

**Alice BORGNA, *Tutte storie di maschi bianchi morti...*, «Fact Checking: la Storia alla prova dei fatti», Laterza, Bari-Roma 2022, 166 pp., ISBN 978-88-581-4839-6\*.**

Alice Borgna (hereinafter “AB”) is an associate professor at the University of Eastern Piedmont (Vercelli). Prior to that, she was a very valuable editor in the early stages of this journal for many years. Her acquaintance and collaboration with this reviewer have lasted for many years and it is my duty to disclose them at once. I am confident, however, that the readers will recognize that these pages are moved neither by *ira* nor by *studium*, since I have no qualms about pointing out even what little did not convince me about this book as well as much of it that did.

Perhaps the first limitation is that the book has not been published in English (immediately or at all). Indeed, while Italian classicists confidently resort to foreign publications, American classicists (and even more so non-classicists), for the most part, do not read publications in Italian (and not only in Italian). What a pity for them, because this book would serve as an eye-opener to them more than to us, providing a competent and well reasoned “outside look” at their handling of this madness (visceral judgment of the reviewer, not the reviewee) of cancel culture (hereinafter “CC”). If this review is written in English, it is because it is in the hope of reaching this particular audience as well, in the lack of interest in AB’s book – as of yet – by BMCR *et similia*.

Firstly, the title of the book, with its three suspension points meant to create curiosity, is a happy reprise of a book by Donna Zuckerberg, the part-time classicist and sister of Mark Zuckerberg and author of *Not All Dead White Men. Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age* (2018), a book focused on racism and misogyny on the Internet and not on the academic *milieu*. The formula melds together two concepts repeatedly evoked in AB’s book, namely “maleness” and “whiteness” (which are the target of CC’s polemical screeds) with the “dead” nature of the languages we classicists study. Yet AB rightly points out that CC actually wants to pick on the living whites who teach rather than the dead ones who are the object of the teaching.

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\* I thank Raffaella Tabacco and David Konstan for reading these pages and for their valuable advice as well as Phillip Peterson for the English translation.

Since the argument of the book and even more of the present review is divisive and easily subject to interested distortions, let me make it clear that the use of the phrase “cancel culture” here is not meant to apply to every kind of critical or radical theory, nor is there any suggestion that it does.



After a brief prologue (3-7), the book is divided into nine brief chapters: 1. *L'incidente* (8-40); 2. *Muoia Sansone con tutti i Filistei. Il dibattito statunitense* (41-85); 3. *Il Tevere mormorò: non passa lo straniero. Le reazioni in Europa* (86-94); 4. *Tutta colpa dell'uomo nero?* (95-102); 5. *Chi siete? Da dove venite? Dove andate? Un fiorino per la scuola pubblica* (103-112); 6. *Inutilopoli* (113-126); 7. *La cassetta degli attrezzi. Ovvero Tucidide e il mio dentista* (127-137); 8. *È qui la festa? Sì, ma non per te. Gli esclusi* (138-151); 9. *L'operazione è perfettamente riuscita, ma il paziente è morto* (152-164).

It should be said right away that the style is exciting, which is one of the added values of an elegantly published book<sup>1</sup>: youthful, jaunty, ironic, allusive – I would like to see a foreign language translator render the neologism in the title of Ch. 6 (something along the lines of *Uselesspolis*) or explain the reference in Ch. 5 to a cult scene from the well-known 1984 film by R. Benigni and M. Troisi. AB creates a reading that is both attentive and engaging, making the book suitable for a much wider audience than just classicists. However, classicists will also appreciate the philological precision of the reconstruction, the attention to the quotations, the unbiased analysis of the sources, and above all, the willingness to deal with a divisive subject without preconceived notions and without anticipated choices. Thus, a sort of Ciceronian *disputatio in utramque partem* that succeeds in making its case, albeit problematically for this reviewer, but certainly succeeds on AB's own terms. This should lend the defenders of CC humility and cause its detractors to recognize at least some of the reasons on the other side. And that, *expertus loquor*, is a great service to all.

