

How Self-Reflexive Can *We* Be? Scrutinizing *Our* Socio-Cultural Position.

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The prompt of the panel: “how does the embeddedness of the scholar in wider social structures (e.g., those related to race, gender, class, religious background, occupational history, etc.) inform their scholarly practices and pursuits?” gets to the heart of one of the most debated questions within the humanities, that of objectivity. At the same time, implicitly, and explicitly it relates to a scholar’s stance on matters of method and theory. We (scholars) generally do recognize that it is difficult if not impossible to be objective or unbiased, that we all speak from a particular position, etc. (McCutcheon 2001), but it’s another story the extent to which we are being self-reflexive or self-conscious: a) regarding the degree to which our biases and most specifically our socio-cultural locations, what I call our positionality, informs our scholarly practices and pursuits and b) how, more specifically, we make that evident in our work.

To begin with, what career path we follow, what we end up studying and how we end up studying it, is undoubtedly linked to/informed by our socio-cultural background. We all have stories to share on how we ended up doing what we are doing, stories that involve in some way or another our connectedness to others, our belonging to groups, whether these groups are clearly identifiable or not. For example, when I finished my first book and while I was trying to think of my next project a Dutch archaeologist who was a Professor at the University of Alberta, in Canada, and who I knew from my PhD years, happened to be in Greece with her students on her summer excavation project, while I was also there, and knowing my interest in discourses of the

past invited me to spend a few days with them to see if there was anything of interest to me, and sure enough my next book project begun.

But that's not all; our *methods* and *theories* are informed also by our positionality, by social and political ideologies as they are internalized, resulting in who we are and who we imagine we will become, and therefore by our gendered/racial/religious, etc. selves. Evidently, by ideology I have in mind something along a more critical understanding of the term (following the work of Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, etc.) and by which I mean any system of ideas (from what it means to be a woman, to our religious and political sense of self, etc.) that is imposed to people of a given social group by those who have the power to do so through a number of social structures and mediums (institutions, etc.), and through processes by which those ideas are internalized and taken to be as anything but natural (on a critical consideration of the term *ideology* see: Hughes and McCutcheon 2022). What's more those selves as products of specific ideological systems that operate within our societies that produce and reproduce them, result also from *our* active involvement in those societies and through our scholarly works. Which is why trying to understand how those ideological systems operate and then also to be self-reflexive about them is rather difficult; for, as Bruce Lincoln pointed out in his very well-known 10th thesis of his *Theses on Method* (1996):

10. Understanding the system of ideology that operates in one's own society is made difficult by two factors: (i) one's consciousness is itself a product of that system, and (ii) the system's very success renders its operations invisible, since one is so consistently immersed in and bombarded by its products that one comes to mistake them (and the apparatus through which they are produced and disseminated) for nothing other than "nature."

Proposing, in his 11th thesis, the following methodological remedy to this difficulty:

11. The ideological products and operations of other societies afford invaluable opportunities to the would-be student of ideology. Being initially unfamiliar, they do not need to be denaturalized before they can be examined. Rather, they invite and reward critical study, yielding lessons one can put to good use at home.

Thus, the comparative method is proposed as, to whatever extent, a remedy to our inevitable positionality. So, ideally, we put observations on curious similarities and differences to *good* use at home but that presupposes that we are willing to do so, a willingness that requires a critical or rather self-critical approach to how we conduct our research. Because whether we recognize it or not, we are involved, through our research, in the production of ideological systems either by reproducing dominant ones or by introducing new ones. The stakes are high either way, for our choices, as they relate to matters of method and theory, affect our very way of being, our very own social systems in which, and from where, we operate as people, as citizens, as shoppers, etc. and yes, as scholars.

