

BOOK REVIEW

Poverty, Wealth, and Well-Being: Experiencing Penia in Democratic Athens. By CLAIRE TAYLOR. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. xvi + 309. Hardback, \$105.00. ISBN 978-0-19-878693-1.

I hope it is, by now, commonly understood that ancient literary sources reflect elite bias about all aspects of life. In teaching a course about classical Athens, for example, when one wishes to explore the lived reality of people of this or that lower-status identity, it is not enough to assign, say, *Against Neaira* and hope for the best: too many filters separate us from the object of inquiry. Using elite sources is unavoidable, but they must be framed carefully, with the result that attempting to do justice to the majority of the denizens of the past can become exhausting. In this book, however, Claire Taylor proves that it can be done. Through a profusion of approaches, Taylor seeks to determine how non-elite Athenians found dignity in their lives and, in the process, bestows dignity upon them.

Taylor's work hovers at the intersection of several scholarly conversations. Familiar to many readers will be the picture of ancient economic history painted by, among others, Josiah Ober. Taylor announces her entry into this conversation with a provocative question: if, as Ober asserts in *The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece* (2015), the classical Greek economy was booming, what did that mean for the majority of the inhabitants of the Greek *poleis*? To answer this question, Taylor combines Ober's often broadly quantitative methods with more nuanced approaches to class. One of these derives from a body of primarily French-language scholarship—works by Roubineau and Lenfant, among others—on Athenian poverty that seeks to depict the poor without employing elite-derived, negative concepts of lack or oppression.

Related in its goals, but more universal in its application, is the “capability” approach of the economist Amartya Sen, which provides Taylor with a robust theoretical framework. According to this approach, poverty should be studied not in terms of the disabilities it imposes, but rather through the kinds of agency it permits: in Taylor's words, “what a person is able to do or be with the resources

available to them and what that person can actually achieve” (20). Taylor uses the capability approach to transcend the tension between, on the one hand, absolute definitions of poverty such as bare subsistence and, on the other, relative definitions such as those peddled by the Athenian elite, according to whom anyone without total leisure was poor. The result is an investigation into poverty that, while remaining cognizant of the very real external constraints upon them, asks how the Athenian poor themselves defined and achieved a measure of well-being.

Taylor asserts the value of her synthesis of approaches and methods not by applying the total blend throughout the book, but by testing each one separately, in its own chapter. The organization of the book constitutes perhaps the biggest challenge to the reader: although the ideas presented in each chapter are distinct, the chapter titles are not, inhibiting those seeking an overview of the contents or hunting for particular topics. Ambiguity could have been reduced even by naming the first and seventh chapters “Introduction” and “Conclusion,” respectively, in order to cut back on repeated keywords. Titles aside, the framing chapters are pellucid, especially the conclusion: in fact, I would advise potential readers to begin there in order to get a sense for the whole.

In the second chapter, the first of the five “methods” chapters, Taylor examines the literary sources for Athenian definitions of poverty: *penia*, *ptōcheia*, and their moral dimensions. Although Taylor’s discussion is brief—Lucia Cecchet covers this territory at book length in *Poverty in Athenian Public Discourse* (2015), which appeared too recently for Taylor to use—the point, that literary sources do not allow us access to the lived experience(s) of poverty, is well taken.

The third chapter applies quantitative methods to changes in Athenian demography over time, particularly regarding inequality of wealth and income. This chapter more than the others assumes the reader’s familiarity with the methods in question: two appendices are helpful for defining the various metrics and their application, but these could perhaps have been fruitfully integrated into the chapter itself. As with the previous chapter, Taylor presents the quantitative approach largely in order to supplant it in subsequent chapters; nonetheless, her nuanced observations about comparative methods—such as why the Gini index fails us in this case (95)—and her refusal to draw broad generalizations about the diversity of poverty make it of a piece with the rest of the book.

The remaining chapters turn toward social, rather than material, aspects of poverty. Chapter 4 examines how poverty could vary in duration and intersect with other kinds of identity, such as gender, in order to produce heterogeneous poverty experiences. Here and elsewhere in the book, Taylor employs a sort of

prosopopoeia of figures known only from inscriptions and dedicatory reliefs, such as the “midwife and doctor” Phanostrate (142): these reconstructions are a highlight of the book and put into practice Taylor’s goal of rethinking the depiction of poverty. Chapter 5 describes how, paradoxically, Athenian institutions such as political pay reproduced rather than alleviated poverty; the sixth chapter, finally, applies Sen’s capability approach, demonstrating how individuals could remain connected to their communities and thereby mitigate the “social exclusion” (218) to which the poor were, and are, subjected.

This is, in sum, a book that does not shy away from complexity, which is evident not only in the variety of methods, but even on the sentence level. For example: “Relative poverty means not just that the Athenians recognized differentials in wealth (though this is important in itself), but that poverty is seen in relation to socially approved behaviors, customs, and lifestyles among society at large” (19). Such sentences, containing layers of concession, refutation and extension, are frequent, and some readers may find Taylor’s determined avoidance of generalization stilted. For my part, I found it refreshing to see the complexity of these issues treated with respect, especially given, as Taylor mentions in the preface, their timeliness.

What makes this book laudable is that Taylor combines this nuance with an ideological purpose that is ultimately straightforward: to illuminate the lives of the poor without exacerbating their marginalization. Taylor’s book lays the methodological groundwork for an important project, and I look forward to seeing future works, including undergraduate-friendly resources, that build on it to help us better understand the vast majority of those who called Athens home.

MITCHELL H. PARKS

Knox College, mhparke@knox.edu