Introduction

> "In the controversy between neoconservatives and postmodernists, teachers of Greek and Latin have found themselves in a curious position."
> —George A. Kennedy, "Classics and Canons" (1992)

"What Color Was Jesus?" and Other Queries from the Culture Wars

In the fall of 1998, as a master's student in classics at the State University of New York at Buffalo, I enrolled in a graduate course called Ancient African Civilizations. Offered under the auspices of the African and African American Studies Department, the class was recommended to me by my adviser, who presumed—as I did—that it would be devoted chiefly to archaeology, since literary evidence for many parts of ancient Africa is wanting.

The course proved to be a very different experience. Its professor was a genial scholar with a doctorate in sociology and expertise in modern Nigerian history. But it was not the professor who made the class so memorable. The majority of my fellow students appeared to be veterans of previous coursework with an Afrocentric outlook. This became clear in the second half of the semester, which was devoted to student presentations. One young man, the most outspoken and charismatic among us, delivered an enthusiastic report on the color of Jesus. Tipping his hand, in front of the class he removed his jacket to reveal a "Jesus Was a Black Man" T-shirt. To the delight of many of his classmates, he acquainted us with various Afrocentric discussions of the New Testament, which stressed Jesus's "Negroid" features. In such moments, the course, without the professor's encouragement, turned distinctly and passionately political, as ancient history intertwined with contemporary activism.

The class prompted in me a sense of bewilderment. Elsewhere on the SUNY Buffalo campus, it appeared, professors and students were engaged in a very different sort of analysis of the ancient Mediterranean world from that offered

in the classics department, with vastly different approaches to evidence. How had this happened? Did these incongruities signal an alarming lack of standards? Or were they merely signs of a promising young discipline's early development? Although these questions still resonate with me many years later, seeming to elude definitive answers, one thing appears crystal clear: the course served as my personal introduction to the academic culture wars.

Toward Ending the Crisis for Classics

Classics, the Culture Wars, and Beyond pertains to contestations over what Americans should learn in colleges and universities, about who we are as Westerners, as Americans. This book examines the role of classical studies in the turbulent academic environment of the United States during the 1980s and 1990s. Its discussions of various classical controversies of the period offer insight into the place of ancient Greece and Rome in contemporary higher education. Through an appreciation of this role, we can suggest ways for the field of classics—and, more broadly, for the humanities—to move forward. The book addresses how American classical scholars can help shift their discipline away from its current crisis mode—a mode that the field has helped promote by disengaging from the wider context of American intellectual life. Classical studies in the US must make important changes—not least, to develop a fuller sense of public spirit—to survive and thrive in the world of contemporary higher education.

There are umpteen polemics on the academic culture wars. This is not one of them. *Classics, the Culture Wars, and Beyond* endeavors neither to adjudicate the quarrels of the 1980s and 1990s nor to score points against opponents. Rather, the book presents a fair-minded and historically grounded analysis of the controversies it assesses. It provides the first full-scale examination of the relationship between these contretemps and the broader contestations that roiled academia in the US at the time. Understanding these disputes can help us both get a better grasp on an important period in the history of American higher education and plot a way forward for the discipline of classics.

To achieve these goals, the book will proceed as follows. Chapter 1 sets the intellectual scene for the investigation by describing and assessing the basics of the American academic culture wars. The clashes of the period—surrounding such popular books as Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals* (1990), and Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education* (1991)—focused chiefly on the study of English literature. Classics departments played an odd role in such disputes: although part of the supposedly radical and politicized world of the contemporary humanities, participants with various outlooks in the quarrels over American academia often deemed the departments old-fashioned and elitist.

Chapter 2 explains the strange place of classical studies in the debates. By presenting a brief history of the role of Greco-Roman studies in US higher education from the founding of Harvard College to the 1980s, it elucidates the widespread perceptions of the classics as conservative and hidebound. Most important, the chapter offers the study a historical foundation. Only in the light of the history of classics in American colleges and universities can one understand the curious position of classical studies in the era of the culture wars. Well before these intellectual skirmishes commenced, classical studies played a much-diminished part in the life of American colleges and universities.

The book then turns to a discussion of the most (in)famous controversies in classics from the period. Such controversies offer us a valuable opportunity to take stock of American classical studies in the late twentieth century. Like similar intellectual quarrels, they forced various scholars to pronounce on topics of great importance to the field's self-identification—topics that in less fractious times often remain unexamined. These disputes laid bare the underlying tensions in classics, clarifying deep-rooted contestations over the discipline's identity and its role in American higher education.[1]

The examination of such quarrels commences with chapter 3, which sheds light on the so-called *AJP* affair. Just as the academic culture wars heated up, Georg Luck, a classics professor at Johns Hopkins University and the editor of the prestigious *American Journal of Philology* (*AJP*), published a pugnacious editorial statement that belittled innovative theoretical approaches to classical scholarship. A formal protest campaign ensued—a campaign spearheaded by feminist classicists that is widely believed to have precipitated Luck's dismissal as *AJP*'s editor. The chapter demonstrates that this popular assumption is incorrect, highlighting the ways in which the wider debates of the academic culture wars could warp perceptions of disputes among classical scholars.

