILL

In 1985, Dr. Yosef A. A. Ben-Jochannan, who was advertised as "a distinguished Egyptologist" although he is not a scholar of Egyptian language or civilization, delivered the Martin Luther King memorial lecture at Wellesley College. Unfortunately for him and for other "Afrocentrists," and fortunately for the rest of us, Mary Lefkowitz, a scholar of antiquity, teaches there and attended the lecture.

He offered the Afrocentrist's usual litany about how Greek civilization was stolen from Africa, as when Aristotle acquired his philosophy by plundering the library at Alexandria. When she asked him how Aristotle could have done that, considering that the library was not built until after Aristotle's death, and that there is no evidence that Aristotle ever went to Egypt, he said he remembered the tone of the question. Several students accused her of racism and of having been brainwashed by white historians. The occasion, she says, was less like an academic lecture than a political rally.

Which did not make it aberrant on a campus today. And it was not a novel experience for Lefkowitz, who was accused of leading a Jewish "onslaught" on Afrocentrism in defense of Eurocentric hegemony when she questioned whether Socrates, Hannibal and Cleopatra were Africans. Once when she suggested that Afrocentrists should give evidence for such claims as that Plato visited Egypt and acquired his philosophy there, she was told that her attitude was "McCarthyite in its intolerance." Such experiences moved her to write her new book, "Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History." Talk about using a howitzer to slay a hamster. Except the hamster, the Afrocentrist fable, is unassailable by mere evidence.

With heroic patience and goodwill she brings her formidable erudition to bear on the Afrocentrists' assertions, which are rarely more than that. If truth mattered in this controversy, her book would end the debate. But what makes the debate important and sinister is that it is not really a debate—not a dispute between scholars in agreement about professional standards. The disputants have no shared sense of what scholarship is or what the ethics of argument should be. On one side are scholars, with a traditional understanding of how truth is acquired and respected. On the other side are political activists wearing academic gowns. They believe that the truth of a proposition about history is less important than the proposition's therapeutic effect on the self-esteem of people whose ethnic pride might be enhanced by it.

Actually, Afrocentrism rests on something even worse than the idea that the truth of a proposition matters less than the utility of the proposition in serving a political agenda. Afrocentrism is another weed fertilized by the idea that there is no such thing as truth, only competing "narratives"; that power decides which narratives prevail; and that people of color are oppressed because the Eurocentric narrative has been "privileged" by the "hegemony" of white racism. Afrocentrists begin with, because Afrocentrism depends on, disdain for historical methodology.

Drawing upon ancient texts, European history and contemporary archeology, Lefkowitz meticulously demonstrates why "arguing that Afrocentric writers offer a valid interpretation of ancient history is like being comfortable with the notion that the earth is flat." What do we know of Socrates' physical appearance? (Not much, and nothing that suggests he was African, any more than there is evidence for the Afrocentrist canard that Napoleon shot the nose off the Sphinx because it was recognizably African.) Was Cleopatra black? (With the possible but improbable exception of one grandmother, her known ancestry was fully Macedonian Greek.) What of the cultural dependency of the Greeks resulting from Egypt's invasion of Greece in the second millennium B.C.? (A cultural transaction that never occurred, the invasion never having occurred.) Lefkowitz deals with evidence but Afrocentrists partake of the Oliver Stone mentality, according to which the utter absence of proof for a proposition is proof—proof of a successful conspiracy to destroy all proof.

One prominent Afrocentrist teaches that Beethoven was "Afro-European." Afrocentrism is sometimes based on merely incautious interpretations of facts, but more often is based on aggressively meritocratic misrepresentations of facts for ideological purposes. They are the purposes of identity politics, which preaches that in arguments about history, the important thing is not the historians' evidence but the historians' motives, which are explained by racial or ethnic determinism.

Afrocentrism is not new. The most influential book espousing it was published in 1954. And Marcus Garvey, who died in 1940, said that because of "thousands of Negro professors," ancient Egypt "gave to the world civilization," that Greece and Rome "robbed Egypt of her arts and letters" and white "resort to every means to keep Negroes in ignorance of their history." But today the teaching of Afrocentrism illuminates the distinction between freedom of speech in society and academic freedom in institutions devoted to the dissemination of knowledge. "Academic freedom," writes Lefkowitz, "is the right to profess a discipline according to its recognized content and procedures, free from constraints and considerations extraneous to that discipline." It does not encompass "the right simply to cease to be an active member of the intellectual community" and does not give anyone "the privilege of teaching what is beyond his or her range of proven competence." People who believe the teaching of Afrocentrism is protected by academic freedom must recognize the "right" to teach creationism.

Afrocentrism is an attempt to "empower" African-Americans with a "transforming" myth. But the myth is self-inflicted intellectual segregation, and the entire project is condescending to African-Americans: tell them inspiring stories, just as parents tell moralizing fairy tales to children. The truth is grander than the myth. "The Negro is an American," said Martin Luther King. "We know nothing of Africa." That is why African-Americans alone are entitled to the robust pride that W.E.B. Du Bois expressed. "There is nothing so indigenous, so completely 'made in America' as we."