

## **CLAIMING THE CLASSICAL: THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD IN CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL DISCOURSE**

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*For details of this image, please see fig. 6 below*

**A**midst the shifting political discourses of the twenty-first century, Greco-Roman<sup>1</sup> or ‘classical’ antiquity has emerged as a recurring theme. From North American white supremacists adopting Spartan ‘lambda’ symbols to the Chinese government’s discussion of the ‘Tacitus trap’; and from the Latin names given to EU immigration policies to the satirical critique of authority in South Africa, references to the Greco-Roman world are currently made by actors from across the political spectrum and in many different parts of the world. While excellent research has been done on individual examples, the full picture remains largely obscure. Why does classical antiquity still appeal to so many politicians and activists in the twenty-first century? Does the classical world have the same political associations across national and/or continental borders? And how are the classics used differently in different political contexts?

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, the ‘classical world’ is roughly equated with the Greco-Roman world. We recognise that antiquity was far more diverse than this terminology implies, that Greek and Roman societies interacted closely with a wide range of other groups, and were in many cases no clear distinction can be drawn between ‘Greco-Roman’ societies/individuals/communities and others. We also recognise that the designations of ‘Greek’ and ‘Roman’ are in themselves problematic, and are the subject of rich scholarly discussion. Yet this complexity is rarely or never acknowledged in the contemporary political discourses that are the primary focus of this article. We have therefore adopted this definition in the interests of brevity and coherence.

The answers to these questions are important for at least two reasons. First, they are important for political commentators, analysts, activists, and members of the wider public seeking to navigate the contemporary political landscape and to understand the appeal of the ancient at this particular moment in time. Second, they are important for scholars of classical antiquity, as politicised uses of the classics shape the popular perceptions of our field that both constrain and enable our work. With this in mind, the research network 'Claiming the Classical' was established in 2018 to investigate the uses of classical antiquity in twenty-first century political discourses. The network facilitates collaboration and the sharing of knowledge internationally, providing a comparative perspective for work being undertaken in individual countries or specific regions.

On 9<sup>th</sup> November 2018, the network organised a workshop in London, hosted by the Institute of Classical Studies and sponsored by the British Academy. The aim of the workshop was to 'map' the use of classical antiquity in global political discourse, providing a 'snapshot' of the current situation. This paper offers an overview of our discussions, supplemented by further research where appropriate. In what follows, we make no claim to comprehensive global coverage, but have sought to represent the diverse contributions made by network members. There are many parts of the world which are un- or under-represented in what follows, and we hope to expand our geographical reach in the future. Similarly, we make no attempt to discuss our examples in historical depth – our focus is instead on the 'now' (i.e. the early twenty-first century), and we leave the historical development of these phenomena for more sophisticated discussion elsewhere.

Our initial survey has identified four main ways in which the classical world is currently utilised in political discourse. These are: in cultural-racial discourses, especially those connected to 'western civilisation'; in inter-state discourses constructing relationships between different countries; in social discourses questioning social structures and hierarchies; and finally, in subaltern discourses.

## **1. Cultural-racial discourses**

References to classical antiquity appear with particular frequency in discourses that seek to construct cultural-racial identities. They occur most often within a vision of 'Western Civilisation' as a white-skinned, European-derived, racial and cultural heritage; with its ancestral roots in the classical worlds of Greece and Rome. This vision is closely associated with the ideologies of the far-right, and was championed by various fascist movements during early and mid-twentieth century (Roche and Demetriou 2018). During the late twentieth century, neither far-right movements nor their racialised reading of the classics featured in mainstream political discourse; and the idea of the Greco-Roman past as an exclusively white heritage faded from public discussion without ever entirely disappearing.<sup>2</sup> The situation has changed dramatically in the early twenty-first century. Across North America and Europe, the rise of the far-right has been accompanied by increasing interest in classical antiquity as the fountain-head of 'Western Civilisation'.

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<sup>2</sup> The persistence of this idea must in part be due to classicists' reluctance to address issues of race in their discipline, see: McCoskey 2018a. Classicists have also sometimes acquiesced to or even promoted the idea of the classical world as the fount of western civilization as a means of defending their discipline in the face of major funding cuts and attacks on the humanities in both North America and Europe.



