

**BOOK REVIEW**

*Athenian Legacies: Essays on the Politics of Going On Together.* By JOSIAH OBER. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. Pp. xiii + 273. Cloth, \$29.95. ISBN 0-691-12095-1.

Ober offers this collection of previously published essays as a “sequel” to his *Athenian Revolution* (Princeton, 1996). Moving beyond the origins of the Athenian democracy to discuss its maintenance, he examines how the Athenians could “go on together” after devastating foreign invasions and civil wars. For Ober, Athens was less homogenous than it is usually depicted to be, and can therefore serve as a useful comparandum for modern democratic theory. Although the essays are wide-ranging, he seeks throughout to show how the Athenians managed the “centrifugal push towards social diversity” and the “centripetal pull towards political coherence” (p. 7) as he considers questions concerning the group and the individual, theory and practice, continuity and change. Rather than regard the tensions arising from the diversity-coherence conflict as a destructive force that needed to be neutralized for the democracy to carry on, he suggests that the Athenians channeled them in productive ways.

In Chapter Two, Ober criticizes the modern propensity to analyze the Athenian democracy in terms of institutions with an emphasis on constitutional history as distorting, and uses the Council of 500 as a test case to show the advantages of a cultural approach. Arguing that Athenian citizenship is best understood as a form of “social knowledge” that promotes team-work (p. 33), he presents the council as a “master network” (p. 37) that seamlessly integrates the center and periphery through a combination of artificial and natural units (the tribe and the deme). Although Athens was not a face-to-face community, the organization of the council and the distribution of the demes within the tribes networked the citizens so that there were only a few “degrees of separation” between any two Athenians (p. 41). Next, Ober draws on Thucydides to show how the past may be used as a positive moral lesson in a heterogeneous society to establish moral authority. The social meaning of any historical event, however, is at best ambiguous, and a community that is divided will invariably ascribe divisive meanings to the past.

Chapters Four and Five respond to political theorists who advocate cosmopolitanism and constitutional liberalism, respectively, over democracy. In reply to the cosmopolitanists, Ober notes the dangers of globalism and the benefits of the nation-state for the non-elite. The constitutional liberals, by contrast, separate liberalism from democracy, arguing that liberalism does not depend on demo-

cracy, and that democracy is desirable only to the extent it protects individual rights. Given the ease with which rights can be legally restricted even within a society with a well-defined constitution (as contemporary events have shown), this trust in non-democratic governments to promote liberal values is overly optimistic. To be sure, democracies do not always adhere to their ideals, but non-democratic governments are even less likely to restrain themselves.

Ober is less convincing in his efforts to show that the Athenian democracy extended “quasi-rights” to non-citizens. In theory, the *hubris* law protected slaves, but an Athenian was probably never prosecuted for (let alone convicted of) *hubris* against a slave. While Pseudo-Xenophon notoriously claims that slaves were protected from the attacks of passers-by, it is also the case that one litigant accused his opponents of having sent a young Athenian into his fields to pick flowers so that he would attack the boy *on the assumption that he was a slave* and thus inadvertently become guilty of *hubris* against a citizen (D. 53.16). Needless to say, slaves were vulnerable daily to random violence at the hands of their masters.

Chapter Six is a particularly valuable discussion of Athenian civic education, which Ober sums up as a balancing act between “thinking alike” and “thinking differently” (p. 129). On the one hand, the Athenians needed to agree on a core set of co-operative values (freedom, equality and security) promoted in public discourse through the daily business of their political institutions. On the other hand, they avoided developing a formal educational system so as not to stifle the expression of heterogeneous viewpoints necessary for effective deliberation. In addition, Ober persuasively argues for an implicit dialogue between the democracy and its critics. Although elite criticism was restricted to the private arena because of the democratic control of public discourse, it was indirectly and partially responsible for political reforms and thus played a pivotal role in strengthening the democracy.

In Chapter Seven, Ober shows how Socrates’ statement in the *Apology* that he would not adhere to a hypothetical law that outlawed philosophizing does not contradict his assertion in the *Crito* that he was obligated to obey the laws. Since the hypothetical law would be in conflict with the pre-existing law on impiety, Socrates had the legal responsibility to continue philosophizing so as not to disobey the impiety law. The next two chapters are more open-ended. Chapter Eight originated as a response paper in a panel at the 2001 APA meeting using models from social science history and culture history to explain the Amnesty of 403 BCE. Ober goes through the strengths and weaknesses of each approach, but avoids siding with either group. In Chapter Nine, he draws on speech-act theory to warn against over-interpretation of Greek *horoi*.

In his final chapter, Ober explores the iconography of the Athenian democracy, starting with the statues of the tyrannicides and ending with the relief on the stele of the Eukrates *nomos* that shows the crowning of *Demos*. Whereas the statues of Harmodius and Aristogeiton emphasize action—transition from tyranny to democracy—the relief depicts democracy as a “state of being” that can only be momentarily interrupted by tyranny (pp. 216–19, 223–5). Between the two stands the Dexileus relief, illustrating the co-opting of democratic imagery for aristocratic display and the tension between democratic and aristocratic values within Athenian civic space (pp. 237–46).

In sum, these essays are impressive for their breadth and depth. Ober focuses on key questions concerning unity and *stasis* while engaging in political theory, and persuasively shows how ancient Athens offers a useful comparison in modern attempts to reinvigorate democracy. He makes a compelling case to explain how the Athenians were able to continue on not in spite, but because of their differences.

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