The first four chapters, which make up almost two-thirds of the entire book, focus precisely on the United States and CC, recounted first as a sort of radio commentary on the events that took place at the annual meeting of the *Society for Classical Studies* (SCS) in San Diego in January 2019, chosen fittingly by AB as one of the exemplary junctures of CC. I recall that the name SCS has replaced the former name *American Philological Association* (APA) since 2013, which has always seemed more appropriate to me. It is indeed ironic that Americans have stopped recognizing themselves in the philological attribute, as being neutral and objective, but foolishly deemed no longer in step with the times, replacing it with the reference to classical, that is, to a highly loaded

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<sup>1</sup> Incidentally, I found only one misprint (*riduziona* instead of *riduzione*, 36).

term, which in itself has always conveyed the exemplary value of Greco-Latin antiquity, precisely what CC now wants to destroy: as they say, “as you make your bed, so you must lie in it”.

The incident to which AB alludes was the expulsion of an SCS member from a debate (during which she had tried to have her say) and then from the entire convention, with subsequent immediate dismissal from her (precarious) job. The “cancelled person”, Mary Frances Williams, had argued that classics represented “Western civilization”, a concept routinely repeated in newspapers, schools, and elsewhere in Italy and which would seem inoffensive, not only to me<sup>2</sup>. Such an affront to multiculturalism had given rise to a ruckus in the hall by those (classicists themselves!) who argued that Western civilization was an «artificial construction», a ruckus that ended in *ad personam* accusations by Williams and her final departure from the venue.

Chapter 2 judiciously follows the subsequent developments and various stances, focusing mainly on those of Dan Padilla-Peralta, a professor of Roman history at Princeton and considered – more wrongly than rightly in AB’s view – the coryphaeus of the CC.

The next chapter is perhaps the only one that justifies the inclusion of this Italian text in a series dedicated to debunking controversial positions (with an approach that is markedly political and leftist, judging from most of the titles published, in contrast to AB’s aforementioned neutrality). In fact, here the reactions that CC has produced in Europe, too simplistic and often oblivious to the peculiar condition of the United States, are demystified with good reason. On the other hand, I have no doubt that Chapters 1-2 would serve a debunking function, if read where CC rules.

At this point, the book abandons CC and turns abruptly and without warning to other topics, with the sole justification that «la minaccia non arriva da oltreoceano» (39). Chapters 4-8 are, in fact, concerned with Europe, particularly Italy, and the most pressing dangers to classical studies, which AB identifies with happy simplification in the neologism “Utilopoli,” *i.e.*, the almost absolute dominance in public schools and universities of teaching subjects aimed at producing wealth, which is countered by the “Inutilipoli” of the humanities. With her usual clarity

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, acknowledging the existence and the particularity of a cultural tradition (albeit in constant evolution) and by means of an adjective that has obviously lost any geographical sense and acquired precisely a cultural one certainly does not mean rating it as superior to others.

and lightness, AB moves from the commodification of the university credit system and the democratic role of the public school in Italy to the difficulties of teaching classical languages at all levels. She also makes reference to the false perspectives of teachers who think they can solve their students' problems by "sending them abroad" (I do not deny that I felt I was a part of the problem, 39), ending with the role of women in Italian academia (the section I feel is most divorced from the theme of the book and the reality of classical studies in Italy). AB chalks up useful points, yet in a few pages she can only be generic, and above all, not innovative, in a field in which we have had entire volumes with prestigious signatures who, for the Italian public, have defended the usefulness of the useless (N. Ordine), the kind of school I would like (A. Scotto di Luzio), the genius of Greek (A. Marcolongo), the beauty of Latin (N. Gardini) and the lesson it teaches (I. Dionigi) and many more titles.

The reader's bewilderment at being diverted from CC in these pages is not unknown to AB, who closes them by asking «Cosa c'entra questo con le richieste delle minoranze etniche negli Stati Uniti?» (149). The answer comes immediately (Chapter 9): if the context in which classics must move, in Europe as well as overseas, is actually "Utilopoli," then any CC operation on them will not result in a discipline that is decolonized, inclusive, anti-racist, etc., but in its sheer cancellation in the name of more lucrative subjects. This is a process we have seen or feared time and again in Europe and which AB recalls (74-78) to have occurred in the United States as early as 2021 with the Department of Classics at Howard University, «il più antico ateneo nero americano»: that very slice of society that CC claims to defend is thus the first to see studying classics "cancelled."