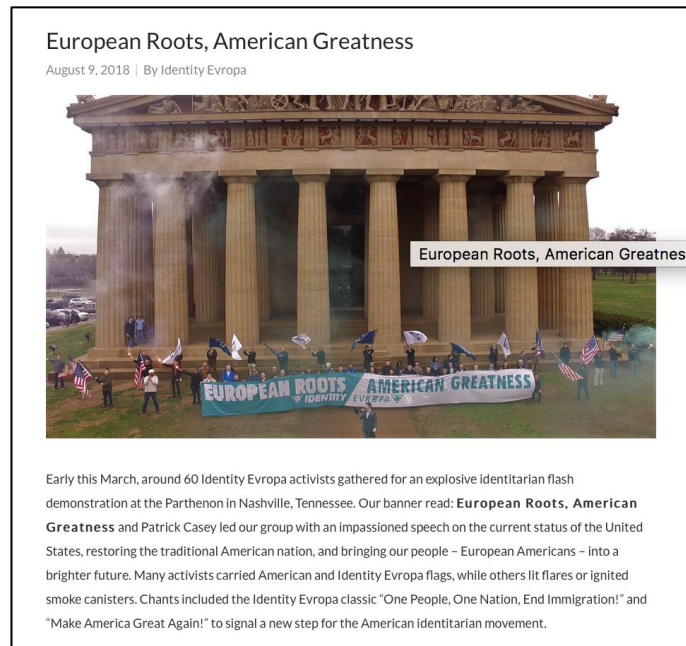
**Figure 1.** Tweet posted by The Boston Globe newspaper, showing far right demonstrators carrying shields bearing the fasces. One of these demonstrators was later to drive a car into a group of counter-protestors, killing Heather Heyer and injuring many others.

In the USA, this phenomenon is especially well documented.<sup>3</sup> At the *Unite the Right* march in Charlottesville in August 2017, during which the counter-protestor Heather Heyer was murdered, far-right demonstrators displayed several symbols associated with the Greco-Roman past. Some carried cardboard shields bearing the *fasces*, a mark of authority under the Roman Republic but better known as the symbol of fascism (Bond 2018; Fig. 1). Others wore replica ancient Greek helmets, or sported SPQR tattoos. Yet others marched carrying flags of an organisation called *Identity Evropa*, an openly neo-Nazi group celebrating 'European' heritage, whose recruitment and marketing materials often make conspicuous use of classical imagery (Davis 2017; Fig 2). Amongst such political groups, the language of 'culture' and 'civilisation' is often used as a proxy for race, and the terms 'Western' and 'European' are used as synonyms for whiteness. The language employed by North American websites and online communities is often more explicit. The anonymity offered by these contexts has encouraged some campaigners to draw a clear equivalence between classical antiquity and a white racial heritage, and to advocate extreme action in defence of this heritage. Examples of this trend include an article posted on *Counter Currents*, a white supremacist publishing site, that defended the black slave-owning states of the Confederacy as "a North American manifestation of Greece and Rome".<sup>4</sup> Skin colour is therefore fundamentally implicated in this discourse. In North America, with its unique history of race relations, classicism has been claimed for whiteness just as Africanism has been claimed for blackness. The classical past, when deployed in the racial-cultural discourse of both the United States and Canada, is therefore refracted through the lens of more recent history,

<sup>3</sup> Core information in this section was provided by Dozier, Futo-Kennedy, and McCoskey.

<sup>4</sup> Available in archived form here (provided by the Pharos project):  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20180214145512/https://www.counter-currents.com/2017/09/why-the-confederacy-matters/>

notably the histories of slavery and racial inequality. These far-right appropriations of the classics in a North American context have attracted significant attention, leading to active engagement by classicists working to correct inaccuracies or debunk misuses of the classical past (e.g. Livingstone 2018; McCoskey 2018b; Yeomans 2018; see also the Pharos website<sup>5</sup>).



**Figure 2.** Screenshot from the Identity Evropa website, showing a blog post dated 9<sup>th</sup> August 2018 reporting a demonstration in front of the replica Parthenon in Nashville, Tennessee.

Similar uses of antiquity can be found in Europe, where far-right groups have also employed classical symbols to invoke the idea of white racial heritage.<sup>6</sup> A network of linked organisations across the continent subscribes to the tenets of Identitarianism, an ideology that developed in the early years of the twenty-first century out of the *Nouvelle Droite* and the *Bloc Identitaire* in France (Camus and Lebourg 2017, 114-7). The last decade has seen Identitarianism develop into a distinct ideology, with focused campaigns against Islam, migration, and what is argued to be the deliberate destruction of indigenous white European culture (*The Economist* 2018). Starting in 2012, national chapters began to be established under its umbrella, drawing their members mostly from the disaffected youth. These include: *Identitäre Bewegung* in Germany, *Génération Identitaire* in France; *Generazione Identitaria* in Italy; and *Identitäre Bewegung Österreichs* in Austria (the US-based *Identity Evropa* is also loosely linked to this movement, see above). The official symbol of the Identitarian movement is a stylised ancient Greek lambda – the sign said to have been painted on the shields of the Spartan soldiers at Thermopylae (Fig. 3).