Take for example, the way that the ancient Greco-Roman world is described and redescribed by scholars in different chronological periods. It is more than evident that such scholarly descriptions mirror, or better are immediately affected by the scholar's socio-cultural location. For example, a few years ago I taught a class on "Self and Society," and I wanted to bring to my students' attention the very fact that when we are reading any type of scholarly work, we need to pay attention not only to its content but also to who is speaking, that is to the author. For them to have a first-hand experience on how our background affects how we describe and interpret texts I had the students read Euripides' play *Hippolytus* (a story about a young man who defies Aphrodite in favor of Artemis and who for his choice meets a tragic ending); the only

prompt that I gave to them was to judge whether the main character of the play (Hippolytus) deserved his ending. In our class discussion I then asked them to describe Hippolytus' behavior and tell me also whether they thought he was at fault. It was clear that there was no consensus not only on how they viewed the hero but also what choices they were making in describing his behavior, with some of them finding fault in Hippolytus' behavior (mostly the females of the class) and others not (mostly the males of the class). Given this curious variation in responses I drew attention to what kind of criteria they had based their answers on and through our conversation it didn't take them long to realize that it had something to do with their own views and background concerning how they had each judged the hero's actions. It was easy for my students after that little exercise (during which, by the way, I always make a point of drawing attention also to my own cultural background, for I too am a reader of the play), when we turned our attention to scholarly descriptions and interpretations of the tragedy, to have a much more critical eye, paying attention and questioning how the socio-cultural location of a given scholar was inserted into the description and interpretation of this text.

And so, with that class exercise in mind, we soon learn that we can pick any ancient Greek tragedy and we will see the variety of scholarly descriptions and interpretations that are affected in some way or another by a scholar's gendered, national, historical, etc., setting and thus self. In my book *Fabrications of the Greek Past* (2017), where I devote far more time to Euripides' tragedy *Hippolytus*, I demonstrated that each scholarly description is actually an (unacknowledged) interpretation that reinforces a particular sense of self related to each author's historical context and idiosyncrasies. From theological descriptions and interpretations to humanist and feminist ones, *Hippolytus* becomes a means by which scholars, whether self-consciously or not, reproduce and reify through their work a particular sense of self, one that is

in accord with their own social, local, historical interests and expectations, that is, a creation in their own image—reinforcing the ideological systems and the power structures of which they themselves are the products.

This is precisely why there is an imperative to be self-conscious of the methods that we use—i.e., description and interpretation—how we use them and towards what effect. A characteristic example of one of those scholarly works, and one that to this day remains my most favorite, is by André Jean Festugière, who in order to defend Hippolytus' contempt of women and his unwillingness to get married against other scholars' critical commentaries, writes the following:

Let us picture to ourselves a boy of about eighteen, well built and handsome, sport-loving, of simple and upright character. He is a virgin...Certainly he has not yet felt any violent physical needs. He takes pleasure in the company of lads his own age, with whom he hunts in the forest or traces his horses on the beach at Troezen. Like many boys of his years, he has at the same time a certain physical horror, and a scorn, of womankind. (vv. 616 ff.). There is nothing morbid in his case. He is perfectly normal. He simply does not yet think about love. Let me add that he is truly pure, and does not practice Dorian love. (1954:)

It may not come as surprise to learn that this author entered the Dominican order and was eventually an ordained priest, interested in proving in his 1954 book, *Personal Religion Among the Greeks*, that “personal religiosity” (analogous to what many Christians likely take for granted) has always been, evidently in 5th BCE century Athens, and therefore transcends time. Festugière, through his description and interpretation of *Hippolytus*, in trying to prove that this so-called personal religiosity was not foreign to ancient Greeks, makes evident to us that those