In Chapter 9, the reader also finds, at last, the  $\mu\theta\omicron\varsigma$  δηλοῖ ὅτι of many insights about CC that AB left without final judgment in the earlier chapters, raising the reader's suspicion that the *disputatio in utramque partem* actually was something of an opportunistic fence-sitting on AB's part. This had also been my suspicion, where for example, AB quoted (10-11), without comment, the ridiculous predictions by D. Zuckerberg in «Eidolon» 2016 (*How to Be a Good Classicist Under a Bad Emperor*)<sup>3</sup>, that the Trump presidency would produce a flowering of classics in a supremacist and even neo-Nazi vein. AB does cite, a few pages later, the

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<sup>3</sup> <https://eidolon.pub/how-to-be-a-good-classicist-under-a-bad-emperor-6b848df6e54a>.

speech read (I do not believe written) by Trump in Warsaw on July 6, 2017, which to me is beautiful because it offers a eulogy of the infamous “Western civilization” (15-17); however, it is only at the end (153-154) that she recalls that, beyond the great speeches abroad, the Trump presidency has once again delivered another blow against classics in the name of what we have now learned to call “Utilopoli.”

In this regard, years ago I had pointed out how the problems of classics stem from being the object of bipartisan attacks, that is, both from the “right” that looks only at the useful and the present and from the “left” that is moved by ideological drives<sup>4</sup>. Among these, I pointed out the Marxist and more generically leftist component, which has always identified Latin and Greek as one of the distinctive brands of the capitalist bourgeoisie to be liquidated, already in Europe. Although the leftist filiation of CC is unequivocal and AB points this out from the outset precisely with regard to D. Zuckerberg, AB’s book shows how the latest metamorphosis in CC is, if possible, even more ideologized and abstract. If the juxtaposition of “capitalists with classics vs. proletarians without classics” however crude, has at least some historical basis, an obtusely racial and gender divide, “white male with (racist) classics vs. blacks, women, etc. without classics,” seems to forget that there are large swaths of the white male population excluded from classics – and from any form of culture – in all countries for reasons that are economic, not racial, just as there are also large swaths of people of color in the United States who are, fortunately, perfectly able to pay tuition to study classics or anything else at Yale or Princeton<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, I do not know how much CC advocates know about experiences, not unrelated to Marxism, such as *Négritude*, and the anything-but-alt-right role that classics played in the thought of a black intellectual, politician and Latinist such

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<sup>4</sup> [\*Insegnare oggi latino e greco nei Licei\*](#), in F. Pagnotta (a cura di), *L’Età di Internet. Umanità, cultura, educazione*, Milano-Firenze 2013, 37-52. I imagine that AB has read my pages, although she does not cite them, just as she does not cite any of the many articles or books she has surely read. In fact, by an admittedly conscious choice, the bibliography, which can be found only in the footnotes, consists exclusively of Internet addresses, in a manner consistent with a very social and new media subject that has developed more on websites, blogs, *Facebook*, *YouTube*, etc., than in traditional print journals. However, finding websites is difficult for those who read the printed book: for reprints and future translations, I recommend that AB add a bibliography at the end (also including websites).

<sup>5</sup> I would like to thank my students in the course “Current issues in ancient and medieval philosophy” at the Scuola di Studi Superiori F. Rossi of the University of Turin for their valuable insights in this regard.

as Léopold Sédar Senghor<sup>6</sup>. On the other hand, it is sad to see how frequent the word “rage” is used in the extensive excerpts reported by AB from the texts of CC supporters: even in Europe we are used to waves of “outraged,” “resistant,” “strikers,” etc., for the most diverse reasons, but anger has never been a good motivation for political action nor does it improve critical theories, so that it should never be a motive for university professors, who answer to nothing but Science and (the search for) the Truth.