<sup>5</sup> The Pharos website is available at: [www.doingjusticetotheclassics.org](http://www.doingjusticetotheclassics.org)

<sup>6</sup> Core information in this section was provided by Agbamu, Bernard, Müller, Poulis, and Psilakis.



**Figure 3.** Demonstration in Vienna, with protestors holding flags bearing the lambda symbol of the Identitarian movement. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

Many of the companies and brands associated with the movement have also adopted classicising names, from the publishing houses of Verlag Antaios and Arktos Media to the online merchandise store, Phalanx Europa (Fig. 4).



**Figure 4.** Screenshot from the Phalanx Europa website, showing one of the classicising items for sale.

Diverse elements have contributed to the forging of this link between identitarianism and the classical past in Europe – not simply the relationship with antiquity. In France (Bernard 2017) and Britain (Goff 2005; Bradley 2007; Vasunia 2013), the classics have long been associated with empire, and evoking it recalls the imperial glories of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Germany and Austria, claims of a classical heritage, and in particular references to Sparta, necessarily recall the celebration of the classical past under Nazism, despite attempts by Identitarians to deny the connection. Both factors are at play in the Italian context. References to antiquity recall Italy's brief imperial experience in Africa in the early twentieth

century,<sup>7</sup> but at the same time are also inescapably linked to Fascism – a connection actively celebrated by some extremist groups such as Casa Pound.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 5.** Logo of Chrysi Avgi (Golden Dawn), taken from a flyer. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

The same is not true of Greece, where the far right's engagement with the classics evokes neither the experience of being an imperial power nor a mid-twentieth century extremist regime.<sup>9</sup> Instead, antiquity today is linked directly with modern ethno-nationalism, a process best illustrated by the neo-Nazi political party *Chrysi Avgi* (Golden Dawn). The party's logo brings together two classical motifs, the meander pattern and the laurels (Fig. 5); its members are closely associated with Hellenic Neopaganism; and its leaders have published novels about Sparta and poems dedicated to the ancient Greek gods (Poulis 2017). Tellingly, *Chrysi Avgi* saw its greatest surge in support during the Greek debt crisis, at a time when heightened political rhetoric connecting ancient and modern Greece was used by centrist and leftist politicians as well as those of the right. Internationally, diplomatic and popular debates questioned what the world 'owed' Greece for its classical heritage (Hanink 2017). At home, the leftist *Syriza* party campaigned on a platform that of modern debt relief inspired by Solon's famous *seisachtheia* of the sixth century BCE.<sup>10</sup> *Chrysi Avgi's* engagement with antiquity, therefore, was part of a wider political discourse surrounding the modern Greek financial crisis and Greek national identity – a discourse that was, from all sides, deeply steeped in classical references (Scott 2018). Notably however, the use of the classics by the far right in Greece was far more extensive, strident, and longer lasting than those of the centre and the left. This more embedded nature sets it apart from the claiming of the classical by other far right groups in Europe and North America.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, the imperial undertones of Italy's Operation *Mare Nostrum*, active between 2013 and 2013, addressing migration across the Mediterranean.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Casa Pound's logo draws inspiration from the Roman 'testudo' formation, and its leader runs a music label called 'Rupe Tarpeia' (The Rock of Tarpeia): see Koch 2013, especially pp29-30.

<sup>9</sup> Although the military junta of 1967-74 did seek to associate itself with the classical past, for example promoting performances of ancient drama (Van Steen 2015, 48-50), this process was not extensive enough so as to link the classical world with inevitable associations of the junta.

<sup>10</sup> The subsequent failure of *Syriza* to accomplish a modern *seisachtheia* has resulted in representations of Solon appearing in popular and political commentary, such as the graffiti works of the street artist Ino, and the satirical cartoon *Democracy* by Alecos Papadatos.

## 2. Inter-state discourses

A distinct group of claims on the classical focus on constructing, explaining, and negotiating relationships between nation-states.<sup>11</sup> The Greek example, mentioned above, partially falls into this category, as Greece's international relations were sometimes discussed with respect to classical antiquity. The Greek case has been included in the section above on the cultural-racial discourses because it is these far right uses of antiquity which continue to be the most prevalent today.



**Figure 6.** *Statue of Europa and the bull, outside the Justus Lipsius Building (used by the Council of the European Union), Brussels.*

Another obvious example of classical antiquity being used to construct international relationships can be found in the European Union (EU). Within the EU, the idea of a shared classical heritage is used to promote a sense of commonality between member states. The first draft of the ill-fated European Constitution originally opened with a quote from Thucydides (2.37) and the statement that “Europe is a continent that has brought forth civilisation...”.<sup>12</sup> Statues of Europa on the bull stand outside several EU buildings (Fig. 6), and the new issue of Euro banknotes is officially named the ‘Europa series’ because two of its security features contain portraits of Europa, taken from an Attic red figure vase in the Louvre.<sup>13</sup> While the

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<sup>11</sup> Core information in this section was provided by Agbamu, Bonacchi, Duru, Koparal, Krsmanovic, Morley, and Scott.

