

Objects of desire

The Elgin Marbles: Should they be Returned to Greece?

by Christopher Hitchens

Verso: 1998. Pp. 137. £11, \$17 (pbk)

The Elgin Affair: The Abduction of Antiquity's Greatest Treasures and the Passions it Aroused

by Theodore Vrettos

Secker and Warburg/Arcade: 1997. Pp. 238. £17.99, \$26.95

A. M. Snodgrass

The Elgin Marbles controversy, usually presented as a prize example of misplaced Greek emotionalism, in fact tells one far more about the British. The past two years have witnessed further instalments in this saga, which provide the occasion for a re-issue of Christopher Hitchens's short but powerful book of 1987, with the addition of a new foreword.

When it first appeared, a reasonable response to the book was that those who supported the return of the marbles to Greece had won the actual argument hands down. The heated and abusive language that they had once used against Lord Elgin had long since been usurped by their opponents. The retentionists, however, still seemed to hold all the high cards: possession of the objects, governmental and popular support, fear of awkward precedents and the serious constitutional obstacles to implementation.

A few of these elements have now changed. A Channel 4 (London) television broadcast by William G. Stewart in 1996 drew a startling response: among nearly 100,000 listeners who called in, more than 92% now favoured restitution. Work has begun on a splendid new museum in Athens where the marbles can be exhibited to full advantage. Above all, the British Labour Party — which, in opposition, had publicly supported restitution from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s — came to power in May 1997. But word had earlier gone out that this former policy might be repudiated, and within hours it was. Is the debate therefore back at its starting point, when the first recorded proposal for the return of the marbles was put to the House of Commons in 1816?

Hitchens will have none of this. A high spot of the original book was (and remains) the shameful, ranting interview given by the then director of the British Museum in 1986, full of accusations of "cultural fascism". But the new foreword shows, from the most recent utterances of politicians in favour of retention, a return to an older vein which — in outraged propriety, historical inaccuracy and sheer complacency — has lost nothing



Frieze frame: the Elgin Marbles saga rolls on. Recent instalments include the start of work on a splendid Athens museum where the marbles could be exhibited to full advantage.

over nearly 200 years. For them, Elgin is still the altruistic saviour, the Greeks still unreliable denizens of an insecure third-world country. But Hitchens is no longer content merely to appeal to the historical record: instead, "morally certain" that the time will come when the marbles return home, he ends the foreword with an imaginary picture of that day.

For what readership, though, is Theodore Vrettos's book intended? It seems to belong to that late twentieth-century genre, 'faction' or 'docudrama', where extensive citation (indeed, at times pages of quotation) of contemporary documents alternates with mainly romantic speculations ("A glass of Portuguese brandy lay untouched on the small oak table ..."), often without a clear transition between the two — a kind of half-way house between Flashman and Antonia Fraser. All but the last few pages are set in the lifetimes of Lord and Lady Elgin. In so far as the book has a climax, it is not the removal of the marbles from the Acropolis (which is over before we are half-way through), but the trial of Robert Fergusson for adultery with Lady Elgin in 1808: one is left with the feeling that this is really the "affair" to which the book's title refers.

The research is haphazard — several of the extended quotations are misattributed — but it is rather the lack of background knowledge that is unsettling. No doubt there are readers who will be content to be told that Robert the Bruce was "the first king of Scotland", or that Sir Sidney Smith was besieging Napoleon in Acre rather than the other way round, but are they the kind of readers who will buy a book on this subject?

The brief concluding section is almost

entirely taken up with what is certainly the most interesting episode of the past 200 years, the brief flirtation of the London government, civil service and British Museum early in 1941 with the proposal to return the marbles to Greece once the Second World War was safely won.

Here Vrettos's account is fuller than Hitchens'. Alone in continental Europe, Greece still bore arms against the Axis powers, and the offer to return the Elgin Marbles was seen as the right gesture for its British allies to encourage it to maintain that heroic stand. Remarkably, the Foreign Office seems to have been the moving spirit behind the idea, and for a moment it looked as if a way could be found around the legal, practical and scholarly obstructions to such an action. (Moral arguments played no part: Lord Elgin's action was still held to have been "right in every way".)

Although Vrettos is on record as having taken up a position on the larger question elsewhere, he avoids doing so here (except perhaps in the emotive phrasing of his subtitle). The main service of his book is to bring out fully the profound sadness of the whole Elgin episode. Here was a typical aristocrat of his time, whose appointment to the Embassy at Constantinople, at a uniquely favourable political juncture, had given him the opportunity of greatness. Instead, he had to watch the disappearance in succession of his nose (eaten away by an infection), of his fortune, of his career prospects (through his internment by the French), of his wife's affection and, above all, of his reputation in perpetuity.