In conclusion, if read to the final chapter, and with patience, AB’s book proves to be an excellent compass on the subject of CC; its merits, in addition to its style, lie in the approach I like to regard as Ciceronian, which aims neither to defend nor to vituperate. If in the end AB shows, as mentioned, the potentially devastating and self-destructive consequences on classics of CC<sup>7</sup>, it is the result of an unbiased analysis of the global situation of the “Western world,” not a moral judgment *per se*.

However, I believe it is legitimate for a reviewer to add personal insights at the end that are absent from the book reviewed, without this being seen as criticism, since the reviewee has the right to write what he or she wants and not what the reviewer thinks. Even after reading, this reviewer thinks CC is inherently and morally wrong, regardless of the devastating effects indicated by AB: the undeniable and serious racial crises of the United States are not sufficient reasons for CC, which is a worse remedy than the evil, for at least three reasons:

- It is not moral to judge human beings (ancient authors or classicists of the past) based on principles that did not exist at the time or had not yet been shared. This coincides with what in Law is considered an abomination, namely the enactment of penal norms with retroactive value<sup>8</sup>. It is one thing to be a racist today when it has been proven that racism has no scientific basis; it is another thing to be racist when science (Aristotle) upheld the opposite. And so on. Moreover, the defenders of CC do not realize they will be the first to be cancelled if future generations apply retroactive norms to CC derived from their own worldview, which will be different from CC, just as CC is different from Aristotle’s view.

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<sup>6</sup> The reference to [https://www.persee.fr/doc/bude\\_0004-5527\\_1974\\_num\\_1\\_1\\_3250](https://www.persee.fr/doc/bude_0004-5527_1974_num_1_1_3250) is sufficient.

<sup>7</sup> This is also the position of a famous NYT newspaper article (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/02/magazine/classics-greece-rome-whiteness.html>) that AB does not fail to quote.

<sup>8</sup> The Italian Constitution states it well in Article 25, Paragraph 2: «Nessuno può essere punito se non in forza di una legge che sia entrata in vigore prima del fatto commesso».

- One of the winning aspects of Western civilization has always been its universalism. If dozens of music conservatories are founded in China to play and sing Mozart and Verdi, if people who do not speak any Indo-European languages line up to look at masterpieces of Renaissance art, which are surely the result of “toxic masculinity” or “endemic racism” as well, it is because these non-Westerners, unlike the defenders of CC, have understood the deeper meaning, that those notes and forms are there for everyone, just like the texts of Homer and Cicero<sup>9</sup>. That is, that before the *hic et nunc* of my body – male or female, white or black, etc. – the best part of me is my humanity, which is the only one that puts me in touch with the rest of the world in every sense, even those furthest from me. On the other hand, when closure about one’s own history, background, and/or race prevails (here the “rage” returns), one loses one of Amartya Sen’s best teachings on “plural identities”<sup>10</sup> and remains condemned not to leave his or her own identity – or rather the single identity one decides to assume and raise as a totalizing banner, to the detriment of other possible alternatives.
- That said, it is nevertheless undeniable that classics struck out more than once: the Athenians realized it, seeing the political disaster of Alcibiades, the most brilliant student of Socrates, the city’s best philosopher, and Cicero thought so when confronted with Caesar, the most gifted mind of his age, but also dictator. In short, human history, not just Western history, is full of excellent ideas that ended very badly. The explanation should be simple and point to the finite nature of human beings (once it would have been called Original Sin): when CC advocates point to the misogyny of ancient sources or the nefarious deeds done by people steeped in classical culture, it should be said that all this happened not *because of*, but *in spite of* the deeper and more universal message of the classics, which remains intact. Yet reading AB’s book, one notices, I believe, how an underlying Rousseauian approach shines through in CC: human beings would be inherently good, but it is the culture, the society that ruins them, from the outside; just remove that toxic culture (classical, racist) and we will have peace, equality, inclusion. Unfortunately, this is not the case, and the authoritarian and dogmatic tone of many CC advocates does not give hope for a better future, to say the least.

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<sup>9</sup> AB points out (17-18) how this topic has come up repeatedly in many scholars’ rebuttals against CC, but also points out the substantial disdain with which D. Padilla-Peralta rejects this perspective out of hand (43-45).

<sup>10</sup> *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, London 2007.