<sup>12</sup> The drafting process began in 2001, and this draft was presented at a European Council Meeting in June 2003. The quote and the reference to ‘civilisation’ was dropped from the final version, which was for signing in presented 2004. The constitution was eventually abandoned in 2007 after it could not be ratified in all member states.

<sup>13</sup> The website of the European Central Bank claims that: “ This figure from Greek mythology was included in the new euro banknotes because it has an obvious link to the continent of Europe and

rhetoric of a common classical past is usually designed to encourage inclusion, integration and collaboration between member states, the focus can sometimes switch to exclusion. In October 2014, the EU border force launched *Operation Mos Maiorum*, a campaign cracking down on illegal immigrants, the name of which implies a defensive protection of 'our' European society against outsiders. Yet overall, EU authorities have not used classical parallels as often as might be expected. In contrast, opponents of the EU have more frequently used classical parallels as a means of critiquing the block. Cartoonists and satirists have cast the EU as a new Roman Empire – a corrupt superstate ruled by an unelected elite. When campaigning for the UK to leave the EU in the Brexit referendum, the British politician Boris Johnson claimed that the Roman Empire marked the first attempt to unify Europe, and that “the EU is an attempt to do this by different methods” (*The Telegraph*, 14<sup>th</sup> May 2016). Similar comparisons between the EU and the Roman Empire were made on social media around the time of the referendum, usually accompanied by criticism of the EU's 'imperial rule' and by ominous warnings about the impending 'Fall of Rome/Europe' at the hands of barbarian invaders (Bonacchi *et al* 2018, 184-5; Hingley *et al* 2018, 295-6). Whether the judgement of the EU is positive or negative, its mission of inter-national integration has been seen against the backdrop of classical antiquity.

Inter-state appeals to the classical are not restricted to those who commonly claim a Greco-Roman heritage. China has also used classical antiquity to construct inter-state relations, crucially with Greece. While classical scholarship has long been established in several Chinese universities, official and state-sponsored engagement with antiquity has intensified dramatically in recent years (Fig. 7). Conferences have brought together Chinese and Greek academics; museums in the two countries have exchanged loan objects and organised travelling exhibitions;<sup>14</sup> theatre companies have collaborated on staging traditional plays;<sup>15</sup> and in April 2017, Greek and Chinese politicians jointly established the 'Ancient Civilizations Forum', inviting representative from eight other states with “great ancient civilizations” – Bolivia, Egypt, India, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Mexico and Peru. Although signed by all ten nations, the declaration establishing the forum carefully presented Greece and China as the two key players, committing members to “supporting the Olympic Ideal” and “advancing the Belt and Road initiative”.<sup>16</sup> In these engagements, China does not seek to identify itself with or position itself as the heir to ancient Greece, but rather to draw a parallel between Greek and Chinese antiquity. This particular claim on the classical focuses particularly on Greece rather than Rome, and uses the 'soft power' of cultural heritage to construct a political relationship between states. The economic motivations behind this policy are clear. Greece is a key staging point in China's plans to revive the Silk Roads, known as the 'Belt and Road Initiative', and the Chinese state now owns a controlling stake in the port of Piraeus (Majendie *et al.* 2018).

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also adds a human touch to the banknotes”  
(<https://www.ecb.europa.eu/euro/banknotes/europa/html/index.en.html>).

<sup>14</sup> These include: 'EUREKA! Ancient Greek Science, Art and Technology Exhibition' at the China Science and Technology Museum, Beijing (Nov 2017 – May 2018); the 'Ancient Chinese Science and Technology' exhibition at the Herakleidon Museum, Athen; 'The Antikythera Shipwreck' at the Palace Museum, Forbidden City, Beijing (Sep – Dec 2018); and 'From the Forbidden City: Imperial Apartments at Qianlong' at the Acropolis Museum, Athens (Sep 2018 – Feb 2019).

<sup>15</sup> A joint Chinese and Greek production of 'The Orphan of Zhao' was staged in Athens in November 2018, while a similar bilingual 'Agamemnon' will be staged in Beijing in Feb-Mar 2019).

<sup>16</sup> See the 'Athens Declaration on the Establishment of the Ancient Civilizations Forum':  
[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/2649\\_665393/t1457694.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/t1457694.shtml)





**Figure 7.** Photograph of a billboard erected in the arrivals hall at Beijing Capital International Airport, showing Chinese artists drawing classical Greek sculptures. Photograph taken by Michael Scott.