ancient social actors are, for him at least, nothing but a rhetorical tool, operationalized to act as an authority in order to legitimize not only the idea of “personal religiosity” but that of the modern, individual self—both of which speak to Festugière’s own socio-political background. Now, of course, in this particular example it may be too obvious to us to infer how the socio-cultural position and the particular scholarly interests of this author affect the supposed description of this ancient Greek tragedy. But we should consider whether it is too obvious, perhaps to me (thinking back on Lincoln’s thoughts on the need for comparative methods), because: a) *I don’t share the same socio-cultural sensitivities/interests as Festugière*, b) *I identify as a straight woman*, c) *I have a different understanding of what an 18 year old boy (is he a boy or man?) is and can be expected to do, etc. etc.* In other words, a description closer to my views today might perhaps passed unnoticed, as would the type of self that it would be attempting to authorize and reproduce. Thus, we arrive at the need to be cautious as to when and by whom we allow so called “disinterested” and subtle descriptions to naturalize things in our scholarly works (our own included), whether that work is carried out on the ancient or contemporary world, like, for example, too easily finding “religion” in the facts and artifacts that we are so accustomed to study.

Thus, the systems of ideology that operate within any given location (from a scholar’s research environment, dissemination platforms, and institutional climate to her/his socio-cultural location) play, for sure, a significant role in how we carry out our research. From what we chose our methods and theories to be to what we then end up choosing as our object of study and how we will describe and explain it. But this very idea of acknowledging positionality and the scholarly socio-cultural location, although it may seem to many of us now as self-evident, is not without a significant amount of, how shall I put it, *academic resistance*. Think of the still

common insistence, for example, that *our descriptions* are disinterested, and that we simply recount what we observe and only later theorize it; consider how often we still presume the idea that there are *facts* independent of *our* theoretical interests; that *our* theories and methods are somehow ahistorical and transcendent and not driven by *our* interests; the idea that there is actually *a* meaning to a text—all of these are instances indicative of whether we, as scholars, are actually self-reflexive or self-conscious about our socio-cultural location or, to use Lincoln’s wording, about the sometimes unnoticed systems of ideology that operate within *our* own society and of which *we* are products (be they gendered, racial, religious, political, etc.). So, in the following pages I would like to bring to our attention some of these instances, as indicative of the lack to be self-reflexive and scrutinize our socio-cultural locations.

In May of 2023 I was in Greece for my sabbatical, and I attended a two-day conference organized by AUTH’s (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki) School of Law, with the theme: «Αρχαίο Δράμα, Δίκαιο και Πολιτική» (“Ancient Drama, Justice (Righteousness?) and Politics”); and by reading the Greek just now my own positionality suddenly became all too obvious, no?). The various panels were consisting of scholars mainly from the School of Law but also from the School of History and the audience was a mix of Law and History faculty and students. The setting of the panels and that of the audience was actually ideal for anyone interested in examining exactly how *our* scholarly socio-cultural locations affect our scholarly work. From the various admittedly very interesting panelists and the Q&As that followed, one is worth discussing in a little more detail. One of the panelists, professor of Law at AUTh, Iphigenia Kamtsidou, gave a paper on the interpretation of Sophocles’ tragedy *Antigone* that were offered between 19th and 20th century and how the reproduction and interpretation of this tragedy,

“ανέδειξε την νομιμοποίηση του εθνικού δικαίου” (“brought forth the legitimation of civil law”)¹ in Europe. In her presentation she discussed German scholars who read the tragedy in terms of natural and positive law, discussing such names as George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Bertolt Brecht to more recent scholars like Judith Butler and her feminist reading of the tragedy. What followed her paper was quite a heated Q&A, especially by the intervention of an older history professor. He insisted that *Antigone* should be understood in the *context* of its time of production, and that “anachronistic readings (feminist, etc.) should not be imposed in the reading of *Antigone*,” claiming that scholars ought to remain faithful and “stick to *the facts*” (my emphasis). Another historian had to say this: “What did the Athenians had in mind when they were watching Antigone? They certainly had the law of the polis. I can’t imagine Athenians identify with the law of Creon.” But this sort of debate—along with the implicit or explicit assumptions on how descriptions and interpretations and thus meanings and facts are unaffected by our theories and methods and by extension, I would add, by our socio-cultural locations—are actually indicative of many debates in our field as well. It’s the ongoing persistence that we can somehow get past our positionality and reach some pure, unaffected—at least by *our* anachronisms—meaning of the text in its proper historical context, a context also considered to be genuine and uncontaminated by our anachronisms. This sort of persistence is, I would argue, telling of how seriously we take (or, should I say, do not) our socio-cultural locations, how self-reflexive and self-conscious we are (or are not) when it comes to our methods and theories. And therefore, a sign of the degree to which we even try to scrutinize the systems of ideology that operate in our societies or, instead, *simply naturalize* them by way of offering seemingly disinterested