Chapter 4 examines the most prominent classical quarrel of the twentieth century: the heated debates—in scholarly journals, the popular press, and even on television talk shows—over Martin Bernal's three-volume work, *Black*

1. On the importance of crises and controversies to an academic discipline, see Bourdieu 1988: esp. 180–86; Harloe 2013: xxiii. Cf. Becher and Trowler 2001: 126–27.

Athena. This chapter reveals the ways in which the political rows over American higher education shaped the *Black Athena* controversy, transforming it into a catalyst of African American identity politics.

The next chapter focuses on the last major classical controversy during the culture wars. In 1998, classical scholars Victor Davis Hanson and John Heath published *Who Killed Homer? The Demise of Classical Education and the Recovery of Greek Wisdom*. This polemic amounted to a full-scale assault on the classics establishment and blamed "politically correct" careerist classical scholars for the withering of classics departments across the nation. The chapter examines the disconnect between populists such as Hanson and Heath and philological traditionalists such as Luck. It also demonstrates the ways in which the rhetoric of the culture wars derailed substantive conversations about *Who Killed Homer?*, ensuring that classical scholars never came to terms with the crucial topics the book addresses.

Chapter 6 surveys American classical studies in the aftermath of the culture wars and assesses the relationship between the controversies examined and the broader academic disputes of which they were a part. The chapter also recommends a path forward for the discipline, contending that its practitioners are often too cautious and thus fail to engage in more expansive dialogues on the nature of the humanities. Rather than revel in intramural methodological divisions, classical scholars should embrace a "big tent" philosophy, since the heterogeneous nature of the field is among its core strengths. Classical scholars (especially the more distinguished among them) need to foster a greater sense of public-spiritedness to ensure the discipline's survival by promoting increased visibility for the classics in the US and reminding Americans of the importance of Greco-Roman antiquity in shaping our culture—for better and worse.

Unearthing the Academic Culture Wars

Classics, the Culture Wars, and Beyond engages with different sorts of evidence. The book presents a traditional analytical approach to texts, both scholarly and journalistic. In the chapters devoted to particular controversies in classics, the study also benefits from numerous in-depth interviews with key contributors to these events. I selected a broad sample of participants on multiple sides of the controversies to ensure that the book would provide the most balanced examinations possible. The interviews—often more than an hour long and in many cases requiring follow-up discussions—help delineate these disputes with greater accuracy and allow important contributors to reflect on their potential impact with the benefit of hindsight. When possible, furthermore, relevant archives have been consulted. The final chapter also includes the findings from a Web survey of contemporary American classical scholars, which aids the book's reflections on the current state of the discipline and informs its suggestions for the most effective ways to address current pedagogical and intellectual pressures.[2]

The title of this book introduces obvious—and important—questions: What were the "culture wars"? How should they be defined? Although we shall return to this topic in chapter 1, some preliminary discussion is necessary. Cultural contestations in the US are hardly a phenomenon unique to the late twentieth century. Thus the notion of an easily defined period of "culture wars" with strict chronological boundaries is a chimera. These days, conservative pundit Bill O'Reilly intermittently devotes a portion of his popular television program to a "Culture Warriors" segment, in which guests debate various matters associated with the current state of American society. Accordingly, one could argue that our nation remains wracked by "culture wars."

Moreover, public quarrels over the state of higher education have been a constant in America and even predate the founding of the US. The nation has endured many curricular battles and many broadsides on the sorry state of US higher education. The methodological disagreements and ideological tensions among classical scholars highlighted in this book are by no means exclusive to the period under consideration. Long before the 1980s, American classical scholars disagreed—sometimes profoundly—on such matters.

Despite these caveats, there remain reasons to confine our investigation to the 1980s and 1990s. This era witnessed an especially prominent public battle over cultural attitudes in the US. Scholarly and journalistic books and articles regularly refer to this period as the age of the American "culture wars."[3] Among these struggles was an exceptionally noisy and attention-grabbing debate concerning higher education. Insofar as this public quarrel chiefly surrounded the state of the humanities in the US, it remains a key period for those attempting

2. Richlin (1989: 58) noted the potential of such a survey: "It would be of great interest to see how classicists self-identify—to poll the whole field and see what its real shape is. Besides letting us know where the lines are drawn, such a poll could be enormously useful to us: tell us what graduate students want and what they're getting, how to balance the panels at the APA [American Philological Association], how better to serve the readers of our journals." Approval for the survey was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Maryland, College Park. For the interviews I conducted, I received an exemption from the IRB at Connecticut College and approval from the IRB at the University of Maryland, College Park.