Turkey uses classical antiquity to further its political and economic aims in a markedly different way. Despite its wealth of classical remains and archaeological sites, there is little interest in claiming an ideological connection with the Greco-Roman past. While the mid-twentieth century saw a focus on Anatolian prehistory and the 'Turkish History Thesis', which proposed a sequence of ancient Turkic migrations to the peninsula (Atakuman 2008); the current AKP administration has instead promoted the vision of sixteen historical Turkic empires,<sup>17</sup> crucially culminating in the Ottoman empire.<sup>18</sup> But while the Greco-Roman past is not seen as contributing to national identity,<sup>19</sup> this does not mean it is neglected. The Turkish state seeks to leverage foreign interest in its classical heritage in two main ways. First, it uses its control over classical sites, monuments, and antiquities as a tool to achieve broader diplomatic goals: for example, Austrian-led excavations at Ephesus were called to an abrupt halt in September 2016 following a breakdown in diplomatic relations between the two countries.<sup>20</sup> Second, it is

<sup>17</sup> The sixteen empires of the Turks are said to begin with the Great Hunnic Empire in 220 BCE, running through the Avar Khaganate in the sixth to eighth centuries CE, the Seljuks of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Timurids of the fifteenth, until the Ottomans. When the Turkish President Recep Tayip Erdoğan met the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in 2015, he was accompanied by sixteen guards, each dressed in a costume to represent one of these Turkic empires.

<sup>18</sup> The recent popularity of Ottoman period dramas on Turkish television is noteworthy. Hit shows currently include: *Diriliş Ertuğrul*, about the father of Osman I who founded the Ottoman Empire; *Payithat: Abdülhamid*, about the last Ottoman emperor; and *Muhteşem Yüzyıl*, about the court of Suleyman the Magnificent.

<sup>19</sup> When an image was circulated on social media of the Turkish ambassador to Uganda attending Republic Day celebrations dressed as Helen of Troy, this was enough to warrant her immediate recall. For a report, see: <https://www.superhaber.tv/turk-buyukelci-ve-katibi-29-ekim-resepsiyonunda-haber-147412>.

<sup>20</sup> The episode was reported slightly differently in the national presses of Turkey (e.g. <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/disisleri-bakanligi-avusturya-arkeoloji-enstit-40215718>) and Austria (e.g.

keen to maximise the economic potential of its classical heritage: tourism is strongly encouraged, and permits for archaeological research are often dependent on commitments to build new tourist facilities and attractions.

There are therefore several different ways that classical antiquity can be used to construct relationships between states. Appeals to a shared classical heritage can be made to bind countries together, as in the case of the EU, predicated on the idea of a common ancestral link with antiquity. Alternatively, the classical past can be used as a parallel or analogue for other ancient pasts, as in the case of China, supporting inter-state relations in the present. Finally, given that the classical holds value for many around the world, it can also be commodified and leveraged for gain in inter-state relations, as has happened in the case of Turkey.

### 3. Social discourses

A third mode of claiming the classical focuses on internal social structures within a given state or society. These intra-state discourses are various in nature, and include debates on class, political authority, and gender.<sup>21</sup>

In several instances, classical references in political discourse are employed as a signifier of elite status and the authority of the speaker. While such tactics may traditionally have been effective in many countries, in the current political climate of Brazil, the association between classics and elites has had a negative impact on the discipline. Educational reforms of the late twentieth century removed classical antiquity from the core syllabus, in favour of colonial, indigenous, and African histories which were assumed to be more relevant. One result of this was that a classical education became increasingly the preserve of the privately educated, and the link between elitism and the classical world was strengthened. While current political discourse therefore includes relatively few classical references, those which do appear are used as conspicuous markers of social distinction. While campaigning for the 2018 presidential election, Geraldo Alckmin, the leader of the centre-right *Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira* (Brazilian Social Democracy Party), initially made use of Latin tags to emphasise his erudition and learning,<sup>22</sup> thereby setting himself apart from the populist candidates of both the left (Fernando Haddad) and right (Jair Bolsonaro). In an atmosphere of widespread anti-intellectualism, Alckmin was forced to back-pedal, downplaying his elite background and academic credentials. But the damage was done, and he eventually finished fourth in the presidential race, with only 4.8% of the vote.

The decreasing popularity of the current French president, Emmanuel Macron, is a comparable case. At the start of his term, Macron encouraged comparisons with the god Jupiter,<sup>23</sup> seeking to communicate a sense of absolute authority and power that would restore strength to the country (Fig. 8). A year and a half after taking office however, Macron is seen as lacking in humility and disconnected from the general public. The idea of a 'Jupiterian'

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<https://www.heute.at/welt/news/story/-sterreichs-Archaeologen-muessen-Arbeit-in-Tuerkei-beenden-19103463>)

<sup>21</sup> Core information in this section was provided by Asante, Bastos-Marques, Krsmanovic, Müller, Noel, Parker, and Sawyer.

