Roger Brock


Making the claim that ‘political imagery is part of the Greek legacy to western culture’, this book is an erudite and informative survey of the emergence and development of political imagery between the archaic and late classical periods. Identifying the sources and shifts of a set of dominant images, the book will be a useful resource for those interested in a range of Greek texts, including epic and lyric poetry, comedy and tragedy, philosophy and, to a lesser extent, historiography. Particularly valuable is Brock’s identification of the earliest instances of familiar images and his survey of a wide range of sources not usually cited by political theorists working on ancient Greece. Useful in this regard is his facility with lyric poetry, almost wholly neglected by theorists, but providing early instances of many familiar images.

The first five chapters each treat an image thematically, and the final three present diachronic treatments of a range of images over three periods. The images given sustained, chapter-length treatment are: gods as kings, kings as gods; the state as a household and family; the shepherd of the people; the ship of state; and the body politic. This division between thematic and diachronic treatments is somewhat overstated, perhaps, because chronology and theme invest each chapter of the book. Although Brock is not explicit about it, his ordering of the thematic chapters reflects a chronological thesis at work in the book as a whole, whereby the political community emerges as a reality and a concept only slowly in the archaic period. For example, the early imagery of gods as kings and kings as gods is already available to people who, as yet, are not settled into clearly articulated, permanent political communities, whereas the ship of state and the body politic require a polis to reach their fullest expression. An interesting implication of Brock’s thesis here is that Greek political imagery represents leaders before it articulates communities. This is, indeed, the theme of his sixth chapter, which concerns the archaic period under the title ‘Leaders and Communities’. Similarly, chapter 7 is entitled ‘Democracy and Autocracy: The Fifth Century’, and chapter 8 concerns orators and philosophers in the fourth century.

One can imagine that Brock arrived at this partly thematic structure out of a desire to provide a useful and useable resource, one which even non-specialists could dip into for a variety of purposes without becoming entangled in a complex theoretical or historiographic apparatus. The three diachronic chapters are helpful in saving the book from certain frustrations that a more theoretically inclined reader may be feeling by the time she arrives at chapter 6.
The first five chapters can read to a theorist, by contrast, as something of a ‘data dump’ wherein Brock piles up examples, counter-examples, and variations of each of the five images with a focus more upon the generic identities of the sources than on ideological or historical context. For example, in chapter 4, ‘The Ship of State’, Brock notes that the earliest surviving instance comes from Archilochus, ‘who describes the sudden and alarming onset of an impending storm’ and, via a gloss on it by Heraclitus, suggests that we can see already ‘the concept of the ship as some kind of community already underlies the image, though that is more likely to be the poet’s hetaireia or war-band than any more extensive grouping’ (pp. 53-4) – like a polis. We have to wait until chapter 6, ‘Leaders and Communities: the Archaic Period (c.750-480 BC)’, to get a more extended discussion of an assumption underlying Brock’s interpretation, his endorsement of ‘the picture widely accepted today of an early archaic society in which social institutions are gradually emerging but still somewhat inchoate’ (p. 84). This kind of lacuna in the thematic chapters tends to militate against the book’s claim to usability by a non-specialist audience, as well as seeming rather abrupt and stipulative to more specialized readers looking for a warrant for each interpretation. The book, then, is not wholly successful in its pursuit of easy usability.

Brock does not claim to have written a theoretical book. Indeed, he warns that ‘this work is not directly concerned with the theory of metaphor (or indeed political science)’ (p. xii). One wonders, however, whether theory (or indeed political science) can be so easily shrugged off. Although Brock gestures towards Lakoff and Johnson’s theory of metaphor in the introduction, there is no sustained theoretical apparatus in this book. When compared to a book like Victoria Wohl’s Love Among the Ruins and its treatment of erotic imagery through a Lacanian lens, whether this is a strength or a weakness may be something of a matter of intellectual taste. Nonetheless, I do think Brock’s book suffers somewhat from the absence of a developed theory of imagery, in part because it effectively downplays the importance of a political phenomenon (imagery) that he argues merits the sustained attention of scholars.

One problem caused by the absence of a theoretical framework is that imagery appears as epiphenomenal to the political history Brock tells in his diachronic chapters, and which underlies his thematic ones. Thus certain images emerge during the archaic period of intra-elite politics (the charioteer, the helmsman of the ship of state) and simply disappear (apart from use in tragedy) in the democratic Athens of the fifth century (pp. 56-7, 117, 121). The ship of state provides a particular problem (though it is not Brock’s problem alone). Why, in the intensely maritime culture of imperial democratic Athens did the ship disappear as a political image, with one generic exception? Brock attempts