

Johann Chapoutot, *Greeks, Romans, Germans: How the Nazis Usurped Europe's Classical Past*, Oakland, University of California Press, 2016, ISBN: 9780520292970.

The English translation by Richard R. Nybakken of the instant academic classic by Johann Chapoutot (Sorbonne), *Greeks, Romans, Germans* brings about interpretative challenges from its very title because of the general noun “Germans” and of the subheading chosen for the volume. The original *Le National-socialisme et l'antiquité*, first published in 2008, was, indeed, more neutral, academic and less sensationalistic, as well as, i.e., the Italian translation of the work, simply *Il nazismo e l'Antichità*, recently published in 2017 by Einaudi.

Chapoutot focuses, effectively, on the use made by the Nazi party of the classical world, specifically the Greek and Roman, realizing an appropriation process of the ancient culture in order to give a “model” for the modern German society after Versailles. However, the Germans cannot be defined as Germans *tout court*.

Greeks, Romans, Germans proceeds through the main section in which Chapoutot defines the process of “appropriation” and re-using of the classics by the Nazis: 1. Annexing Antiquity; 2. Imitating Antiquity; 3. Reliving Antiquity. The point of Chapoutot, who is Professor of Contemporary History and not a Classicist, is extremely interesting and directly links Nazi racist ideology with the forced re-interpretation of the classical past. The author states: “We think of National Socialism as the apotheosis of racism in both words and deeds. But racism is an exclusionary practice: it is the distinction between friend and enemy based on a strict biological determinism that, taken to extremes, separates who get to survive from who must perish” (p. 3). Then: “The biological transmission of racial traits precludes any casual dalliance outside the kinship group, any genealogical digression” (ibidem) and “the Germans thus traced their line far back into the distant past of palaeontology and primeval forest (Urwald), through the Teutonic Knights and the Brothers of the Sword (Fratres Militiae Christi), Frederick the Great and Bismarck, to Hindenburg, and, finally, Hitler – the chosen one of the prophet and acme of the race” (ibidem).

It is here that Chapoutot's book finds its key note, rightly underlining how the concept of *genos* is distinct from the one of ethos, and how the ideological racism of the Nazis needed

something more than mythical origins that are purely related to genealogy and biology. There is a clear problem of lack of cultural prestige: “In the Western hierarchy of civilizations, the coarse Germans did not possess the necessary historical refinement” (p. 5).

It is for this reason – and to give a “solid” base to racism in terms of ethos – that the Third Reich started a systematic appropriation of the classical world – the cultural world *par excellence* – hence using classical images and references in speeches, events and other fields of public and private life: an example of this would be the works of the architect Albert Speer or those of film director Leni Riefensthal.

Chapoutot has delivered a prominent volume that shows how history has been rewritten by National-Socialism – and usurped, using the subheading of the English translation – in order to annex the ancient Greeks and Romans to the Nordic Race, in a way that, according to the author, is even deeper compared to the one put into effect by Mussolini and Fascism in Italy.

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