<sup>22</sup> See for example: [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/bi\\_event\\_summary\\_-\\_alckmin\\_speech\\_and\\_panel\\_0.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/bi_event_summary_-_alckmin_speech_and_panel_0.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> See for example: [https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/macron-jupiter-le-match-08-06-2017-2133778\\_20.php#xtmc=jupiter&xtnp=1&xtr=4](https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/macron-jupiter-le-match-08-06-2017-2133778_20.php#xtmc=jupiter&xtnp=1&xtr=4)

president is now used as a focus of scorn and ridicule.<sup>24</sup> In both of these Brazilian and French cases, the use of classical parallels and references by politicians were designed to construct a sense of authority, power, and distinction; and in both cases, this vision has largely been rejected by popular opinion.



**Figure 8.** A selection of newspaper and magazine cuttings portraying Emmanuel Macron as a 'Jupiterian' president. Compiled by Anne-Sophie Noel.

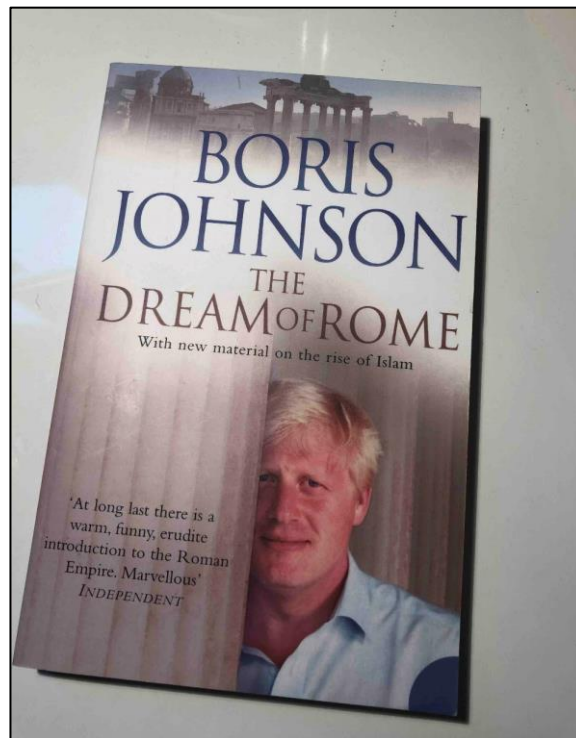
A contrasting situation can be found in the UK, where the classics are also unavoidably implicated in discourses of class (Stray 1998; Hall *et al* 2016; Harrison 2007), despite efforts to increase accessibility, diversity, and inclusion (Higgins 2009). In recent years, prominent centre-right politicians such as Boris Johnson and Jacob Rees-Mogg have cultivated a public image of upper-class traditionalism using, amongst other things, displays of classical learning (Fig. 9; some of which have included coded critiques of the general population as plebians, see Beard 2016).<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, in the UK this has not resulted in public opprobrium or a general rejection by voters. This may be partly due to the primary audience of these remarks, which are often directed internally at other members of the political class.

Classical references are used in a similar manner by politicians in the USA, as a means of constructing authority in relation to each other within the confines of the political elite. In Congress, speakers in both the Senate and the House of Representatives regularly quote from classical authors, yet tend to repeat the same quotation patterns and practices. Thucydides and Cicero are especially favoured, with a small number of passages from both authors constituting the large majority of the quotes (Sawyer 2013, 173-227). Speakers employ classical quotations, therefore, not only to lend gravitas and authority to their

<sup>24</sup> <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-france-macron-popularity/from-jupiter-to-jeers-frances-macron-battles-popularity-slump-idUKKCN1M625F>

<sup>25</sup> In a recent article by Boris Johnson about the Brexit negotiations, those calling for a second referendum or in favour of Britain remaining in the EU were likened to Cicero, with his scare-mongering over the Catalinarian conspiracy (Johnson 2018), with the implicit critique of Cicero as a 'new man' with ideas above his station.

speeches, but also to link themselves to other politicians by replicating what are seen as appropriate patterns of political speech (Sawyer 2015, 539). In both the USA and the UK therefore, it remains possible to employ the classical references as a marker of status and distinction in political discourse, despite the populist tone of current politics in both countries.



**Figure 9.** *The Dream of Rome*, a book published in 2006 by the UK politician, Boris Johnson. Photograph by Naoíse Mac Sweeney.