3. E.g., Graff and Cain 1989; Hunter 1991; Henry Louis Gates 1992b; Graff 1992a; Jay 1992; Jacoby 1994; Gitlin 1995; Goodheart 1997; Stimpson 2002; Bruce L. R. Smith, Mayer, and Fritschler 2008: 8–23; Hartman 2015: 285. This title for the period, as Smith, Mayer, and Fritschler discuss (11), comes from the work of Hunter (1991).

to discern the future of classical studies in American colleges and universities.

Classics, the Culture Wars, and Beyond attempts to keep professional terminology and jargon to a minimum. But in at least one circumstance, the book requires the use of labels that necessitate explanation. Many disputants in the academic culture wars are deemed *traditionalists* or *antitraditionalists*. Like many labels, these possess shortcomings. As we shall see in chapter 2, they are misleading, especially since the liberal arts tradition is itself variegated, and each side in the academic culture wars could conceivably lay claim to a link with some part of it—and each can be seen as a break from another.

Yet for all their problems, these labels for the disputants seem the least fraught. James Davison Hunter, a prominent historian of the period, prefers the adjectives *orthodox* and *progressive*.[4] Yet the former possesses religious associations that are inapt, and the latter causes confusion because it overlaps with a particular American political movement. Still other writers on the culture wars favor *conservatives* and *liberals* or *progressives*,[5] but, again, these call to mind political divisions that are not always appropriate. Some traditionalists in the academic culture wars were actually political liberals or leftists; some antitraditionalists would not self-identify as politically liberal or progressive. The labels used in the book, though reductive, cause the fewest problems.

Readers may wonder about the decision to include the classical controversies the book examines rather than others.[6] *Classics, the Culture Wars, and Beyond* focuses on these particular disputes because they were arguably the most well known, and, given the comparatively plentiful written records documenting them, they remain the easiest to reconstruct. Taken together, these three controversies also allow us to home in on issues of paramount concern to many academics during the culture wars: as we shall see, the *AJP* affair highlighted the topic of gender; the *Black Athena* controversy emphasized matters of race and ethnicity; and the row over *Who Killed Homer?* touched on these subjects but focused on class.[7] Race, gender, and class—for many American academics in the late twentieth century, these issues amounted to a Capitoline Triad of sorts, and humanists' supposed obsession with them encouraged much handwringing from their critics. By no means does the book aim to offer a comprehensive account of American classical studies in the 1980s and 1990s. The controversies examined both broaden our understanding of these years and allow us to comment on the likely future for the discipline.

4. Hunter 1991. See chapter 1.

5. E.g., DePalma 1991: A1; Atlas 1992: 14; Epstein 1992: 153; Graff 1992a: 97; Kennedy 1992: 224; Pollitt 1992: 202–3; Sedgwick 1992: 143; Clausen 1993: 15; Brustein 1994: 32; Jacoby 1994: xii; Hartman 2015. Cf. C. Vann Woodward 1994; Stimpson (2002: 37) (who criticizes the labels *conservative* and *progressive*).

6. E.g., the 1991 American Philological Association elections scandal, which is briefly mentioned in chapter 3, and the 1988 removal of E. Christian Kopff as the book review editor of *Classical Journal*, which pertains to Thomas Fleming's (1986) polemical piece in the publication. For a response to Fleming, see Skinner (1987b).

7. See Hanson and Heath (1998b: 258), who stress the primacy of class: "University affiliation—like class in the real world—not skin color or gender, will usually provide or relinquish financial dividends."

To a greater degree than most works of classical scholarship—or even examinations of the discipline's history—*Classics, the Culture Wars, and Beyond* analyzes conflicts with glaring ideological resonances. Since the book endeavors to provide dispassionate assessments of these disputes, it seems necessary to offer a brief word on my political views. I do not mention this topic out of a misguided impression that readers care about my biography, and I hope that my few words on the matter will not appear self-indulgent. But I think it is only fair for me to come clean on the subject, since it may help readers judge the degree to which my outlook affects my analysis.

In fact, I hope that my varied political background suggests that I am a good candidate to write this book. My inclinations have shifted over the years, from garden-variety American liberalism, a short-lived flirtation with radicalism, a center-right phase (during which time I worked briefly as an editor for the *New Criterion*, a journal discussed in chapters 1, 2, and 4), and most recently a push toward moderation. These days, I consider myself a centrist. Although I do not believe that this personal history allows me to write objectively about the contentious topics discussed in this book, I hope that it helps me give a sympathetic hearing to various opposing arguments.

Let us turn our attention to many of these arguments, as we examine the general contours of the American academic culture wars of the late twentieth century.

Classics, the Culture Wars, and Beyond

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