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Homer Redivivus

It would be strange to discuss a revised role for classicists as public intellectuals without recognizing that one manifesto for that project has already been written: Hansen and Heath's 'Who killed Homer'? For the book tries to use ancient wisdom (their 'Homer') to solve a very modern dilemma — the role of the humanist intellectual in the era of experts, in an increasingly commodified and class-riven social world. Indeed, the Hanson/Heath program is a modification - and intensification - of the old Gramscian demand for 'organic intellectuals'. Gramsci called for intellectuals to meld into communities and work places, to refuse, through their actions, to let any division between intellectual and manual labor take hold. Hanson and Heath's project goes further, seeking to bring the public to the intellectuals. It breaks down barriers between students and faculty by creating a world of intellectual generalists. It demands a vast expansion of secular, public education, funded by a huge increase in teaching loads and a channeling of money away from arcane humanities research programs. It demands an end to any intellectual cant and pretension that cannot defend itself before its broader community. Should not such a project be openly embraced?

A frequent criticism has been to question the content of this intellectual program, and the version of 'Homer' that solders it together. Is not its final cause the propagation of a US cultural imperialism? But this merely begs further questions. What is the precise nature of this contemporary imperialism, and what are the pragmatic political alternatives to it? To map Athens versus Sparta onto the cold War is not quite the same thing as mapping them onto the US /NATO versus Al Qaeda/The Taliban — though one gets the sense that at times both Hanson/Heat (with their 'unchanging core' of Western values) and the academic left (with their unacknowledged 'unchanging core' of current US imperialism) would have it so. At least the Heath/Hanson project has the merit of posing the political question — in their terms, to raise without apology the question of relevance. And at least the building block of their vision of the human as a communicative and social animal is grounded in a worthy tradition, spanning Aristotle, Marx in his Paris manuscripts, up to Habermas.

Perhaps this is why 'Who Killed Homer?' finds a surprising fellow-traveller in Terry Eagleton's 'After Theory', a work that also seeks to ground contemporary ethics in the idea of the good life shared by Marx and Aristotle. Both share an intellectual impatience with contemporary humanist academic work. Eagleton explains this poverty from our unenviable status as epigones of the grand theorists. Hanson and Heath vacillate — at times, pointing to toward the cultural pedigree of such theorists (say, the classical roots of their intellectual ancestors Marx and Freud), at other times seeking to sweep all obstacles to Greek wisdom away. But the cure is the same: a populist intellectual/cultural effort, grounded in a return to ancient ethics in order to reinvigorate a mercenary and moribund academic and political sphere.

In this paper, I would like to take this common ground between Hanson/Heath's 'Homer', and the leftover ethical thrust of theory, seriously. For Hanson/Heath's ethical 'Homer' is

full of unacknowledged contemporary theoretical concerns – their secular reflections on the fragility of the self, and hatred of therapy-culture, finds a counterpart in the psychoanalytic project, their economic populism in the efforts after Marx to find forms of non-market-determined value. But perhaps more important, a return to the basic tenets of critical theory can help populize their utopian Gramscian project.