While politicians across many different countries have tried to use claims on the classical to heighten their standing and shape their public image (with varying results), it is equally possible for others to use those same classical comparisons for satire or critique. Over the last decade in South Africa, the cartoonist known as Zapiro has used Roman references as a means of criticising the ANC government of recent President Jacob Zuma, often portraying Zuma as a power-crazed Roman emperor, misusing his authority to silence critics (Fig. 10; Parker 2017, 30-3). These images play on the negative connotations of the classical past, using them to critique obscene wealth and corruption, as well as cruelty and despotic power. Similar parallels are used for other politicians, perhaps most notably Donald Trump who is often compared with Roman emperors such as Nero or Caligula.<sup>26</sup> These critiques once more depend on an association between the classical and elite status, but take things to the extreme, focusing especially the idea of absolute power and tyranny.

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<sup>26</sup> E.g. *The Guardian*:

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2017/jan/25/donald-trump-president-tyrants-ancient-rome>; *The Spectator*: <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2017/05/the-nero-in-donald-trump/>; and *The New Statesman*: <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2017/01/what-lessons-roman-empire-can-teach-us-about-donald-trump>.



**Figure 10.** Cartoon by Zapiro (Jonathan Shapiro), entitled: 'Jacob Zuma's Panem et Circenses', originally published 24<sup>th</sup> May 2012 Image reproduced with permission of Zapiro Publications and Artwork

In many former European colonies, an additional level of complexity is added to the equation of classics and elitism – classics may also be connected with the experience of colonialism.<sup>27</sup> In Ghana, the Greco-Roman world retains strong associations of British colonialism, given the close connections between classical scholarship and the practices of British imperialism (see references in section 1, and for West Africa specifically, see Goff 2013, 21-64).<sup>28</sup> As a result, both in school and university curricula and also in political discourse, greater emphasis is placed on West African history and (within the ancient world) pharaonic Egypt. Yet the appeal of the classical as a source of gravitas remains. The current President of Ghana, Nana Akufo-Addo, has made classical references at public funerals – likening the musician Hugh Masekela to Brutus (via Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*),<sup>29</sup> and quoting Latin tags to praise the classical scholarship of the politician and academic Alexander Kwabong.<sup>30</sup> Yet while they may have served to heighten the solemnity of the occasion and to perform the erudition of the speaker, classical references do not seem to have been appropriate in some particularly high-profile

<sup>27</sup> Goff 2005.

<sup>28</sup> This remains, despite the role played by classics in the struggle for independence (Goff 2013, especially 169-180).

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/2018/January-30th/we-clubbed-across-the-world-akufo-addo-pays-detailed-tribute-to-masakela.php>.

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.graphic.com.gh/features/opinion/paeon-to-alexander-adum-kwabong.html>

international contexts. Notably, none were included in Akufo-Addo's speeches on the death of former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan.



**Figure 11.** Screenshot of an anti Hillary Clinton tweet, featuring an image of her as Medusa or a Gorgon.

The classical world is invoked in internal discourses within countries, not just to construct social distinctions and status, but also as a means of commenting on gender roles and relations. In particular, Greco-Roman antiquity is used as a model for an idealised vision of lost gender certainties – it is portrayed as a time when ‘men were men, and women were women’. Within online communities of disaffected men, the Stoics are invoked as the epitome of manly virtues (Zuckerberg 2018, 45-87), and the erotic works of Ovid are promoted as practical guides for the treatment of modern women (Zuckerberg 2018, 89-141). The image of Medusa also recurs, as a means of denigrating women who claim more power or authority than deemed appropriate (Johnston 2016; Fig. 11). Yet Greco-Roman antiquity is also seen as a source of positive role models for women. The French women’s group *Les Antigones* was formed as a rebuttal to the strident feminism of *Femen*, arguing that a softer and traditional ‘femininity’ is being fundamental to women’s nature.<sup>31</sup> As well as taking their name from a heroine of ancient Greek myth, *Les Antigones* make use of classicising imagery to portray idealised womanhood (Fig. 12). In many cases, this gendered valorisation of antiquity is linked to far-right groups that also connect the classical to a racialised view of ‘Western Civilization’ (see above). This is true both of misogynistic groups seeking to restore ‘male’ gender roles, and of *Les Antigones*.

<sup>31</sup> For the manifesto of *Les Antigones*, see: <https://lesantigones.fr/manifeste-antigones/>



**Figure 12.** Screenshot of the Twitter page of Les Antigones, showing idealised depictions of women in classical dress.

#### 4. Subaltern discourses?

In all of these examples discussed so far, when classical antiquity appears in contemporary political discourse, it is aligned with current and/or traditional *loci* of power.<sup>32</sup> We have seen how Greco-Roman antiquity is associated with a racialised idea of 'Western Civilization' and the nationalism of modern states (section 1); how it is used to build inter-state partnerships and as a source of diplomatic capital (section 2); and how it is equated with established social hierarchies and elite status, as well as traditional gender roles (section 3). In all cases, the classical has been claimed by established structures of power and authority, and serves to bolster or reinforce traditional notions of order and status. This is true even when the classics are used as a medium for critique. Neither likening the EU to the Roman Empire, nor comparing South Africa's discredited ex-President Zuma to Nero disrupts the equation between classics and power. In both cases, it is the established *locus* of authority that is identified with the classical.

