Book Reviews

Alex Gottesman


The study of Athenian politics has traditionally been approached through an institutionalist perspective. Best exemplified in the voluminous studies of Mogens Hansen, this approach rightly argues about the need to take seriously the institutions for any understanding of Athenian democracy. In contrast to other political systems, where informal processes and networks of kinship and patronage played a major role in their function, the Athenians took great pains to separate a field of interactions as peculiarly political and open only to Athenian citizens. This approach has led to major insights, but has also its own drawbacks. Josiah Ober’s Mass and Elite was an influential effort to complement the study of institutions with the study of rhetoric and discourse that informed the debates that took place within those institutions.

Notwithstanding the contributions of these two approaches, there is something that modern accounts of Athenian politics are still missing. While it is remarkable that the Athenians constructed an institutionalised field of politics only open to male citizens, it would be misleading to assume that politics was restricted to the institutional field. For quite some time now a number of scholars have been trying to move beyond approaches that focus on legal and status polarities that end up presenting the vast majority of the Athenian population (women, metics, slaves) as mere passive objects of exclusion, domination and exploitation. These studies have in various ways tried to explore the agency of people beyond the male citizens, and examine contexts of interaction in which status did not matter, identities were blurred, and subalterns created their own communities and networks, or mingled with male citizens.

The present book is a welcome effort to build on this work in order to present the first book-length study of Athenian politics beyond the institutional field. Gottesman’s approach is informed by modern studies of the public sphere generated by the influential work of Jürgen Habermas. Habermas stressed the
significance of the emergence of the public sphere in early modern Europe. The growth of the printing press and mass literacy created a sphere of public discussion that took place outside formal institutions, in loci like coffeehouses and salons. This sphere had a constitutive role in European politics in the transition from absolutist monarchies into the representative democracies of modern times. Building on this work, Gottesman has employed the concept of ‘the street’ as the Athenian equivalent of a non-institutionalised public sphere.

Gottesman explores a number of aspects of the politics of the street in classical Athens. His first chapter is an excellent discussion of the Athenian agora as a place in which politics mingled with social, economic and cultural activities, constituting a ‘free space’ where citizens mixed with women, slaves and metics indiscriminately. A space that included public buildings housing institutions like the Council and the law courts, public monuments, covered spaces used for commercial exchanges, loitering, and philosophical discussions, created political interactions that were severely disapproved of by Greeks like Xenophon and Aristotle, who preferred a clear segregation between political and commercial agoras.

The second chapter moves from an examination of spaces into an exploration of the networks and interactions that took place in those spaces. Gottesman examines how spaces like shops and workshops provided fields of interaction for Athenian social networks, including both networks consisting exclusively of citizens, and mixed networks including also metics, slaves, and women. Building on this, he then discusses how Athenian institutions necessitated and employed those informal spaces and networks in order to function. In a polity with very little in the shape of a bureaucratic apparatus, phenomena like social control and the dissemination of information depended to a significant extent on interactions taking place in the informal public sphere. While the Athenians voted for minor and major decisions in the institutional setting of the assembly, much debate and discussion had already taken place in the informal public sphere of shops and workshops. Gottesman describes tellingly the interdependence between the formal and informal public spheres in Athenian politics as ‘a machine consisting of two wheels, joined by a set of gears, with wheels that turn at different speeds, connected in such a way that motion is transferred from one wheel to another, even though gears might skip’ (p. 75).

Chapters three and four explore the problems of non-institutional politics, by focusing in particular on the practice of supplication. Supplication aimed to move public opinion for particular purposes, by exploiting passions like pity and anger in order to achieve a hearing, raise awareness, create a public mood,