

November 2006

Book Review: Athenian Legacies: Essays on the Politics of Going On Together by Josiah Ober

Aristide Tessitore

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops>



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Tessitore, Aristide (2006) "Book Review: Athenian Legacies: Essays on the Politics of Going On Together by Josiah Ober," *Journal of Political Science*: Vol. 34 : No. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops/vol34/iss1/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Politics at CCU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Political Science by an authorized editor of CCU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact commons@coastal.edu.

Josiah Ober, *Athenian Legacies: Essays on the Politics of Going On Together* (Princeton University Press, 2005). 296 pp.

Josiah Ober's most recent offering brings together a series of essays written at different times and in different contexts, but all addressing a single question: How can the experience of Athenian democracy be rendered a positive legacy for contemporary theorists and political actors, without losing its radical capacity to challenge, even revolutionize, the complacency that constrains politics as usual (xi-xii)? Although sensitive to the unrepeatable character of Athenian political experience, Ober nevertheless finds in that experience resources capable of provoking fresh perspectives on some of the dilemmas besetting the practice of democratic politics in the contemporary world. Notwithstanding the fact that the essays were consciously written with multiple audiences in mind, I focus especially on aspects of the book likely to be of greatest interest to students of politics.

Ober finds in ancient Athens an instructive alternative to contemporary versions of the debate between Rousseau's homogeneous community in the *Social Contract*, and Arendt's depoliticized cosmopolitanism. Both Rousseau and Arendt mistakenly base their arguments on a "thick" notion of Greek politics. Against this, Ober draws on the work of anthropologist William Sewell to argue that Athens was in fact a "thinly coherent political community" (70). Key to Ober's analysis is the recent attention given by classicists to the several "micro-cultures" (rich, poor, intellectual critic, male, female, resident alien, slave) that constituted Greek political culture. Whereas full political participation ("positive participation rights") was

limited to native adult males, Ober maintains that over time democratic practice in Athens gave rise to “quasi rights” (“negative liberties”), i.e., certain privileges and immunities that extended—at least in principle—to all residents of the Athenian territories (126). Without going so far as to suggest that ancient Athens was predicated upon the modern distinction between positive and negative liberties, the social and cultural presence of inchoate analogues for these terms points to the normative relevance of Greek culture for contemporary debate. Indeed, the absence of the modern liberal distinction between citizenship and government, meant that the continued existence of both positive rights and (negative) legal immunities depended entirely upon the activities of society’s members. For Ober, this difference helps explain both the precarious and dynamic quality of Athenian democracy; the normative Athenian “value triad” of freedom, equality and security (140) provided a thinly coherent cultural context, but one “continually put at risk” and “subject to transformation” by the complex interactions among the diverse micro-cultures that constituted it. For Ober, the “thin coherence” of Athenian political practice points to a “normatively desirable middle way” between “oppressively thick versions of community” and “a depoliticized, fully cosmopolitan world” (70).

One interaction likely to interest students of political philosophy concerns Ober’s treatment of the relationship between the ordinary citizens of democratic Athens and intellectuals critical of democracy, especially as it comes to light in his analyses of civic education and Plato’s Socrates. Ober provides evidence for the existence of a fruitful dialogue between democratic partisans and their critics. On the one hand, those who claimed to speak for Athenian democracy maintained that an adequate civic education emerged from the laws and

institutions of democracy itself (consider Meletus' exchange with Socrates on the education of the young in Plato's *Apology* 24c-25c). On the other, critics of democracy insisted that reliance on democratic process alone was insufficient, and that a special system of education developed and overseen by those possessing some expertise was necessary to prevent catastrophic civil conflict (133) (consider Socrates' response to Meletus in the *Apology* and his proposed educational schema in the *Republic*). Despite radically different evaluations of democracy, Ober maintains that those on both sides of the debate agreed in rejecting some aspects of the standard Greek (aristocratic) ethical code of "tit-for-tat reciprocity" and "zero-sum competition" (137). Furthermore, the engagement between democracy and its critics (carried on especially through theater and oratory) contributed to significant democratic reforms in the late fifth through mid-fourth centuries (enumerated on 147). In Ober's view, the consequences of this engagement were not entirely one-sided. He contends that Socrates resists the order of the Thirty to arrest Leon of Salamis (*Apology* 32c-e), because obedience in this case presupposes disobedience to the ancestral laws of democratic Athens (166, 168). Although Socrates considered other polities to be *substantively* better than Athens, the "thin" *procedural* emphasis of Athenian law was more compatible with Socrates' dialectical enterprise than any regime animated by a "thick" conception of justice could ever be. For Ober, even Socrates' voluntary acceptance of capital punishment, is best explained by his commitment to the largely procedural conception of justice characteristic of the thinly coherent democratic Athenian polis.

Ober's study of Athenian politics is erudite, clearly written, and something of a *tour de force* in its ability to engage both ancient and contemporary issues from a variety of disciplinary

perspectives (classics, philosophy, political theory, social science, cultural studies, and history). For students of classical political thought tempted to view Athenian democracy through lens provided by its philosophic critics, Ober importantly brings to life a more complex and engaging democratic alternative. However, readers of Plato especially attuned to the ironic, rhetorical, or dramatic dimensions of the *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Republic* will be less than fully satisfied with Ober's considerations of these dialogues, and some will balk at Ober's contention that Socrates' acceptance of capital punishment is better explained by his commitment to a democratic principle than a philosophic one. Notwithstanding these potential criticisms, *Athenian Legacies* is remarkable in its range and learning, the work of a mature and distinguished scholar, and deserving of the influence it will surely have. The essays in this collection have something to offer all students of ancient politics, and may even advance Ober's overarching goal of making ancient Greek politics a resource for contemporary theorists and political actors.

Aristide Tessitore
Furman University