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Review of Raphael Greenberg and Yannis Hamilakis, Archaeology, Nation, and Race. Confronting the Past, Decolonizing the Future in Greece and Israel

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Raphael Greenberg
and Yannis Hamilakis,
*Archaeology, Nation, and
Race: Confronting the Past,
Decolonizing the Future in
Greece and Israel*

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Raphael Greenberg and Yannis Hamilakis

*Archaeology, Nation, and Race: Confronting the Past,
Decolonizing the Future in Greece and Israel*

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022. xvi + 218 pp.

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A book about archaeology that wrestles with nationalism, colonialism, race and cultural hegemony is always welcome. When it also happens to be so timely then it could be a must-read. This is certainly the case with *Archaeology, Nation, and Race*. As the genocide in Gaza unravels so does scholasticide – the systemic obliteration of education – and the destruction of the physical monuments to the history and heritage of the Palestinian people, an enterprise to which Israeli archaeology has long been devoted. And while archaeology is not routinely associated with such devastating violence, yet, as the book suggests, it is steeped in the darkest sides of nationalism and imperial conquest.

The by-product of a seminar that was taught jointly by Raphael Greenberg and Yannis Hamilakis at Brown University, the book maintains the dialogic structure in the hope that, as the authors suggest, it will mark the beginning of longer discussions on the notions of crypto-colony and crypto-colonisation, the idea of purification as an archaeological endeavour, the logic of race and archaeogenetics, and finally, on the prospects of the decolonisation of the field of archaeology. Written at a time when the self-fulfilling prophecy of the clash of civilisations is coming to pass and old colonial anxieties and ideological fabrications about the moral and cultural superiority of the West are on the rise, the book also has a certain urgency about it.

The coloniality of archaeology is the main thread that runs through the book. The term has been advanced in decolonial and Latin American subaltern studies by scholars like Walter D. Mignolo, Catherine Walsh and Anibal Quijano, among others, to connote the surviving Eurocentric systems of knowledge and the long-standing colonial power structures, which to this day define racial, political and social hierarchies. Nationalism and national archaeologies, as the authors explain in the second chapter, are intertwined with imperial structures of European colonialism. Classical and biblical antiquity, appropriated in various ways by the West, were written up as the unquestionable progenitors of Western

civilisation against which other cultures were to be measured and were most often to be found less developed, less sophisticated or less complex. Colonisation and the imperialist domination of the West over the rest of the world were embedded in a civilising rhetoric, inadvertently exposing both the shortcomings of the Enlightenment's universalistic tendencies and Romanticism's darker side of cultural particularisms. Archaeology has not just been part of the wider battle for cultural hegemony. It defined the nature of the battlefield itself.

In their use of coloniality to comparatively examine the Hellenic and Zionist nationalisms and their respective archaeological projects, the authors are cautious not to equate the brutal forms of colonialism to which the Global South has been historical subjected with the Greek or Israeli experiences. In chapter three they discuss Greece and Israel as contemporary crypto-colonised states, defined by Michael Herzfeld as countries with aggressive nationalism and massive political and economic dependence that serve as buffer zones, that, according to Hamilakis and Greenberg, have turned to colonisers. Historically, the entanglement of Greece and Israel with British colonialism and American postwar imperialism in the Eastern Mediterranean call indeed for a closer examination.

The idea of crypto-colonialism, divorced from the histories of other groups or nations which have similarly suffered the effects of imperialism, capitalist exploitation and outright violence, may turn to be compatible with conventional Greek historiography that tells the story of the Greek state as one of victimisation and manipulation in the hands of the nineteenth-century Great Powers, the United States or primordial enemies like Turkey for Greece or the whole Arab world for Israel. Victimhood has played a central role in driving xenophobia, racial hatred and other nationalistic attitudes. Yet, the authors take the concept further. Greenberg proposes the term "superimposed colonialisms" in Palestine and Israel; formal or informal colonialism by the West, Zionist settler colonialism, and crypto-colonialism in twentieth-century states, while he explains that, unlike Greece, Israel poses as an equal partner of the West characterising itself, simultaneously, as proudly independent and as the 51st state of the USA.

