

# New York Times racist vandals descend on Rome and Greece

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24 February 2021

Earlier this month, as part of its ongoing effort to racialize every aspect of human existence, the *New York Times Magazine* published an article by *Harpers* editor Rachel Poser about the work of Dan-el Padilla Peralta, a race-obsessed professor of Classics at Princeton University (“He Wants to Save Classics from Whiteness. Can the Field Survive?”). Padilla upholds the view that his discipline—the study of ancient Greek and Roman history and culture—is a mainstay of the conception of “whiteness” and should be done away with.

The field of classics is primarily concerned with the “Greco-Roman world,” a series of societies that spanned the millennium lasting roughly from the formation of the Greek city-states around 600 BC to the collapse of the western part of the Roman Empire in the 5th century AD. The culture was instrumental in the development of modern society. For centuries it has been invoked by the ruling classes in Europe and America—as well as by those who would challenge the existing rulers.

Roman conquest, spreading from the Italian peninsula starting in the third century BC, united many of the peoples of ancient Europe, Western Asia and Northern Africa, and created a dominant culture that spoke two now-extinct languages, ancient Greek (the parent of Modern Greek) and Latin (the parent of Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Romanian). Scholars of classics normally learn to read both of these languages and to study the literature written in them, and sometimes other significant languages of the period as well, including Phoenician, Sumerian, Aramaic, and Hebrew. The field is strongly associated with the archaeology of the places where the Greeks and Romans lived, as well as the study of history, government and many expressions of religion and art—painting, sculpture, literature, epic poems, drama and comedy—for which the Greco-Roman civilization has been deservedly renowned.

Padilla, of Dominican parentage, grew up impoverished, as Poser relates in a snap biography, at one time living in a homeless shelter in New York City. He entered an elite high school on scholarship and then attended Princeton where he was one of the few blacks to study classics. As he developed an academic career, Padilla initially studied Roman slavery, but soon began to have doubts about its legitimacy. What for so many is the most liberating aspect of the study of the ancient world—its challenge to one’s conception of his or her own time and place—Padilla admits to having found unacceptably threatening. The scholar “sensed that his pursuit of classics had displaced other parts of his identity,” Poser worriedly writes.

Picking himself back up for battle, Padilla’s subsequent career has aimed to reverse the alleged “whiteness” of classics by imposing critical race theory upon it—and on academia as a whole. At Princeton, Padilla last year led a crusade that demanded racial quotas for all levels of staffing and the formation of an administrative review board that would ferret out “microaggressions” and “oversee the investigation and discipline of racist behaviors, incidents, research and publication.” Padilla is indifferent to the implications of such an Inquisition for academic freedom, labor rights, and even freedom of speech. “I don’t see things like free speech or the

exchange of ideas as ends in themselves,” he tells Poser.

Padilla deploys similarly aggressive measures against his subject. “Dismantling structures of power,” he writes, “will require writing an entirely new story about antiquity, and about who we are today.” If the classics disagrees with him—both as a field of study and as a realm of history—it should be destroyed. Poser writes approvingly that “if classics fails his test, Padilla and others are ready to give it up.” The *Times* author herself thinks it is time to “get rid of the classics”—a formulation that appears three times in her article.

To be blunt, this is the rhetoric of the privileged, arrogant, and self-satisfied elite. How many recent college graduates, it may be asked, are at all familiar with Thucydides or Plutarch? In fact, the great majority of American students—regardless of their racial background—have almost no access to the study of classical antiquity. Politicians have gutted the study of the humanities in the public schools. College and universities have likewise shifted resources to “professional training” programs. Rigorous education in classics, the hallmark of the college liberal arts education of the 19th century, has vanished. Even as a *potential* field of study, classics exists at a diminishing number of elite colleges and universities such as Princeton, from whence the self-satisfied Padilla hurls his thunderbolts.

Deploying the typical method of the *Times*, Poser’s article is based on a crude, almost comical, amalgam. She observes that the field’s attempt to shed its “self-imposed reputation as an elitist subject overwhelmingly taught and studied by white men,” has gained a new “urgency” because it has supposedly been embraced by the far right. Stretching her point to the breaking point, Poser notes that some protesters at the 2017 fascist Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, carried symbols of the ancient Roman state alongside anti-Semitic ones, and that the neo-Nazi website, Stormfront, has the symbol of the Athenian Parthenon on it.

Then, leaping from the far-right’s preposterous invocation of Greco-Roman heritage, Poser concludes, without any irony, the correctness of Padilla’s view “... that Classics has been instrumental to the invention of ‘whiteness’ and its continued domination.” The fascists would not disagree!

Poser’s (and Padilla’s) assumptions about the reactionary and racist character of classical studies are repeatedly shoved down the reader’s throat without evidence. Poser states, for example: “By 2015, when Padilla arrived at the Columbia Society of Fellows as a postdoctoral researcher, classicists were no longer apologists for ancient slavery.” At what time were classicists “apologists” for ancient slavery?

It is true that southern planters in the years before the Civil War used the example of Greece and Rome, both slaveholding societies, to justify their enslavement of blacks, just as they used the Bible for the same purpose. Over the centuries in Europe and America, however, there was no common agreement on this view. The planters’ conception that the Greek and Roman use of slave labor was morally superior, in any case, was smashed along with the Confederacy in 1865.

