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Abstract of Research Project

Struggle for Democracy or Culture of Dominance? The Agora in the Transatlantic Architectural Discourse of the Postwar Period up to the 1960s

In the postwar period up to the 1960s, the transatlantic discourse on architecture, the city, and the public sphere was markedly shaped by three authors: the art historian Sigfried Giedion, the philosopher Hannah Arendt, and the architect Aldo Rossi. For each of these authors the agora was at the heart of the origin myth of the European- or Western-style city, and was linked with certain ideas about man, culture, and democratic politics.

What has not yet been examined in detail, however, is the proximity of these three authors to certain Eurocentric ideas of antiquity. Thus, little consideration has been given to the question of the influence on these authors of prominent publications of classical archaeology and philology around the mid-twentieth century. The proposed project will focus, on the one hand, on the publications of the French archaeologist Roland Martin *Recherches sur l'Agora grecque: Études d'histoire et d'architecture urbaines* (Paris 1951) and *L'urbanisme dans la Grèce antique* (1956), and, on the other, on the three-volume work *Paideia: Die Formung des griechischen Menschen* (1934–1947) by the philologist Werner Jaeger. Jaeger, who emigrated to the USA in 1936, and who taught in Chicago and then at Harvard University, is still considered the most important exponent of the “Third Humanism.”

However, if we read *Paideia* today, it is the problematic aspect of this “humanist” conception that comes to the fore, based as it is on the explicit distinction between Greco-Western cultural achievements and those of all other and earlier cultures. A single quote from the book should be sufficient to give a sense of a few premises of the author’s conception of Greece, which had already been formulated in the 1930s:

“Natürlich gibt es für uns und für jedes Volk dieses Kreises auch gegenüber Hellas und Rom ursprüngliche Fremdheiten, die teils im Blut und Gefühl liegen, teils in der Geistesanlage und Gestaltungsform, teils in der Verschiedenheit der jeweiligen geschichtlichen Situation. Aber zwischen dieser Art des Andersseins und derjenigen, die wir gegenüber den ausgesprochen rasse- und geistesfremden Völkern des Orients empfinden, besteht ein riesengroßer Unterschied, und es ist ohne Zweifel eine

ungeschichtliche Verschiebung der Perspektive, wenn manche neueren Schriftsteller die Welt der Antike von der der abendländischen Nationen durch eine hohe Mauer treffen wie China, Indien oder Ägypten.” [Werner Jaeger]

In my research project I analyze the abovementioned references to ancient Greece and to the agora, and examine the influence of the corresponding ideas on postwar architectural historiography. This analysis focuses on the publications *Architektur und Gemeinschaft* (1956) / *Architecture: You and Me* (1958) by Sigfried Giedion, *The Human Condition* (1958) / *Vita activa* (1960) by Hannah Arendt, and *L'Architettura della città* (1969) by Aldo Rossi. Giedion spoke for example of the re-humanizing of the modern city, whose model was the ancient “core of the city”; Arendt saw in the agora the ideal image of a political community based on communication, diversity, and freedom; while for Rossi the beauty that Athens attains played a formative role in the moral development of its citizens. Furthermore, he believed that this “purist experience of humanity” was never achieved again:

“[...] questo carattere speculativo dell'architettura della città greca è dovuta la sua straordinaria bellezza. È a questo punto però che essa si stacca da noi, dalla nostra esperienza viva; [...] Atene rimane come la più pura esperienza dell'umanità, in condizioni che non possono più ritornare.” [Aldo Rossi]

The present study sets out is to analyze the visual and literary images of antiquity in the abovementioned works, and to situate the agora within the transatlantic architectural discourse of the 1950s and 1960s by pursuing two lines of argument. First, I discuss the extent to which the references to ancient Greece are not only the expression of a general “humanist” concern, but already part of a struggle for democracy. An important reference work for this discussion is the edited volume *Classics in the Modern World: A Democratic Turn?* by Lorna Hardwick and Stephen Harrison published in 2013. Here, the authors ask—now from a global perspective—about the existence of a democratic turn: “a perspective applied to the ways in which Greek and Roman ideas, texts, and images have been absorbed, reworked, and communicated in the wider world in the modern period and have attracted the interest of recent research.” Second, in the figurative sense of a “dialectic of enlightenment” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1947), I consider the reverse side of the struggle for democracy: namely, the culture of dominance—a topic that has been examined recently in a multifaceted way in the book *Dominanzkultur reloaded* (2015) edited by Iman Attia, Swantje Köbsell, and Nivedita Prasad. In the case of the present research project, the culture of dominance is founded on the narratives and myths of origin mentioned at the beginning. These ensure superiority for Greece and the agora in relation to other cultures— also in architectural historiography.