¹ It is worth noting that, given my lack of law training (again, my specific position), my initial translation of my Greek notes namely “εθνικός νόμος” which I took while I was attending the conference was “national law” which actually means something else in the legal system.

descriptions of the past *as it really is*, thereby remaining faithful to the supposed “facts,” of the context and the correct meaning of a text within that context, and of listening to the voices of people.

As a second example, consider that, several years ago and in another of our field’s conference, I gave a paper not far from today’s topic (see Touna 2019), in which one of my main arguments was that scholars need to be self-reflexive, to recognize that their positionality or (to maintain the framing of this panel), their socio-cultural location, affects their research and that we need to find a way to make that evident in our studies. For example, when it comes to the study of religion in the ancient Greek-Roman world, beyond the general acceptance (at least for some today) that religion is a modern term (and by modern term I mean both the word along with our very modern definitions that we attach to it) I’m not sure that this recognition has any practical effects on the way scholars study the ancient world, since we keep on studying the same data as if they *are* religious, understanding at the end of the day that both the term “religion” and its derivatives as actually transcending time and space. What followed in the Q&A was a debate regarding the extent to which we can be self-reflexive. Among the audience were those who maintained, like I did, that we should do more than simply acknowledge our implication in the way we study things but then also those who questioned whether we are even capable of doing it and therefore making it almost a naïve or useless endeavor; but this same, latter group also maintains that we can somehow be objective or strive to be objective as long as we stick to the facts.² This is indicative, though, of how scholars often think of theory in relation to description, failing to understand their own implication in the selection and then description of *their* facts.

² And to “people’s own voices” therefore accepting the viewpoints of those we happen to study as equally authoritative (See McCutcheon 2001: 74).

This is a point that McCutcheon discussed extensively in his book *“Religion” In Theory and In Practice* (2018). As he wrote:

What we therefore have to take into account is situation and context along with the interested observers arriving with questions that are more than likely alien to the interview subject, or which have been previously unasked of an artifact—what we might otherwise name as a generic object that those very interests have already plucked from the obscurity of Trotsky’s “dustbin of history” to make it into an item worth our time.

But, as I said, I find too few in the field interested in defining theory in this way and thus, despite the so-called reflexive turn, few seem open to scrutinizing their own position as a scholar and the contributions they offer to making the world seem interesting. Instead, as already noted, theory is assumed only to be a subsequent step, only sometimes used to explain religion itself. (10)

Take for example, Jon Mikalson—a well-known classicist—who in the preface to the second edition of his book *Ancient Greek Religion* (2010 [1990]), claims that his “book is largely descriptive”—the thing, though, is that any description is already a kind of interpretation in that it selects information according to the scholars’ prior interests, assumptions, position, etc. So, Mikalson, unavoidably has to make *his* choices, and as he said “employing a variety of strategies” because of the complexity of Greek religion, first by limiting his descriptions “as it was practiced in the Classical period” and then centering “much of the discussion on Athens because of the evidence-literary, artistic, archaeological, and epigraphical” in order “to give a general account...about Greek religion” (xvi). Of course, Mikalson by his initial statement that “this book is largely descriptive” means that it’s about genuine (that is, uncontaminated by theory) facts on the ground, as he explains:

Over the last hundred and fifty years a number of theoretical systems to explain major elements of Greek religion have come and sometimes gone. Those theoretical approaches hold great interest in themselves, but one needs to know what the Greek themselves did and said about their religion before one can adequately apply or evaluate the various theoretical systems to explain it all. (xvi)

This understanding of theory “as a subsequent step” is precisely what’s going on every time we read scholars writing about things like facts, contexts, meaning, etc. It is therefore indicative of *our* failing to take seriously *our* implication in *our* scholarly practices and pursuits. It’s evidence that the self-reflexive turn has severe limitations in much of our work.

In the examples that I discussed so far it is obvious not only how the socio-cultural background of the scholars affects their scholarly practices and pursuits but also the lack of being self-reflexive and critical about it. In the end the question is not simply to identify how our socio-cultural location informs our scholarly practices, for without a doubt they do, but how to be self-reflexive or self-conscious about it. As Jonathan Z. Smith—in his famous preface to *Imagining Religion* (1982), recognizing the implication of the scholar in the imagining of data as “religion” and therefore her/his active role in the creation of religion—urges us that “the student of religion, and most particularly the historian of religion, must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study” (xi).

It is important therefore to be self-reflexive, to scrutinize our socio-cultural position, and by which, I mean not only to be self-reflexive of the systems that operate within our locations but also to be critical of them. That is, to demonstrate in our work our ability as critical scholars to distinguish between modes of operations, that is between ideological apparatuses and power structures that produce and reproduce various ways of being, and one way of doing that is to

recognize that “*our* scholarly vocabularies and categories are not theoretically autonomous but are the products of *our* research methodologies and theories” (McCutcheon 2001: 75; my emphasis) and therefore our efforts should be directed towards scrutinizing “which vocabularies and assumptions are appropriate to which context” (McCutcheon 2001: 76) and for what purpose.

The self-reflexive turn then that I have in mind is elucidated in the works of such scholars as Bruce Lincoln, Jonathan Z. Smith and Russell McCutcheon among others. More specifically what I have in mind is Lincoln’s book *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (1999), which is exemplary of what a self-reflexive turn could look like in scholarly works. Lincoln tried to expose the ideologies that were involved in the study of myths first by explicitly positioning himself in this study both in relation to his socio-cultural background as well as in relation to his scholarly interests. Bringing in the end attention to the role of footnotes in scholarly works which, as he writes, “act as a check on ideological manipulation” (208). McCutcheon very effectively summarizes this self-reflexive turn in the first chapter of his book “*Religion*” in *Theory and in Practice* (2018):

[W]e likely shouldn’t just impulsively leap into action, trimming and grooming some part of reality that we’re drawn to, for some inexplicable reason, for among our jobs (again, as scholars) is to clearly identify those interests and assumptions as best we can then to make them as explicit and public as possible, organizing it all into what we’ll just call a theory, that (i) directs our gaze, (ii) makes it possible to see something as more or less interesting to us (i.e., as an object of inquiry or datum), and, most importantly perhaps, (iii), inasmuch as it is explicit, invites our peers to call us to task by inquiring as to the warrant for, or implications of, what it is that we do. (7)

So, one way forward perhaps is by adopting the comparative method akin to Lincoln's 11th *Thesis on Method* that I mentioned at the start of this paper by which we make the strange, familiar and the familiar strange. But also, in the way Smith has laid out in his work *Drudgery Divine* (1999) whereby *we* (scholars) bring things together not because of their assumed inherent similarities or differences but instead by making evident in our work that they were brought together due to *our* theoretical (Smith's idea of the "third thing") and methodological tools (in this case comparison) and by extension *our* interests scholarly or otherwise.

References³

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³ I'm not oblivious to the fact that my bibliography is limited and reflects my own scholarly influences, and in need of a more diverse scholarly reference list which I hope those in the NAASR session can also provide.

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