Exceptions to this general rule can be found in Israel, where the dominant axis of identification is biblical rather than classical. Classical allusions can therefore evoke a sense of the rhetorical 'Other', as in the case of the name chosen for a controversial military protocol to prevent soldiers being taken captive, even at the cost of those soldiers' lives. The name chosen was the 'Hannibal Directive' – drawing not from biblical precedents, but from the peri-classical world of Carthage. The choice of name served as a distancing mechanism, allowing the Israeli state to disassociate itself as much as possible from an unpopular military

<sup>32</sup> Core information in this section was provided by Asante, Parker, and Schramm.

strategy.<sup>33</sup> The result was not, as in all previous examples discussed here, an identification between the classical and authority, but rather between the (almost) classical and something that the state first wished to remain secret and then to disavow.

Examples that truly go against the grain are rare – instances where the classical is claimed by and/or equated with the subaltern. Beyond the narrow confines of formal political discourse, there several examples where works of literature and art that have done this. The visual artist Nandipha Mntambo has used her own body as a basis for reworking the myths of the Minotaur and Europa; thereby deconstructing traditional ideas about both gender and European racial identity. The Greek world has been projected onto Nigeria, Ghana, the Caribbean, Korea, and Northern Ireland by dramatists and poets including Femi Osófisan, Derek Walcott, Edward Kamau Braithwaite, On Keng Sen, and Seamus Heaney, and thereby used as a means of exploring subaltern perspectives on colonialism and occupation.<sup>34</sup> Antiquity has also been deployed from a feminist and queer perspective in novels by Pat Barker, Margaret Atwood, and Madeleine Miller. Today, the classics are used to explore contemporary social diversity in complex and exciting ways.<sup>35</sup>

While these works may be political in intent, they remain outside the boundaries of formal political discourse. Within these confines, the equation of the classical and the subaltern occurs far less frequently. This has not always been the case. In the mid-twentieth century, Greco-Roman antiquity was deliberately weaponised by activists calling for independence from the British Empire in several parts of the world (Goff 2013), as it was by black abolitionists and civil rights campaigners in late nineteenth and early twentieth century North America (Malamud 2016), and by women from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards (Hurst 2006; Prins 2017). While the Greco-Roman world may have been traditionally associated with elites, imperialism, and a traditional social order; this equation began to be disrupted by the mid nineteenth century, and subaltern groups increasingly began to claim the classical for themselves. The classical became a central point of reference within mainstream political discourse, claimed by both the establishment and the subaltern as a bone of symbolic contention. It has recently been argued that these more radical chapters in the history of classics should be a cause for both celebration and hope for the future (e.g. Beard 2019; for the opposing view, arguing that much more yet needs to be done see Padilla Peralta 2019).

Yet the work of this network, preliminary as it is, suggests that classical antiquity is no longer shared conceptual ground when it comes to political discourse. At the moment, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have found that the Greco-Roman world is no longer deployed as easily by the left as it is by the right, by the subaltern as by the establishment, by radicals as by conservatives. Despite decades of academic debate over the political approaches to the discipline of classics (Hanson and Heath 1998; DuBois 2001), when it comes to Politics with a capital 'P', subaltern discourses have largely ceded the classics. Why did this happen? When exactly did the pendulum swing? And is this set to change again?

Recent years have seen heightened calls for academics to engage in political activism, using their classical knowledge to enter into mainstream political debates. Many such calls have

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<sup>33</sup> The Hannibal Directive was revoked, amidst public pressure, in 2016:  
<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-idf-chief-orders-to-revoke-controversial-hannibal-directive-1.5402252>

<sup>34</sup> See papers in Goff and Simpson 2007; and also Greenwood 2010. It is noteworthy that many other creative works that use the classics to comment on colonialism have identified the classical world with the colonisers, rather than the colonised – see, for example, the 'Odyssey of Captain Cook' series by Marian Maguire.

<sup>35</sup> See Powers 2018 for a recent overview.



come from North America and Europe, in response to the appropriation of the classics by the far right (see section 1 above; Zuckerberg 2018). Yet others have come from Africa, to counter political corruption (Akinboye 2018; Asante 2018); and from Asia, to address the ills of twenty-first century materialism (Takada 2010, 297). We will wait to see when, how, and if there is to be a change in how the classical is claimed in the mid twenty-first century.

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