Padilla comes close to blaming the Greeks and Romans for racism—he

seems angered by “distortions and gaps in the archive,” and ruminates that “[w]hen folks think of classics, I would want them to think about folks of color.” Of course, Padilla knows that no concept of biological race or color-race existed in the ancient Mediterranean. He takes a different line of attack. Joined by Poser, he insists that the subsequent history of Europe makes the study of classical literature part of a dangerous, racist tradition.

Poser points an accusing finger at the Enlightenment, the movement of thought in the 18th century that sought to level feudal absolutism and the anti-scientific authority of religion. Enlightenment thinkers such as Denis Diderot and Jean-Jacques Rousseau were those “who in France prepared men’s minds for the coming revolution,” as Friedrich Engels said. Diderot’s famous *Encyclopédie* has no entry for “race” and its entry for “negro” suggests that skin color may be mutable.

But for the racialists the Enlightenment was truly the worst of times. Poser and Padilla claim that it was the Enlightenment that “created a hierarchy with Greece and Rome, coded as white, on top, and everything else below.”

Poser of course is forced to acknowledge that revolutionaries, including the black revolutionaries in Haiti after 1791, found inspiration in the figures from the Greek and Roman past. “Generations of intellectuals, among them feminist, queer and Black scholars, have seen something of themselves in classical texts, flashes of recognition that held a kind of liberatory promise,” she writes.

But Poser always returns to associating the classics with race. “Classics and whiteness are the bone and sinew of the same body. They grew strong together and may have to die together,” she says, paraphrasing Padilla.

“The language that is used to describe classical antiquity,” Poser further says, “in the world today—the classical tradition, legacy or heritage—contains within it the idea of a special, quasi-genetic relationship.” This is nonsense. Scholars in the subfield of the classical tradition seek out the influence of Greece and Rome in all of world culture ranging from the Arab philosophy, where it had an enduring presence, to Tibetan poetry.

Poser’s piece, in line with the *New York Times*’s now-discredited 1619 Project, seeks to impose the contemporary obsession with race, and its pseudo-intellectual conceits such as “whiteness,” on the past. It is a blunt instrument aimed, in this instance, at a crucial branch of world literature, history, and philosophy.

The racist tendency has material roots in present social conditions, particularly in the strivings of the upper-middle class for special privileges, under conditions of terrible poverty for the vast majority, of all races the world over. But it has also become possible because of the decades of the suppression of Marxism in both the working class and in literary and historical studies.

The founders of scientific socialism, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, like most educated people in the 19th century, were trained in the classics. Both men were highly conversant in the history and literature of Greece and Rome. As they studied the development of class society, they were able to place the Greco-Roman world in the broader context of world history. Marx’s doctoral dissertation was on a topic of ancient philosophy, and he read the plays of Aeschylus, the founder of tragic drama, in the original Greek for pleasure.

Because of the influence of Marxism, millions of ordinary people in the 19th and 20th centuries understood that the path for socialism was being prepared by capitalism through its creation of a world economy, the extraordinary development of the productive forces, and especially through its calling into being of an international working class. These were the immediate prerequisites for a socially equal society. But the development of capitalism had, in turn, been based on previous accomplishments.

As Engels put it, against Padilla’s forebears who moralized against

slavery in the Greek and Roman worlds, “Without slavery, no Greek state, no Greek art and science, without slavery, no Roman Empire. But without the basis laid by Hellenism and the Roman Empire, also no modern Europe. We should never forget that our whole economic, political and intellectual development presupposes a state of things in which slavery was as necessary as it was universally recognized. In this sense we are entitled to say: Without the slavery of antiquity no modern socialism.”

In other words, socialism could only be constructed on the full assimilation of the accomplishments of earlier societies, not only economically, but also culturally. Capitalism had already demonstrated this. Beginning in the 14th century, in the period that later came to be known as the Renaissance, the emerging bourgeoisie had revived the technological and intellectual achievements of Greece and Rome, a recovery made possible in part owing to the preservation of those achievements by Arab scholars. The works of Dante and Milton are unthinkable without the accomplishments of the great Roman poet, Virgil, the author of the *Aeneid*, which both modern poets knew thoroughly, and Shakespeare’s development of a distinctly bourgeois tragedy could only have emerged after the ancient tragedy of Sophocles and Euripides.

There was a definite ideological component to this process. The rising capitalist class fortified itself against its feudal masters with the history of ancient social conflicts in Greece and Rome, including in its struggle for the abolition of monarchy and the establishment of democratic rights. The works of art, from sculpture to poetry, had an objective content in depicting reality, which helped to teach the bourgeoisie in its revolutionary phase how to think and feel and act. Bourgeois culture carried this legacy to all corners of the world, where it became a part of the foundations of world culture. The novel, for example, now written in every corner of the world to express life in artistic form, only came into existence by a complex development that included Greek and Roman models in Britain and France.

To Marxists, it has never been a matter of either celebrating or condemning the Greco-Roman world. The astonishing feats of that epoch expressed the highest material culture that could be achieved given the mode of production. Just as crucially, the fall of the Greco-Roman world demonstrated that social orders, civilizations, and indeed entire historical epochs, collapse under certain conditions. This remains a profound lesson.

The *New York Times* sees no value in the study of classical antiquity, besides the spoils that can be shaken down using the vulgar racist weapons of the present. One cannot imagine a more backward and arrogant conception of human culture.



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