
For once the blurbs on the book jacket do not exaggerate. Josiah Ober is one of the most original, wide-ranging, and provocative thinkers we have on Athenian democracy and his book, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens: Intellectual Critics of Popular Rule* really is a ‘groundbreaking contribution to classical Greek history, ancient Greek philosophy, and the history of political thought’ (Malcolm Schofield) and does indeed offer ‘close and insightful’ readings of particular texts (Paul Cartledge). Every chapter is full of fresh interpretations of the most worked-over passages (such as Pericles’ Funeral Oration) or a shift of focus (on Epidamnus in Thucydides) which alters our reading of an entire text. Moreover, he has more interesting things to say about Ps.-Xenophon (conventionally known as the Old Oligarch) than just about anyone I have ever read. And he weaves all this into a richly textured story about modern as well as ancient democracy.

Ober is an exceptionally generous reader of texts even when he strongly disagrees with them. Indeed, this book would be impossible without such generosity since in the absence of democracy’s defenders Ober must distill the character of the Athenian democracy he admires from the voices of its critics. This generosity extends beyond the critics of whom he is ultimately critical to his readers.

Ober wears his learning easily. He avoids jargon and convoluted arguments, and writes without pretence or self-congratulation even in his most original work such as his brilliant revisionist interpretation of Cleisthenes’ role in the Athenian revolution of 508/7 BC., and his fascinating reading of Aristotle’s *Politics* and politics. His generosity is also evident in the catholicity of his methodological commitments. Ober is in thrall to no one school or approach. If it helps him illuminate a particular text, a larger argument or his overarching framework that is good enough. Thus he draws on analytic and literary approaches to Plato, uses J.L. Austin’s idea of performative utterances and Michel Foucault’s discussion of ‘regimes of truth’ to clarify the relationship between words and deeds and is as comfortable quoting Sheldon Wolin

---

1 Kresge College, University of California, Santa Cruz, CA 95064, USA. Email: Euben@cats.ucsc.edu

**POLIS. Vol. 17. Issues 1 and 2, 2000**
and Michael Walzer as John Rawls and Quentin Skinner. It is this eclecticism that allows him to realize his aim of writing for ancient historians, Classical philosophers, students of Greek literature, intellectual historians, and political theorists.

My praise may seem inappropriate, even suspect, because the two of us are friends. We have (along with John Wallach) edited a book together, we read each other’s work (though he has taught me more than I have taught him), and we share the intellectual/political project of making Athenian political thought and democracy a presence in contemporary theoretical and political debates. More than that, we share a conviction about ‘the moral value of participatory democracy’ and agree that none of its critics no matter how intellectually powerful ‘offers us a form of government more choiceworthy than the rule of the people or a set of moral values more attractive than the conjoined freedom, political equality and security of the citizenry and of each citizen’ (p. 12). We also agree that democracy requires the participation by the people in maintaining a political culture and system of values that constitutes them as agents and political equals. Thus we are unpersuaded by the pallid version of democracy frequently endorsed in our own day. For us, the United States looks more like an ancient oligarchy than Athenian democracy.

Finally, we also agree that the origins of the Western tradition of political thought began (if origins must be found) with a fruitful dialogue/context/battle/struggle between Greek democracy and philosophy and that the literary memory of Athenian democracy as preserved in dissident texts was and is an important addition to our stock of cultural resources. The concern of these texts with issues of freedom, power and justice, individual and community, deliberation and enactment, class conflict and public interest, eros and education, remain intellectually and politically generative.

Of course, the appropriateness of my praise rests on the quality of the book itself, more parochially, on my rendering of its general aims and particular interpretations (which I offer in Section II) and my reflections on both. Nonetheless, it may be worth noting that our friendship was intellectual before it was personal, and that we have not been shy about criticizing each other’s work in print, evidence for which follows in Section III below.

What makes *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens* so rich is the presence of not one but two conversations. The first takes place between the text’s various purposes and levels of analysis. This ‘conversation’ establishes the parameters and purposes for the second which is among Ober’s six elite critics: Ps.-Xenophon, Thucydides, Aristophanes, Plato, Isocrates, Aristotle, and Ps.-Aristotle (the writer of the Athenian constitution).