Colonialism and archaeology or archaeological colonisation has always been accompanied by concepts of purity and a racial logic, as Hamilakis and Greenberg explain in the subsequent two chapters. Orientalist archaeological practices adopted by foreign and national institutions alike formulated a pure sacralised past by removing living people from their ancestral lands and imposing modernist conceptions and categorisations of past and present, science and culture, of reason and affect. Archaeology was employed to provide material evidence of racially pure societies that reflected the colonial racial hierarchies, erasing in the process the inherently diverse and fluid identities of the two regions in discussion, often with the help of archaeogenetics and dubious DNA studies.

Greek classical and biblical archaeology have undergone a series of

transformations, being repositioned within multiple metanarratives about race and cultural evolution even as aesthetic preoccupations continued alongside questions of ethnic origins. Today, Israel and Greece serve as buffers against the alleged onslaughts not only of brown Muslim bodies ready to invade the borders of the Christian West, as the book explains, but also as the last frontiers of democracy, a metonym for Western civilisation. Liberal capitalist democracy lies at the core of the postwar Western civilisational onslaughts and the classical Greek heritage, as well as the Judaic tradition, remains central in narratives about civilisational clashes and the end of history. To this day, the “cradle of democracy,” a Cold War construct which carries the imprints of modernisation theory and American and European hegemonic hierarchies, conditions our cultural dispositions and political imagination. Israel also projects itself as such, in a sea of autocratic and dictatorial regimes. In a summit meeting in Greece in 2017, which was meant to promote the collaboration between the two countries and Cyprus for the construction of the EastMed pipeline, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stressed the shared economic interests between the three countries while he also described Jerusalem and Athens as the “two pillars” of our modern civilisations. He further grounded the relationship on their alleged democratic traditions saying that: “there’s a simple fact with Cyprus, Greece and Israel that brings us very close together. We are all democracies – real democracies and when you look at our region ... that’s not a common commodity.” It is based on the same shared narrative that the Palestinian genocide is executed today.

As I have previously argued, these social and political significations invested in Hellenism and Judaism have developed into internalised structures of domination, coherent identities which perpetuate durable inequality. The inability to perceive alternative modes of political and social organisation are intrinsically connected and closely intertwined with identities which are far from immanent or as primordial as they appear. They are, instead, socially and historically grounded on configurations and events that date back to the nineteenth century but also, and I would argue predominantly, to the twentieth century; they constitute responses to the American and European Cold War order, fierce anticommunism, transatlantic militarism and the free market economy.

In view of the enduring colonial and nationalist legacies that permeate archaeological practices, in the last part of the book Greenberg and Hamilakis reflect on the decolonisation of archaeological knowledge and practices. Alongside scholars coming from post- and anticolonial perspectives, they argue for decolonisation not as a metaphor but as an actual material and ideological practice dismantling the colonial framework and the Eurocentric regime of values associated with antiquities and linear temporality in the service of hegemonies and globalised capital. The authors argue for an archaeology for and by the people who have been historically the victims of colonialism and colonised knowledge. That is the direction, I think, that Greenberg points to at the end of the book, where he calls for a close collaboration of Israeli and Palestinian scholars and archaeologists.

In essence Greenberg and Hamilakis argue for what post- and anticolonial scholars

like Gurminder Bhambra, Raewyn Connell, Julian Go or Santos Boaventura de Sousa describe as the “southern” or “subaltern standpoint”. The argument is not that we should be looking for a pristine space of “non-Western” indigeneity – this is definitely what Hamilakis does not argue for when he talks about “indigenous Hellenism” – but a kind of postcolonial thought that emerges from the colonial space through a critical engagement with the dominant knowledges imposed on that space. Our conceptualisation of the “southern standpoint” should be understood in conjunction with what has been described as “postcolonial relationism”, an approach that acknowledges the interconnectedness and fluidity of social interactions and the mutually constitutive relationships between colonised and colonisers. Both concepts should be central to our efforts to interrogate the imperial episteme. Here one would locate the centrality of classical scholarship, biblical studies and archaeology, and bring also social theory – a body of thought that embeds the standpoint of empire – and postcolonial thought – an anti-imperial project – in dialogue. From a “southern standpoint” one can explore the forceful Hellenisation of ethnic and religious minorities in Greece, or the colonising power of biblical archaeology in Israel, yet not from a space that allegedly exists outside European thought or theoretical traditions but in relation to them. Such an approach will allow for a systematic analysis and understanding of Greece’s and Israeli’s position within imperialist circuits of capital, fields of knowledge and cultural production but also networks of collective struggles and emancipatory politics.