It was his misfortune that an act of destructive appropriation, which otherwise

might have been remembered only by scholars, attracted uniquely widespread condemnation, with Byron's voice not merely soaring above the contemporary chorus in Britain, but speaking to Greeks as well, and to every later generation in both countries.

The kind of internationalist spirit that protested then is still quietly at work today: it will never go away. In the long run, there can only be one end to such a story. □

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Civilized living

Cities for a Small Planet

by Richard Rogers

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Roy Porter

Cities are certainly the most conspicuous symptoms of our global environmental crisis, and perhaps even the chief cause. One statistic will here suffice — with its 20 million inhabitants and four million cars, Mexico City is growing at the rate of 80,000 people a month — and also one grim reminder: all previous great urban civilizations, from those of the Indus valley, the Tigris and Euphrates onwards, have utterly collapsed.

Cities for a Small Planet, an exquisitely designed and illustrated reworking of Richard Rogers' 1995 BBC radio Reith lectures, tackles the environmental costs of cities, while affirming their human potential. Cities are meant to bring civilization, but all too often today it is pollution, poverty, crime, congestion and chaos that they call to mind: hence the flight to greenfield sites. So: what future for our cities? And specifically, asks Rogers, where do architects stand in all this — are they sinners, scapegoats or saviours?

Recent decades have seen cities compromised by market-driven developments — sterile zoning into 'single-minded' spaces such as business parks and out-of-town shopping malls — and wounded by the great gashes made by highways. Today's megacity may be bejewelled by the odd breathtaking postmodernist tower, but (especially in the United States) it has turned its back on the public areas people crave and urban vitality demands. All too often, Rogers admits, the architect or planner has been the villain of the piece, or at least supinely complicit in the making of these urban wastelands.

How could we expect otherwise, when the profession is typically paid to produce not integrated spaces but blocks, in one-off commissions from property developers? "Buildings of all types are packaged and standardized," Rogers concedes. "Architects are selected for their low fees rather than for the



Under a cloud: are sprawls such as pollution-plagued Mexico City heading for disaster? Four million cars congest its streets and its population of 20 million is growing at the rate of 80,000 people a month.

quality of their work. The profession is condemned to turning out the largest enclosure for the least money in the shortest time ... these buildings are the energy-guzzling structures that are consuming half of the world's annual energy." The result? Buildings that enrich clients but impoverish the quality of urban living.

In place of today's characteristic *laissez-faire* sprawl, Rogers argues the case for the compact city, one with multiple and overlapping functions, and endowed with ample people-friendly public sites. To achieve this, public will is needed, as in the showcase post-Franco renewal of Barcelona in the 1980s under the populist mayor Pascal Maragal. By contrast, London, rudderless since the abolition of the Greater London Council, is collapsing amid worsening traffic congestion and pollution which carry economic as well as health costs.

Architect-planners have their role to play too. Given today's desiderata of sustainable growth and environmental renewal, the city and its structures must be rethought on viable ecological principles. Essential to that are energy-efficient buildings, whose specialized technical features will use natural resources (trees, sunlight, wind) and minimize waste.

Escorting the reader through a portfolio of buildings and developments mainly designed by his own partners, Rogers shows what has been done (efficient use of the atrium, for instance) and what remains to be achieved. It is disappointing that his most environmentally sympathetic proposals — such as those for Shanghai — seem to be the ones that never got off the drawing-board,

presumably because they contravened the developers' demand for profit-maximization and the conventional urban-political axiom that the motorist always comes first.

Londoners in particular will welcome another chance to ponder his imaginative plans for Trafalgar Square (now, as he remarks, just a vast roundabout) — though they may not be able to avoid a wry smile, given his own involvement with the Greenwich Dome, when Rogers says that, by way of a Millennium celebration, a "series of local projects" would be far preferable to a "sweeping Beaux Arts masterplan".

Mammon of course has always been the ultimate foe, but the most destructive force this century has been the car. Every redesigning of the city to make it subservient to the needs of private vehicles has been another nail in its coffin as an agent of human congregation: all too often, all that is left of public space is the unsafe, frenetic pavement. Rogers is at his most passionate in crusading to reclaim the city from the car — whether through big improvements in public transportation systems or, better still, by cutting the need for journeys themselves, for example by 'living above the shop'.

Read this book while stuck in the traffic jam on the way to work. Think of all the friendlier urban environments in which you might be reading it. And then make waves towards putting into effect the ideas so imaginatively, so ardently advanced. We owe it to the next generation that it should have no mean city to inherit. □

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