

## BOOK REVIEW

*Classicising Crisis: The Modern Age of Revolutions and the Greco-Roman Empire*. Edited by BARBARA GOFF AND MICHAEL SIMPSON. London, UK: Routledge, 2021. Pp. 240. Hardback, \$128.00; e-book, \$39.16. ISBN: 9780815361770.

In the Introduction to *Classicising Crisis*, Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson acknowledge that the two concepts of classics and crisis may, at first blush, seem contradictory (1-2). Both classics as a discipline and classical literature are often stereotyped as tweedy, old-fashioned, elitist or conservative; by contrast, *crisis* contains both the threat of danger and the potential of revolutionary idealism. However, this ostensible opposition is belied by the regularity with which revolutionaries, social reformers and utopian dreamers turn to the Greco-Roman tradition for inspiration and to make sense of crises as historical inflection points. The essays in this collection chart these tensions, tracing competing traditions of classics being deployed simultaneously to support revolutionary goals and the status quo in opposition to even gradual reform.

This tension is at the heart of *Classicising Crisis*, shaping the reception of classics in virtually every essay. Right from Goff and Simpson's Introduction, which explicitly explores the tensions between the titular terms, the multiple uses to which Greco-Roman antiquity can be put is apparent. Goff and Simpson frame the collection in terms of competing questions: about whether revolutionaries are inspired by classical texts or merely try to fit revolutionary sentiments into classical molds; about whether the rhetorical deployment of classics is done in good faith or merely to generate sympathy and cultural capital; about how and why revolutionary movements are classicized; and about whether the classical framework allows revolutions to imagine brave new worlds or whether liberatory movements are constrained by these models (2). The remainder of the Introduction provides brief surveys of revolutionary theory going back to Plato and Aristotle's political writings, with a big focus on Karl Marx and Hannah Arendt, then a survey of the impact of classical reception on the modern world, particularly during the period of revolutions from the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century through the present. Goff

and Simpson's questions frame the collection as a whole, with each of the essays attempting to work through the tensions.

Structurally, *Classicising Crisis* moves chronologically through various revolutionary crises, beginning with the English Civil War and ending with the contemporary global economic crisis following the 2008 Great Recession. Rachel Foxley's opening essay examines early 16<sup>th</sup>-century English discourse around "innovation" as rooted in classical political philosophy, particularly Aristotle's *Politics*. The charge of "innovation" was used to condemn religious and political reformists and simultaneously to critique the monarchy and Anglican church. In the first of three essays on late 18<sup>th</sup>-century revolutions, Nicholas Cole argues that although the leaders of the American Revolution continually quoted Greco-Roman sources, it was not until the framing of the US Constitution that American politicians and intellectuals seriously began grappling with the political problems of antiquity. Sebastian Robins then looks at the political discourse of 1790s Britain to show how conservatives deployed classical political philosophy to counteract its use by radical thinkers of the American and French Revolutions. Following this, Adam Lecznar links the psychological blurring of (neo)classical statues and living people with the political tensions of the Haitian Revolution, as depicted in Alejo Carpentier's novel *The Kingdom of this World*. Moving into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Katerina Kitsi-Mitakou and Vasiliki Misiou argue that feminist authors in the new Hellenic Republic blended virtuous heroines from ancient Greek myth with Christian values to imagine a new, socially empowered role for women in the deeply patriarchal society of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Greece. Isobel Hurst then examines Anglophone expat writers' reactions to the Italian Risorgimento of 1848-1849, showing how Roman referents sometimes built support for the republicans and sometimes prompted detachment or even disenchantment with contemporary Italians. Challenging the usual narrative that the Russian Revolution of 1917 marked a clean break that destroyed Russian studies of the classics, Henry Stead and Hanna Paulouskaya argue that classical literature and art were actually democratized in the early years of the Soviet Union through popular dance, theatre and Russian-language translations. Benjamin Gray then looks at a movement in contemporary German thought to treat the recent socialist past as ancient history, co-opting methodologies from classics, archaeology and philology to understand the gap between socialist East Germany and the modern German Left. The collection closes with Michael Simpson's essay about Yanis Varoufakis' use of the Minotaur myth as a metaphor for the global economy. Simpson argues that Varoufakis deploys "mythematics," or a strategic use of myth to expose the faults of

another myth, in this case the myth equating national economies with household budgets (178).

Across these essays, recurring themes emerge, with the most prominent being the contested status and meaning of classics across moments of crisis. In most cases, Greco-Roman antiquity was rhetorically and/or philosophically deployed both to shore up existing institutions and to critique them, to imagine more just societies and to reject liberatory movements. *Classicising Crisis* provides a complex picture of classical reception, showing that the ways any historical period engages with antiquity will be multi-faceted. While this is already an acknowledged principle in reception studies, this collection's unique focus on moments of crisis highlights the role of classics at historical inflection points while people try to envision futures for their societies.

Goff and Simpson's *Classicising Crisis* is an insightful collection that will benefit scholars in reception studies, classics, mythology/folklore, political science, political economics, history and literature. The book is concise, engaging and easy to read, frequently incorporating literature reviews or surveys of existing commentary on classical reception for each chapter's historical period. These qualities make the essays extremely accessible and useful for everyone from veteran scholars to graduate students or advanced undergraduates. A minor fault of the book is that the essays sometimes drift from a strict focus on classical reception, but these drifts provide a fuller context for the moments of crisis and why antiquity was received as it was at those historical points. The overall argument of the book—about the complexity of reception—is a wonderful reminder of the multi-faceted ways in which antiquity shaped varying historical eras and continues to shape the world through contemporary moments of crisis.

PHILLIP ZAPKIN

*Pennsylvania State University*, [phillipzapkin@gmail.com](mailto:phillipzapkin@gmail.com)